Brecht's Tradition

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frank wedekind

The realism of the Lenz-Grabbe-Büchner tradition is not a realism of halftones. These dramatists are possessed of a passion to get into their plays what they feel to be the true forces moving the world, and to this end they have no qualms about exaggerating and distorting the reality they are trying to bring to light. Their work abounds in grotesqueries, in situations, imagery, and linguistic forms that are blatantly subjective; their characters are often caricatured to an extent which the scientific pretensions of naturalistic and realistic literature make impermissible. A great deal of their aesthetic technique is directly traceable to J. M. R. Lenz, the Sturm und Drang dramatist who wrote under the twin influences of the emergent middle genre and the episodic dramaturgy of Shakespeare.

From Shakespeare, Brecht and his anticipators learned much that suited their antinaturalistic temperaments, e.g., the art of constructing a play of highly vivid episodes which when linked together attained panoramic scope; the compatibility of powerful dramatic effects with a context of commentary, whether this commentary took the form of protracted monologues or crisp poeticized observation; and the miscibility of the tragic and comic as well as the prosaic and lyrical. The Shakespearian history play was a perfect model of dramatized narrative in which individual scenes constituted autonomous units of action. Shakespeare offered an approach to character wholly divergent from the balanced psychological approach of nineteenth-century realism.

To a great extent this approach became identified with Ibsen, and it is Ibsen’s characters who receive the mockery of one late-nineteenth-century dramatist who avails himself heavily of Shakespearian technique. Quite well known is Frank Wedekind’s contemptuous reference to Ibsen’s characters as “domestic animals”;1 Wedekind was as convinced as Brecht that, for all his insight and talent, Ibsen had not come to grips with the real determinants of middle-class life, had not penetrated the respectable surface far enough to disclose the wolfish instincts which energize modern society. When he attacks through characters in his plays the divorce between art and life in the drama of his time Wedekind has Ibsen in mind. He questions whether Ibsen

1 Frank Wedekind, Prosa, Dramen, Verse (Munich: Albert Langen, Georg Müller, 1960), p. 382.
was at all capable of doing justice to the kind of natures whose portrayal will always escape softhearted idealists. This Wedekind comment on Hilde Wangel speaks for itself:

The author knows such natures only from the outside and imagines what simply cannot exist. In reality, a Hilde Wangel is a superficial creature with a short memory and little perception. Thanks to a lack of any charm, such temperaments are characterized by stunted and banal spiritual functions. Their natures are comparable to shallow water that presents a dynamic surface only because it flows over uneven pebbles. A Hilde Wangel will never send a man upon two scaffolds, in order to see him fall down; for that, another kind of physical and emotional makeup is required. As a matter of fact, she would be the first to faint at the sight of a mouse or a child’s bloody nose.

Wedekind’s relationship to Lenz, Grabbe, and Büchner, who influenced him more than any other group of dramatists, makes it inadequate to characterize him as a mere antinaturalist, even if much of his art was an angry reaction to that movement. His contempt for the naturalists was focused on their most successful representative, Gerhart Hauptmann, who Wedekind disliked, particularly after Hauptmann saw fit to dramatize some confidential material about Wedekind’s family. Wedekind viewed the naturalists as born snoopers who were turning drama into the art of investigation. In his first play, The Young World, Hauptmann is caricatured as a compulsive recorder of everything that happens to him; no triviality is too small, no intimacy too delicate to keep him from an immediate date with his notebook. But for all their meticulous procedures, the naturalists were letting what Wedekind considered the most essential aspect of life go unrecorded. What really drives men and women on could not possibly be projected through “men who can make no children, women who can give birth to none.”

*ibid.*, p. 915. The essay from which this is excerpted, “Schriftsteller Ibsen und ‘Baumeister Solness,’” gives us also Wedekind’s concept of great art: “Beyond doubt every great work of art, Faust, Hamlet, Antigone, is symbolic; but by virtue of symbolizing human nature, not abstract concepts; by virtue of trying to crystallize clear and significant standards for life, not by playing hide-and-seek with the reader.” See p. 922.

in the last two decades of the nineteenth century struck Wedekind as a very pale imitation of what was actually happening.

It has been said that to fully understand Wedekind, the apostle of sexual vitalism, one has to realize that he moved in an atmosphere thick with Nietzsche-worship. Even the more pedestrian type of intellectual was hypnotized by superman psychology. In the air was the idea that great men and Judaeo-Christian values do not mix. Be that as it may, Wedekind, the man, was as powerful an influence on the literary life of his time as Wedekind, the dramatist. He refused to accommodate his plays to Philistine squeamishness, pictured himself as a kind of Kraftmensch whose powerful instincts defied the frightened morality of the rabble. He had trouble no end with the censors, but if we go by Brecht’s testimony, this never diminished his vitality. On Brecht himself he seems to have left an indelible impression, and the early Brecht projected very much the same kind of artistic self-image cultivated by Wedekind: the writer as sardonic Bohemian who sees through everything and spends his evenings vocalizing bitter insights to the tune of ballads in disreputable cafés. The Brecht of the twenties was particularly anxious to vitiate those conventions which dictate sharp divisions between the atmosphere of the theater and the more low-brow atmospheres of sports events and carnival shows. Wedekind was very likely his model here; even at the height of his fame, he did not hesitate to made needed money "as a cabaret artist, singing his own ballads in the music halls."

A minor early play reveals Wedekind even at the start of his career as a writer whose anti-idealism by no means sums him up. In The Quick Painter a struggling artist suffers and suffers until he manages to sell his first painting. The moment he does so, he is quick to exploit the power of materialistic success; aesthetic idealism goes right out the window. Shrewdly, he knows that the girl he wants can no longer be kept from him by a family whose values are entirely materialistic. Wedekind pictures the artist in question as a man who plays his suffering for all it is worth in a world of types whom no art can reach. This may be among Wedekind's worst plays, but it foreshadows what will be expressed with genius later on. He would always take pains to expose pretentious idealists; he would always be revolted

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by the small-mindedness of bourgeois types who see art only in terms of cash. He would bristle at any approach to life not ruthlessly antisen­
timental, but sheer opportunism never sat well with him.

Lenz's major plays, especially *The Soldiers*, had underscored the need for society to face up to sex as a force that could not be shunted aside by repressive custom. Lenz even went to the point of advocating subsidized sex for the military. Büchner formulated no such programs, but his plays make clear enough that he did not underestimate the power of sex. Thus, Wedekind is hardly the first German dramatist to deal with what he was persecuted for bringing into the open in his own time, and what he was lionized for by the young people of his time. He is, however, the first German dramatist to write plays which articulate an unabashed sexual vision of life, a vision which comes out most powerfully in his Lulu plays. His most famous play, *Spring's Awakening* (1891), also has sex at the center, but it is worlds apart from his later work; here Wedekind is very much the topical dramatist lashing out at contemporary abuses with a reformist zeal that would soon give way to pervasive cynicism.

*Spring's Awakening* takes a panoramic look at a particular society from the point of view of the adolescent in search of sexual identity. It is not the kind of neutral look the strict realist would approve; Wedekind leaves no doubt where his sympathies lie; he makes quite sure that the implications of his play will not be attenuated by surface detail. Action does not revolve around a single hero or protagonist but a gallery of types such as Brecht would employ to demonstrate individual variations of a basic human dilemma. Wedekind is concerned with institutionalized bourgeois power as misused by those who dictate behavior at home and school, and with the hapless victims of such an arrangement, girls and boys in the process of maturing. Two of the schoolboys could not be more unlike: Moritz is frightened of his shadow and literally perspires at the sexual and academic pres­
sures his society exerts; Melchior looks this society straight in the eye and is quite willing to defy it. Both these boys are driven to

Instead of educating its young to recognize and accept what are perfectly normal impulses, the society Wedekind attacks does the oppo­site: it promotes sexual fear and ignorance, making almost certain that no one grows to maturity without psycho-sexual damage. The unreasonable defenses erected against erotic awareness block all curios­
ty about the mechanics of reproduction. Thwarted in their need for
concrete truth, the young people of this society are bound to overdramatize and distort what would fall into perspective in a less repressive atmosphere. Inevitably, adolescent fantasy begins to take on psychopathic overtones.

Such unhealthy sex is the substance of a scene in which an adolescent imagines himself as Othello making a final, ritualistic journey to Desdemona's chamber, identifies himself with Bluebeard on the verge of disposing of his seventh wife, and, in general, lets his imagination transport him to pathological realms. This scene comes right after one in which Mrs. Bergmann, a typical mother, cannot bring herself to tell her daughter Wendla how babies are made. The implication is that the kind of prudery practiced by Mrs. Bergmann makes it all too inevitable for sick, vicarious sex to be acted out by the young.

In his portraits of misguided parents, Wedekind manages to be cutting without departing from a generally realistic technique. He works differently in his portraits of schoolmasters, giving away his highly exaggerative technique by the names with which he chooses to endow them: Affenschmalz, Knüppeldick, Hungergurt, Knochenbruch, Zungenschlag, and Fliegentod. These absurd names satirize their owners immediately; the schoolmasters are satirized even more by what they have to say. The opening of a window stimulates them to pedantic locutions; it is wholly as important to them as the expulsion of a student for delinquency. These minuscule minds are quite sure that they speak for the moral order; they defend that order by bringing to bear the full weight of their authority on Melchior for composing a treatise on sex. His protest that he merely put down fact falls on deaf ears. Wedekind pictures Melchior's trial as very much like the trials we have come to expect under totalitarian regimes. A miserably defenseless human being is throttled by monsters in judicial robes.

Wedekind utilizes caricature of the most deliberately gross type. Unlike Lenz and Büchner, his caricatures are not an uneasy blend of empathetic observation and bald distortion. His predecessors in the art of sardonic episodic theater refrained not only from prejudging their portraits of bourgeois types by means of wholly absurd names, but they were generally careful not to make character an excuse for mere discharge of contempt. Wedekind, on the other hand, joins hands with Brecht in refusing to disguise for a moment that same contempt. We are never in doubt as to what makes the Bürger run in Brecht and Wedekind; both allow their aggressions against the middle class to spill over into dehumanized portrayals of scourges pure and simple.
Not only in the sphere of sex do inhibition and repression set the tone. The road to intellectual maturity is just as rocky. A severely regimented system of education militates against any kind of normal development; everything is subordinated to iron-tight discipline and sudden-death competition. Those in charge of molding youth have no qualms about the damage they inflict upon the innocent. Their only concern is that the mounting number of students who commit suicide or go insane will not attract public attention.

In short, Wedekind finds middle-class psychology a horrendous blend of hypocrisy, fear, and misplaced aggression. Like Büchner, he cannot resist mocking the pseudo-religious pretensions compelling this class to picture itself as part of a sacrosanct moral order. At Moritz’s funeral, a pastor with the Brechtian name of Kahlbauch shields himself from the rain with an umbrella while expatiating on the “inscrutable disposition of His Grace.” But the crowning touch of sanctimony comes from Headmaster Sonnenstich when it is his turn to deposit dirt upon the grave:

Suicide, as the most serious offense conceivable against the moral world order, is the most significant proof conceivable for such a moral world order, inasmuch as he who commits suicide confirms the existence of such an order by making it unnecessary for it to pronounce judgment.

Kahlbauch pontificates very much the way Büchner makes almost every Bürger and Führer who does not experience suffering from the victim’s point of view pontificate, and Wedekind adds bite to exposure by having such nonsense expressed over the fresh corpse of a gratuitously destroyed young man. What could be more grotesque than a metaphysical justification of the world’s moral order in such circumstances? If Moritz could answer, he would probably be as tongue-tied as Woyzeck.

While Moritz rots, those who killed him talk rot. Some may feel that when the headmaster tries to console the late Moritz’s father by informing him that his son had little chance for promotion and would, at most, have lasted another term, Wedekind is simply going

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6 Wedekind, Prosa, Dramen, Verse, p. 289.
too far. But he is working here very much the way Büchner worked and the way Brecht would work, trying to sum up with a bland grotesquery what his whole play is about. For as villainous as these hypocrites may be, in a way they are beyond good and evil, so ingrained and complacent is their malevolence. One could not for a moment think of indicting them without questioning the kind of society that extends them power and eminence.

Innocent humanity wedged in between instinct and system—one may well be reminded of the vision in Danton's Death. But Spring's Awakening does not conclude with bloodstained guillotines, even if Wedekind's final scene is among the most morbid of modern theater; it concludes with a kind of Darwinian affirmation. In a graveyard, Melchior comes up against stark reminders of his society's murderous nature: the grave of the girl he impregnated and the corpse of his friend Moritz. At the moment when he sees no reason to go on living, a man in a mask appears to instill in him an unquenchable need to survive. This mysterious intruder is as blatant a departure from realistic technique as the sight of Moritz carrying his head on his arm. Verfremdung is a pertinent concept here; Wedekind abruptly demolishes an atmosphere with which we can identify and creates an atmosphere that can only startle us to wonder and reflection. He makes us realize by his grotesque antinaturalism that in essence his play has been about Eros versus Thanatos as much as it has been about adults versus adolescents. In this struggle, specious morality can prove a potent death force, as Moritz realizes too late:

If only you had told me that earlier! It was morality that sent me to my doom. I seized the murder weapon for the sake of my parents. "Honor thy father and mother to enjoy long life." That scripture proved quite ridiculous in my case."

Here Wedekind links up with the Brecht who maintained that to be good in the conventionally idealistic sense is to stupidly invite disaster. Even more coldly Brechtian is The Man in the Mask's comment on Moritz's regretful look back. He declares that Moritz's parents would by no means have gone to an early grave upon their son's failure—the human capacity to feel has very definite physiological

1 Ibid., p. 310.
limitations. Anti-idealism could hardly be carried to more sardonic lengths; Wedekind translates a concrete apprehension of life into an unqualified philosophy of egoism. No one does anything except to himself, even if he fools himself into believing that he cares for others or vice versa.

Such cynical generalizations must be balanced against the fact that Spring's Awakening is above all a drama in the tradition of protest literature. Again, Büchner comes to mind, for like him, Wedekind manifests polar extremes of awareness; he wants on the one hand to contemplate with icy detachment a Godless world, to stand apart in the role of the sardonic, uncommitted observer, but at the same time he cannot transcend a basic commitment to life. In a way he is a composite of Grabbe and Büchner, sharing the former's highly aggressive cynicism, the latter's furiously outraged sense of fairness, reminding us of Grabbe in his overreaction against sentimentalism, of Büchner in his sensitivity to the tribulations of those who exist to be victimized.

To return to the graveyard scene, the technique implied by Wedekind's bizarre final episode is formally related to the manner in which Lenz concluded The Soldiers. Programmatic commentary brings to sharp focus what the action of the play is projecting; like Lenz, Wedekind works this out in a series of tendentious remarks. A sequence of scenes showing a particular society to be antilife becomes again the prelude to wisdom. But this is where Lenz and Wedekind part ways; the latter does not have his characters launch into reform proposals. His assault on contemporary society remains implicit; the only solution offered in the final scene to the problem of individual versus society is that one can do nothing more than to hold on to life in spite of its evils. Wedekind's masked philosopher, who is after all Wedekind himself, speaks more with the sardonic intonations of a Büchner or Grabbe mouthpiece of cynicism than with the reasoned calm of Lenz's Aufklärer.

In Spring's Awakening, what is behind the action is as obtrusively thrust at the audience as it will be in Brecht's epic theater. All through the play, Wedekind sees to it that the sexual basis for what is happening is not blurred. The action is constantly put into perspective by meaningful comment passed off as dialogue. When Moritz asks, "Did you ever stop to think, Melchior, how we got sucked into this whirlpool?" Wedekind is asking us the same question. When Martha remarks that weeds thrive while roses bloom miserably, she is giving
voice to Wedekind's feeling that civilization and vital instinct are tragically incompatible; and when Melchior finds no reason for anyone's acting shocked at what is plain fact, he is expressing Wedekind's own resentment toward a society that will not look truth in the eye. It is quite right to sum up *Spring's Awakening* as "the play with a moral."

Wedekind's dialogue takes in an enormous range of sensibility. Headmaster Sonnenstich, for example, typifies the perfect bureaucrat specializing in ponderous formulations: "Notwithstanding the overwhelming fact of a similarity to which recognition has been extended by incontestable authorities..." He comes through almost as absurdly as his fumbling colleague Zungenschlag: "If by the criteria of authority the prevailing atmosphere leaves little or nothing to be desired, then I would like to put forth the proposal that during the summer vacation the other window also be bricked up!" Against such dialogue resonating with Wedekind's contempt, *Spring's Awakening* contains much that reflects his empathy with sufferers, his sensitivity to the lyricism of innocence. Sonnenstich comes on stage to speak nonsense right after the following outcries by Moritz:

> ... I shall—SCREAM!—SCREAM!—Becoming you, Ilse!—Priapism!—Loss of consciousness!—My strength is being sucked out of me!—This luck-child, this sun-child—this daughter of joy on my road to misery! OH!—OH!*

What has been said about the style of *Woyzeck*, also applies here. Speech is intended to give the most immediate transcript of mental process, to take us as close as mere words can to the reality of a human being's deterioration. The technique employed here owes every bit as much to Büchner's example as does Wedekind's use of language to vent his rage at pseudo-moralists.

Then there are passages imbued with poetic feeling that convey a rapturous state of mind:

> The road is like a fleecy carpet—not the tiniest rock, no thorn.—My feet do not feel the ground. ... Oh, how I slumbered last night!


Even though Wedekind's language is "always a little abstract and more than a little idiosyncratic," his linguistic talents are undeniable; his speech is as rich with mimetic implications and tonal inflections as that of Lenz and Büchner.

Revelation by monologue is as intrinsic to *Spring's Awakening* as it was to *Danton's Death*—Wedekind availing himself freely of a device frowned upon by scrupulous naturalists. Through monologue we learn of one schoolboy's murderous sexual fantasies; a conventional mother's failure to appreciate the true forces at work in a boy who seeks her help; the powerful psychological change produced in a young girl by her first sexual experience; the utter desperation of a young man who cannot find his way out of the maze of problems his society has manufactured for him; and another young man's utter incomprehension of that same society's stigmatizing him for doing what came naturally. Even when Wedekind gives us ostensibly natural dialogue, he has his characters ruminate in such a way that we get the equivalent of short monologues interspersed throughout the play; he is less concerned with doing justice to the texture of real-life speech than with extending the scope of dialogue to define the nature of the world in which his characters function.

Wedekind's episodic treatment owes much to Büchner, whose *Woyzeck* was also composed of scenes depicting sufferers and insufferables. Like the latter, Wedekind shifts from episodes of pathos and lyrical feeling to episodes of broad and caustic humor, underscoring by alterations of tone the inequities of an impersonal society. Again like Büchner, Wedekind finds society divided into groups which cannot begin to communicate. On a more technical level, both dramatists are realists in some scenes, fantasists in others, and both present a series of pictures culminating in a forceful indictment. Most of all, episodic treatment allows Wedekind to portray society at a kaleidoscope of impulse and repression. Some scenes show youthful impulse in its natural expression; others reveal youthful impulse colliding with censorious puritanism in the institutionalized authority of family, church, and school. *Spring's Awakening* is composed of pictures showing the young as they really are and pictures showing the young as they must be thanks to the power of their elders.

Wedekind juxtaposes scenes for ironic effect, again like Büchner. An alert audience can pick up a great deal merely by the way scenes

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10 Bentley (ed.), *The Modern Theatre*, p. 98.
alternate. Thus, Wedekind concludes one episode with the smug know-nothingism of petty professors and begins another with a chance meeting between Melchior and Wendla in the course of which these two young people reveal a complexity unsurmised by their elders; indicates in one scene that adolescents are all too aware how obsessed with sex the adult world is, and in the next scene shows how adamantly sex information is denied those on the threshold of adulthood; proceeds to comment on Mrs. Bergmann's puritanism with a scene of histrionic onanism; footnotes a scene in which Melchior seduces Wendla with a scene in which the former's mother cautions Moritz against impulsive behavior that will not stand to his credit later. Wedekind sets up patterns of ironic relevance from the very start of his play; *Spring's Awakening* is the perfect ironic title for a mosaic of scenes in which the rites of spring are celebrated with the dance of death.

In fact, scarcely a character or aspect of life is presented by Wedekind without dialectic counterpart. The energy of youth versus the inhibitory conservatism of those older is the main thematic contrast of *Spring's Awakening*, but it is merely one contrast among many. One could go on to show the antitheses implied by Frau Gabor and Frau Bergmann as well as by the prostitute Ilse and The Man in the Mask; or how heterosexuality is contrasted with homosexuality, cruelty with sensitivity, system with life, the sensibility of the male with that of the female. Patterns of strong contrast would always show up in Wedekind's theater, and those who explain them as symptomatic of the dramatist's hopeless self-division may have a point; for Wedekind was never able to resolve the larger issues on which he pretended to speak with messianic authority; like the other writers under discussion, he was persuasive in his exposure of the way things were but quite unconvincing on the possibility of something better.

*Spring's Awakening* is the Wedekind play most unmistakably related to the kind of episodic theater initiated by Lenz. But it is not the only play in which we can detect anticipations of Brecht. For example, the Prologue to *Earth Spirit* (1894) is bound to recall us to any number of cynical prefaces and interpolations of Brechtian theater. Wedekind's spokesman is an animal tamer who does not hesitate to identify theatrical entertainment with the amusements of a zoo in which a brute struggle is the main attraction. Sadly enough, the attraction has begun to lose its magnetism thanks to the competition of other fare, especially Ibsen. Wedekind insinuates a criticism of life by focusing on the harsh economics of theater:
Times are bad!—All the gentlemen and ladies
Who once collected at my cages
Now honor farces, Ibsen, operas and plays
Such fare gets all the kudos of this age.
My boarders are in such need of fodder
That they've begun to feed on one another.
But nothing beats an actor's lot!
The flesh upon his ribs is never threatened
While colleagues starve in times of dreadful need.\(^{11}\)

He goes on to vent his contempt for the drama of his time:

What do you see in the comedies and tragedies?!—
Domestic animals with well-bred emotions,
Quite content to feast on naught but vegetables
They revel in innocuous commotions,
Like those who prattle—in the pit: . . . \(^{12}\)

Only his drama constitutes a truly authentic response to the bestial nature of life; only his drama refuses to shy away from an uninhibited presentation of "the true beast, the wild, beautiful beast. . . ." This is the kind of showmanship which Brecht would employ to enhance the shock value of plays like \textit{The Threepenny Opera}. Wedekind may well have taught him the art of attention-getting presentation.

Wedekind's magnificent beast is his most famous incarnation of amoral sexuality—Lulu—and \textit{Earth Spirit} is dominated by her electric presence from start to finish. She lives almost every moment on the level of shameless physical appetite, mesmerizing with a glance the sundry males who cross her path. She serves as the focus for activity which allows Wedekind once again to stress the inextricable connections of Eros and Thanatos. Her sexuality is the inevitable prelude to masculine suicide, whether by deadly weapon or sheer physical collapse. In spite of the corpses that litter her past, she continues to cast her spell upon fresh victims. Only at the very end of \textit{Earth Spirit} does the spell lose its potency, and it is off to jail with Lulu.

For all its resemblance to the more tightly knit variety of play,

\(^{11}\) Wedekind, \textit{Prosa, Dramen, Verse}, p. 381.
\(^{12}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 382.
Earth Spirit is actually a series of episodes. Wedekind does not give us the kind of play whose construction is so unitary and organic that all its actions comprise one single development. Nothing could be further from the dramaturgy which commences with exposition and concludes with residues of climax than Earth Spirit. Separate acts treat separate actions. Lulu is shown in terms of the men to whom she is a fatal temptation. Dr. Goll is lascivious and possessive; when he realizes what kind of woman he married in Lulu, he suffers a stroke. Schwarz, the artist, kills himself when he too has his eyes opened; his idealization of Lulu prepared him least of all for the truth. The power-mad Schön who, for all his conformity in the world of bourgeois business, proves Lulu's worthiest opponent, goes the way of all flesh when Lulu pumps five bullets into him.

Again and again, the same essential action recapitulates itself: Lulu, simply by being what she is, changes men into moths near light. The dance of death is performed in a series of grotesque variations, and Wedekind hints at the senselessness of what is going on so tumultuously by indicating it to be merely one small note in a world of dissonance. This is surely the point of footnoting the suicide of one Lulu victim and the agitation of another with the announcement that revolution has broken out in Paris. As in Grabbe's plays, one man's tragedy is quickly lost in the enormous swirl of what is going on elsewhere.

Wedekind prided himself not only on peopling his plays with characters who would not be at home in the living rooms of Ibsen's drama but on inventing for these characters a strange new dialogue devoid of warm human intonation. This dialogue is so mechanical that it often strikes one as the monotonous emission of the same set of signals. Above all, the impression is of characters mouthing what will never find a responsive ear. Everyone seems anxious to speak at the same time, sentences crisscross haphazardly, conversation becomes the alternation of telegram phrases. It is dialogue designed to parallel Wedekind's depersonalization of character in the realm of language.

For all its originality, this stylized speech reflects the kind of verbal mechanisms by which Lenz and Büchner represented mentalities and mental states. Their characters often spoke like puppets tied to a single emotional string and defined themselves by stereotyped speech patterns. What distinguishes Wedekind is that he condenses language to the point where it comes through as the most forceful verbal equivalent
of sheer drive. His language transcends self-consciousness, and one often gets the impression of words materializing themselves like circles in water shattered by rock; everything said is wholly automatic. The effect of such dialogue volleying back and forth is of a deadening mindlessness. Wedekind need not even have put any cynical phrases into his characters' mouths; only the morally dead could speak such a soulless language; here the human being verbalizes what Wedekind believed to be his real nature.

Like Lenz, Wedekind can write monologues which comment as much on the speaker as on the absurd world in which he insists on overdramatizing himself. A very unamusing emotional crisis comes through with comic overtones when Schön realizes his house is not a home:

**SCHÖN (alone, looking around):** A real Augean stable. This the evening of my life. Show me a single corner still clean. A plague on my house. The poorest day laborer has a cleaner nest. Thirty years of work, and this is my family circle, my circle. . . . *(He looks around.)* God knows, who's eavesdropping on me now! *(He pulls a revolver out of his breast pocket.)* One's life is in danger here! *(He walks, the cocked revolver in his right hand, to the right and addresses the closed window curtains.)* This my family circle! The fellow has courage!—Might it not be better to blow my brains out?—I'm up against mortal enemies, but this. . . . *(He pulls up the curtain but finds no one concealed.)* The filth—the filth. . . . *(He shakes his head and goes to the left.)* Madness is overpowering my reason, or—exceptions prove the rule!"  

This kind of speech, whose parodistic quality anticipates Sternheim and Brecht, catches the ludicrous atmosphere enveloping *Earth Spirit*. Though a newspaper tycoon who need nod to no one, Schön expects of life the same validation of bourgeois value that inspires clean-living clerks. He goes to pieces because the society in which he rides high is going to pieces. Wedekind's symbolism could not be plainer than when he shows us the magnificent Renaissance home that is Schön's castle invaded by creatures from the lowest depths. These unsavory characters make themselves at home and reveal a vocabulary unburdened by moral assumptions. They have only one aim, to take what they do not have:

"Wedekind, *Prosa, Dramen, Verse*, p. 444.
HUGENBERG: Who lives here then?
RODRIGO: We do!

Rodrigo's statement sums up Wedekind's world.

*Earth Spirit* indicates Wedekind would not have been surprised by what happened in Germany within fifteen years of his death. The play exposes the *Bürger* as utterly incapable of grasping the import of the forces building up against him. Far worse, the *Bürger* actually believes the kind of powers Lulu embodies should be responsive to his need for a nice quiet life. Adrift on a sea of naïve assumptions, the *Bürger* advances slowly but surely to his inevitable demise while spouting moralistic nonsense. Like Brecht, Wedekind cannot get over the farcical disparity between hard facts and bourgeois attitudes; like Brecht, he works this out in farcical situations whose implications are deadly serious.

It has rightly been said that the morality by which Lulu lives is not definable. She comes through as an amorphous force ready to attach herself to the nearest available man; she combines pristine innocence with a colossal capacity for homicide. But precisely because she sails by no recognizable moral charts she magnifies the contradictions of those who invoke morality but chase after Lulu. The technique of personifying forces allows Wedekind to make almost every motion and word of *Earth Spirit* resonate with significance for his dominant theme, that modern society has wholly lost the ability to live in harmony with the very instincts which drive it on, that modern men live by pseudo-sexual values that can bring them only misery.

Like Freud, Wedekind could not overstate the power of sex as the driving force of personality. This emphasis on basic, knowable forces and how they work themselves out in personal terms would concern Brecht as fully as Wedekind, even if the former located these forces in the realm of economics instead of psychology. Brecht, like Wedekind, wrote drama on the assumption that he was dramatizing forces that could not be denied, forces whose recognition the bourgeois mentality could only be shocked into by grotesque visualizations.

14 However, at least one critic speaks of Wedekind in a way which implies he was every bit as concerned with economics as Brecht. In *Frank Wedekind* (Leipzig: Reisland, 1922), Fritz Dehnow takes Wedekind to task for being so conscious of money that he reduces everything to "the need for property." See p. 73, which contains the following couplet to prove Dehnow's point: "Money is freedom and nobility/Peace of mind and human dignity."
Lulu is as much an antitype to bourgeois society as Woyzeck was. Both provoke moralistic admonition from their fellow citizens, whom nothing disturbs so much as an unconventional gesture. Woyzeck's miserable descent into murder and madness could well confirm the Bürger in his equation of middle-class morality with Providence, and so could Lulu's. Like Woyzeck, Lulu travels farther and farther along the margin of acceptable society until she is finally ostracized from the company of all except those who live beyond that society's versions of good and evil.

The grisly conclusion comes in Pandora's Box, which Wedekind considered organic to the four-act play preceding it. If Earth Spirit was dominated by the in-groups of the bourgeois world, this play is dominated by those who have long cast off their civilized masks, if they ever wore any. Wedekind brings on stage human bodies manipulated by anthropoid minds. Rodrigo Quast is all muscle, vanity, and cynicism, quite prepared to do away with others for his comfort; Casti Piani has an eye out for attractive women, so that he can meet his commitments to Egyptian houses of prostitution. They are just two specimens among a collection of swindlers, parasites, and blackmailers into whose company Lulu moves upon her escape from jail. She is lucky to escape from them as well, but not for long. As a prostitute in London, she meets Jack the Ripper, and he is her last customer.

The creature whose vitality and magnetism changed men into swine in Earth Spirit is barely recognizable in Pandora's Box. She still has admirers, but they are easily outnumbered by victimizers out for the little blood she says she has left. If Wedekind is without illusions on the psychology of the bourgeoisie, he is even more so on the psychology of the sub-bourgeoisie, that class of adventurers and opportunists waiting only for prey. In the realm they inhabit, there are only flies and spiders and the two species are quickly interchangeable. It is a realm whose exploration Brecht would continue, but Wedekind said he saw little evidence of its existence in the literature of his day.

For all the truth of the observation that in the second Lulu play Wedekind casts a less glacial eye on the swirling carnal whirlpool, the author of Pandora's Box cannot be accused of having gone soft. In the play, love is made on the couch of a man murdered by one of the lovers; a fugitive prostitute infects her only male friends with syphilis; a lesbian makes the supreme sacrifice of sleeping with a
repulsive gymnast in order to win the favors of the prostitute she loves; a white-slaver sings the praises of brothel life; every perversion is taken for granted. The play forces one into a world where the psychopathic response is normal and where all our conventional assumptions are, to say the least, irrelevant. How much *La Dolce Vita* is the life of the cesspool, Wedekind realized long before it became a fashionable insight. Lulu declares: “Is there anything sadder on this earth than a daughter of joy!”

Wedekind was as alive as Büchner to the powerful effects obtainable by nonverbal theater. All through the Lulu plays, meaningful gesture complements self-revealing dialogue. Toward the end of *Pandora’s Box*, pantomime contributes to the highly grotesque effect produced by Lulu’s taking on three very strange men before succumbing to Jack. The first is Herr Hunidei, whom Lulu finds difficult indeed to figure out:

**LULU:** What are you trying to say?

**HERR HUNIDEI:** (He puts his hand on her mouth and leaves his index finger on his lips.)

**LULU:** I don’t understand what that means.

**HERR HUNIDEI:** (He holds her mouth closed.)

This goes on and on; the lack of communication exposed between Wedekind’s characters was never so shockingly evident. For Hunidei, Lulu is the object of some ritualistic fantasy who would spoil everything by reminding her customer that she is real. And she hardly succeeds in getting across more of herself with her next two men, both of whom reinforce the fact that Lulu is attracting the worst of human deformities. Her fourth man ends it all, and the last we hear from Lulu are her screams; one beast has been pounced upon by another, who kills simply because it is his nature.

The Lulu plays are not panoramic in the sense that they shift about from one locale of action to another in order to encompass what seems to be happening all over. But they do have panoramic scope, for in the course of the two plays we come across characters from just about every level of society, from the affluent capitalist Schön

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"Wedekind, *Prosa, Dramen, Verse*, p. 524-25."
to the artist for hire Schwarz; from the established Dr. Goll to the vagrant Schigolch. The Wedekind landscape takes in procurers, prostitutes, cardsharps, and vagrants as well as representatives of more legitimate pursuits. Wedekind throws all these characters into a proximity which points up how much the underworld is merely a change in degree from conventional society. After killing Lulu, Jack remarks on the poverty of her quarters—not even a towel to be found; his outrage could not be more middleclass.

Diebold has called Wedekind “the tragicomic moralist of the flesh,” pointing out that the man who extolled sensuality as a supreme value was never very far from the man who realized sensual living was pernicious. There is truth in this, for Wedekind in no way idealizes the seamy lives of the very persons he pictures as living by his philosophy, those on the periphery of society who prize their animalism too highly to surrender it for civilized status. But, as Diebold himself has noticed, these types are equivalent in the world of Wedekind to the kings of Shakespeare’s world; only ancient kings and modern trash have any power to actualize their impulses; only they are not emasculated by convention. The point is that at bottom Wedekind was not quite the simple moralist he tried to picture himself in *Censorship*; there he asserts that he had never presented evil as good and vice versa; the fact is that at bottom he preferred id to superego.

Wedekind is less a moralist than a seeker of value in a world that negates value at every turn. Grabbe sought an exception to the unheroic nature of human life in the stature of mythical leaders, but he knew all too well that greatness is perishable. Wedekind sought an exception to the devitalized banality of modern life in impressive personifications of instinct, but he knew exactly what Grabbe did; his heroic characters soon enough end in muck; by and large they

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* *Censorship* reveals again that Wedekind was a sensualist with a bad conscience. It shows him concerned with the lurid impressions made by his plays. He argues here for religion which is an extension of common sense rather than naïve wish-fulfillment, for religious recognition of the body. All through the play, one cannot escape the feeling that he was in doubt as to the validity of his mission to unite religious and sexual feeling. He seems well aware that the prophet isolated from society may well succumb to the temptation to play God, to translate his own egoism into moral doctrine.

*Wedekinds’ mouthpiece is Buridan, who defends himself against the charge that his work is immoral: “In none of my works have I depicted good as bad or bad as good, I have never falsified the consequences which flow from human behavior. I have only demonstrated these consequences in their inexorable necessity.”*
exist to be misunderstood, hounded, or destroyed. It is not unconscious morality that makes Wedekind point this out, but a realistic grasp of life which will not let fantasy obscure fact. For the dramatists who anticipate Brecht, life is seen correctly only when judged by our worst expectations.

In effect Wedekind gives us the same sinister world which Grabbe and Büchner summarized in nihilistic monologues, the same self-devouring world which Brecht would first try to accept for what it was, in *Baal* and *In the Jungle of the Cities*, and which he would later feel it his task to help revolutionize. What distinguishes Wedekind as well as Brecht from Grabbe and Büchner is in part traceable to the cultural fact that the philosophy of materialism was by the end of the century far more firmly entrenched than ever before. Büchner and Grabbe lived at a time when materialism and naturalism were beginning to challenge all idealistic systems, when the very dimensions of the unavoidable, oncoming ideological crisis frightened many into romantic withdrawals. It was an age in which one believed in world-wills, in dark demonic forces, in dialectical systems that were highly abstract. It is no more surprising that the time which produced Schopenhauer and Hegel should produce Grabbe and Büchner than that the time of Marx and Freud should produce dramatists like Wedekind and Brecht. The world of all these dramatists is equally evil, but Wedekind and Brecht are very much of their period when they declare it to be so for sexual or economic reasons.

A more subtle change in theater and attitude between Wedekind and his predecessors is that Wedekind wrote with the realization that his art, for all the resistances it was bound to encounter, might well exert influence on bourgeois thought. He was very much concerned with sexual morality and anxious to contribute to the struggle for a liberalized sexual code. Among other things, his *Music* asserts the rights of women to abortion. The attitude behind his drama may have been more hopeless than he could admit to himself, but it does not approach the fatalistic resignation of Grabbe and Büchner. Unlike them, Wedekind is not primarily concerned with lamenting the unalterability of the human condition; the lurid and sordid world he puts on the stage is intended to show us to ourselves as we really are—and had better not be. Like Brecht, he often seems to say "anything goes" but does not mean it; only a fine moral sensibility could construct the zoos of two-footed creatures given us by Wedekind and Brecht. They sermonize with dung.
Friedrich points out that Wedekind appears to lack "the social pity of the naturalists and the later expressionists," while his subjectivity, violence, and rhetorical style separate him from the documentary emphasis of the naturalists. Interestingly enough, almost everything one can say about Wedekind's relationship to the expressionists is valid about Brecht's relationship to them. According to Sokel, "Brecht showed the Dionysiac essence of Expressionism" in Baal, concerning himself in that first important play, as he would later on in A Man's a Man, with the value of naked instinct in a frightened depersonalized society. This was precisely Wedekind's concern. Sokel adds that "Brecht made expressionism 'realistic,'" stripping it of "the illusion that the explosive liberation of 'essential man' could be compatible with humanism." Wedekind was just as un-Rousseauistic. This is precisely why one German scholar finds it hard to understand why Wedekind's work did not receive the approval of the Third Reich, whose leaders often mouthed slogans not at all antithetic to Wedekind's championship of instinct.

Undeniable as Wedekind's linguistic influence was on the expressionists, there were definite limits to the extent they could assimilate his wealth of dialogue styles; they simply did not share his passion for pitilessly stripping everything to its core. Brecht, on the other hand, was most receptive to just this side of Wedekind, following him in his use of a diverse mixture of linguistic forms, from Schillerian rhetoric to vulgarized concisions. Like Wedekind, he writes dialogue whose cynical intonations are heightened by the very speech rhythms in which it demands to be articulated, and by imagery which reminds us how much this is a world of tooth and claw. Brecht continued Wedekind's revolt against "literary" theater as well as Wedekind's practice of stylized, antinaturalistic grotesqueries; both poet-dramatists relished the coarsely worded insight.

Aside from the Lulu plays, Wedekind comes through as most Brechtian in plays where he identifies the reality principle with a healthy suspicion of idealistic ethics. King Nicolo or Such Is Life (1902) makes the point that in the bourgeois world, power and vulgarity go hand in hand—to be noble is to be isolated and impotent. Quite naïve is the artist's belief that his frustration is sanctified by the holiness of his mission; artists are mere luxury items bought and

*Werner P. Friedrich, History of German Literature (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1959), p. 244.
*Sokel (ed.), An Anthology, p. xxix.
paid for by the moneyed bourgeoisie. At the center of middle-class life is a worship of the material and lucrative that holds implications for everyone, without exception. Head-in-the-clouds aestheticism invites disaster.

The world is made least of all for the tender-minded. This is never dramatized more acidly than in *Music* (1906). A young woman is totally victimized by a professor of music who deludes her, impregnates her, impoverishes her, and eventually drives her to the point where she is a step away from insanity. Through all of this he receives not a slap on the wrist from bourgeois authority while his victim has to contend with punitive laws against abortion and winds up in prison. At the end of the play her baby is dead, she in a state of hysterical collapse, while the professor of music steps blithely away from the wreckage to go on with his pleasant middle-class life. *Music* is a vitriolic illustration pattern of the extent to which amoral parasitism thrives in a society where one need only keep up appearances. Small wonder the young woman in question comes to realize her hopeless situation is really quite comical.

If what the Germans call *Sachlichkeit* is attenuated in much of Wedekind's later work, it is quite prevalent in *The Marquis of Keith* (1900). Here a cynical philosophy of life is presented without any overtones of pathos or pathology; the play provides great insight into the polar divisions of Wedekind's complex psychology without the kind of morbid atmosphere which envelops a nightmarish play like *Wetterstein Castle*. Two sides of Wedekind's personality are made

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59 This observation is made in *The Tenor* (1897), a short play in which Wedekind presents modern society as a treadmill of commerce from which no one is exempt. His spokesman of cynicism is the singer Gerardo, who declares that love is a deplorable bourgeois virtue, that there is no success that is not materially rewarding, that only the sick would spend their time on something that did not prove lucrative. For Gerardo, every moment of his life is tied to his trade: he lives quite literally by the principle that time is money.

60 *Wetterstein Castle* (1910) shows Wedekind trying to be far more explicit about matters he worked more integrally into the action of earlier plays. His art became increasingly one of commentary. Once again we get two Wedekinds: the man in search of an ethos and the cynic without reservations. Wedekind directs his usual fire at the bourgeoisie, but he shows equally that there is no real alternative to commercialized living. Absent is any real exalation of instinct: Effie, a girl who seeks total sexual fulfillment, is killed to satisfy the perverted lust of a human beast named Tschamper. And upon her corpse another business deal is consummated. The smell of neurosis was never more powerful in Wedekind's work, even if his neurosis allowed him
flesh here: the individual above all eager to affirm his animalism and the individual wholly afraid of life. The Marquis speaks with a Brechtian voice when he identifies religious values with business values—sin is merely bad business. Just as Brechtian here is the constant definition of the action by the explicit commentary of characters whose dialogue takes us straight to their basic attitudes.

Ernst Scholz seeks existential meaning through self-sacrifice, an attitude totally unintelligible to the Marquis, an exploiter par excellence. Life being the merry-go-round it is, the Marquis must beg the man he holds in contempt for some money. He receives instead the advice that he give up his dissolute ways and retire to a sanitarium, advice that begins to make sense when the woman closest to him ends her life. By now the Marquis should be totally destroyed, but he is not, though he fiddles with a revolver. At the last moment, unexpected money falls into his hands and it reignites the old vitality. Why not continue living, inasmuch as life is anything but a respecter of what we tend to take most seriously. "Life is a roller coaster . . . " and one may as well continue to ride; the Marquis makes the same affirmation of life that the Man in the Mask talked Melchior into making.

As revolted as Wedekind was by a bourgeois world, he saw as little reason as Brecht not to relish the passing scene; the gusto of their cynicism is a major determinant of their style.

Wedekind is reported to have given an unforgettably convincing performance as Scholz. He may have acted the part so well because it was not wholly a part. For all his conviction that dutiful idealists were sick to the core, he manifested in his own uncompromising aesthetic positions the same kind of self-sacrificial temperament which he painstakingly deplored in his more masochistic characters. Only when we leave the written page to observe Wedekind’s one-man fight with censors outraged by his sexual ethos do we realize that when he mocked the messianic zeal of would-be society saviors in plays like Hidalla or Karl Hetmann, the Dwarf-Giant, he was actually engaging in self-laceration. He was as torn between commitment to a cause and the cynical view that all causes exist to be seen through as were Lenz and Brecht.

It was not above Wedekind to put a penetrating insight into the mouth of an out-and-out rogue, and it is a rogue in Hidalla who

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to see what must forever be shut to the less troubled. Wetterstein Castle is a ghastly vision.
tries to convince the woman he is after how much life belongs to the living: "Oh, Fanny, Fanny—a living scoundrel is much better for your health than the greatest dead prophet." Can one conceive of a more Brechtian declaration of love? Actually, one can take at random any better work by Wedekind and Brecht and expect to find the same relish for the cynical, the same mockery of bourgeois values, the same hard observations on the extent to which neither art nor anything else is sacred in a world where only cash and pleasure counts, the same emphasis on animal instinct driving people on, in short, the same antisentimentalism, the same refusal to be taken in. Neither shies away from social areas exotically remote from the bourgeois living room; both give us a world of individuals against whom the good citizen locks his door. Neither has the least respect for aesthetic criteria which dictate an art of prosaic texture; both spurn the unities and load their plays with explanatory commentary. It is no exaggeration to say they are willfully antinaturalistic. This is not to suggest they are mere carbon copies of one another, but it is to imply that for all their differences, they are kindred spirits. With them, the anti-idealistic rebellion in German drama extends to modern times; the force of their work challenges anew the pre-eminence of the Lessing-Goethe-Schiller tradition.
chapter five: