
The Urbanization of the Body: Prostitutes, Dialectics, and Utopia in German Expressionism

Christiane Schönfeld
University of Wales Lampeter

When Heinrich Heine saw Eugène Delacroix's famous revolutionary painting *Le 28 juillet: la Liberté guidant le peuple* at a major art exhibition in Paris in 1831, he stood in awe before it, touched by the "Heiligkeit des Sujets."¹ A holiness, conveyed by a half-naked woman, which for Heine embodied "eine seltsame Mischung von Phryne, Poissarde und Freiheitsgöttin."² Generically related to the peripatetic female philosophers, Delacroix's *liberté* leading the people over the barricades reminded him not only of the followers of Aristotle but also of those otherwise *peripatein* or (street-)walking around, like the fleet-footed lovers on the boulevards.

Delacroix's image of the woman in battle—not as a nurse but as a leader—had scarcely found a foothold in the arts before a bourgeois "feminine" ideal of respectability and rootedness once again put the canvas in order and the woman in her place.³ Heinrich Heine, the young critic in exile, rejoiced when he saw this "Venus of the street", "this whore who symbolized the will of an untamed people."⁴ Although Heine himself only alludes to the Parisian cocottes, his insinuation nevertheless reveals both the fascination of the (political) artist with the fighting *liberté* (or revolutionary *Marianne*), and a specifically bourgeois interpretation of the nexus between a half-naked woman in battle and a "whore". For the bourgeois, a whore's involvement in subversive and revolutionary activities came as no surprise for the prostitute had always been ambiguous and strange.

Eighty years after Heine drooled over Delacroix's *Liberté*, Wilhelmine Germany was still struggling to keep the woman under control. The women's rights movement was becoming well established despite the intrinsic division between conservative, bourgeois, Christian activists and socialist, proletarian women's rights groups. The prostitute⁵ was again and again a major topic in both the proletarian and the bourgeois women's rights movements, which indicates the increasing urgency of the issue: approximately 330,000 prostitutes⁶ worked the streets of Wilhelmine

Germany prior to the First World War. The thematization of the rights of these marginal women, however, led both to uproar outside the women's rights movement among the vast conservative circles of Wilhelmine society, and to conflict within the movement itself.

The first time a feminist writer dared to discuss the question of "the oldest profession" in her journal, it had extremely damaging repercussions for her career. Gräfin Gertrud Guillaume-Schack, the founder and editor of *Die Staatsbürgerin*, the first German journal for the proletarian woman, realized the need to politicize the prostitution issue in 1882 and was immediately prosecuted first for naming the ineffable in her public lectures and then even in her journal; eventually such legal prosecution resulted in her expatriation. Her journal was prohibited and pulped⁷ after it had been distributed for only six months. It was not until 1892 that Clara Zetkin started a new *Arbeiterinnenzeitung*, the well-known *Gleichheit*, again fighting not only for the rights of the proletarian female, but also for those of the prostitute.

This thematization of the prostitution issue by left-wing and radical bourgeois feminists was bound to disrupt the conservative discourse of the moderate bourgeois and Christian activists. These rather traditionally oriented women's rights advocates were all too often more likely to go into raptures when talking about the late Queen Luise of Prussia (1776-1810) than they were when discussing emancipatory issues. It was Queen Luise, rather than the German Emperor's wife Auguste Viktoria, who was upheld at the time as a symbol of female modesty and chastity, intelligence and motherly instincts. In an opinion poll conducted in 1899 by the *Berliner Illustrierte*, Queen Luise was still considered the most important woman of the nineteenth century, beating even Queen Victoria into second place.⁸ Regarding "respectability" as essential to the welfare of women, the merging of traditional "feminine" values with demands for equal rights in education or career was quite common in bourgeois feminist circles. What started as a protest against the treatment accorded to prostitutes—especially against the enforced physical examinations carried out by men—and as a battle for the rights and dignity even of marginal women, soon became a crusade against prostitution itself.⁹ While proletarian and radical feminists fought against the exploitation of the prostitute, the conservative bourgeois women's rights activists demanded the acknowledgement of their own intellectual equality with men,¹⁰ as well as social purity and the abolition of prostitution. Conservative activists were well aware of the fact that it was the prostitute, this radical and colorful outcast, who was frequently and lustfully escorted right into the nucleus of bourgeois society.

The question of prostitution was thus predestined to be an extremely explosive topic—both in politics and in private life—in Wilhelm II's rather prudish Germany. In this repressive and hypocritical society, brothels and mental hospitals were remote "places of tolerance,"¹¹ spaces of locked up hysterics and whores that were verbally nonexistent within and spatially removed from bourgeois culture; for, as

Michel Foucault tells us, "repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know."¹² Therefore, it comes as no surprise that harlots became a favorite theme of antibourgeois, bohemian artists and writers, a theme which found expression in prose and plays,¹³ poems and paintings. The prostitute was particularly embraced by Expressionist artists and writers of Wilhelmine society, and became the predominant female figure in their art and literature. Being opposed to the 'repressive society' they lived in, the Expressionists emphasize the prostitute's existence and thus relieve her of her bourgeois spatial "framing": the brothel is demolished via pen or brush, and the prostitute is turned loose on the streets of the metropolis.

But how are we to interpret this willful act of liberation? It has been pointed out by feminist and nonfeminist scholars alike that Messianic Expressionism and its implied quest for the New Man not only paints a decisively negative picture of the woman but sheds a clear and fatal light on minorities in general. Just as Zarathustra demanded, the New Man must rise, and be it from *their* ashes. The Expressionist representation or outcry of this demand by, for example, Ernst Barlach in *Der tote Tag*, Georg Kaiser in *Gas*, or in Kurt Heynicke's poem "Aufbruch," reflects the most dominant side of Expressionist chauvinism. But is chauvinism all there is to be unveiled in the Expressionists' primary choice of topic? Or is there not, rather, an immanent dialectic to their representation of minorities, marginal women, and prostitutes?

It has been the more or less unanimous view among feminist scholars of German Expressionism that the woman in Expressionism is either depicted as a flat and passive character of extremely minor importance or simply portrayed as a sexual being without the *Geist* or *Wille* which are seen as essential qualities of the New Man.¹⁴ Or, as Marion Adams puts it: "Die Frau ist für den Expressionisten entweder die Verkörperung des Tierisch-Sinnlichen oder die erbarmungswürdige Fabrikarbeiterin—alles in allem eine unerfreuliche Erscheinung."¹⁵ However, to mention the obvious, the essence of Expressionism lies partly in its conflicting, even contradictory tendencies. In view of its heterogeneity it cannot come as a surprise, despite ample evidence to support the above-mentioned views, that many Expressionists also depicted in their literature the power and force of the woman of their time and her right to independence and individuality. Intellectual links were thereby established with the women's movement and especially with its socialist wing. Even in Messianic Expressionism the disgust at marginal women is paired with—if not depreciated by—fascination and admiration. The *O Mensch-Dichtung* is imbued with long-overlooked declarations of solidarity: a solidarity which is no longer just a critique of the morbid frailness of modern society, but a fellowship that attempts to go beyond Ernst Stadler's humanistic emotion, when it calls the drastically marginalized prostitutes its "lieb Geschwister."¹⁶

Else Lasker-Schüler time and again states in her poetry¹⁷ the belief in her own individuality, in self-determination, and sexual freedom which parallels the claims of the socialist women's movement.¹⁸ Emmy Hennings devoted not only numerous poems but also a novel to the issue of prostitution: *Das Brandmal. Ein Tagebuch*.¹⁹ In her work, she criticizes society's treatment and marginalization of the street-walker and offers nonbiased insights into the lives of prostitutes and the destructive effects of prostitution on the individual. Both authors extend their feminisms to the sphere of sexual ethics. This idea of sexual liberation which is based on the needs of the individual rather than exposed to the constraints of society and church has little in common with the above-mentioned Expressionist obsession with the woman as a sexual object. And it was not only women artists and writers but also male Expressionists who became proponents of emancipation.

To name only a few, Erich Mühsam and Franz Pfemfert are known for their support of the woman's right to vote.²⁰ Carl Sternheim sympathized with the women's rights movement and shared its criticism of the woman's place within bourgeois society. He feeds emancipatory ideas into his prose and plays, where they remain obvious despite his inevitable irony. In *Die Kassette*, to mention only one of numerous examples in which the rules and conventions of the middle class are ridiculed, Sternheim seems well aware of the question of gender. He depicts bourgeois women who are utterly commodified by the structures of bourgeois society. In many of his works he criticizes not only the reduction of the individual to a dependent personification of a prescribed role model but also bourgeois morals which keep the woman in "her" place and the prostitute on the margins.

Time and again issues of abuse and discrimination against women in general and prostitutes in particular become topics of Expressionist literature and art. Rape and the complete failure of society in dealing with this sort of crime is examined for example by Hermann Essig, one of the lesser known Expressionists. Essig addresses the issue of rape in "Die Gänsemagd" which was published in *Neue Blätter für Kunst und Dichtung* in 1918. In this text Marie is raped while tending her adoptive parents' geese. Society's judgement of the young girl, who becomes pregnant as a result of the rape, has devastating effects on her life. She eventually gives up her child for the prospect of permanent employment and possibly even happiness. Choosing her own life over her responsibilities as a mother, she "liberates" herself from the rapist and society's humiliating verdict and moral imprisonment: "Sie entriß sich der Klammer des Vagabunden."²¹ Although still not independent of male-dominated society—this would be all too naive—she does not accept the prescribed boundaries of passive female suffering. The author emphasizes a female identity which goes beyond her reproductive functions and implies an assertion of the woman's right to self-determination. At the same time, society's hypocritical treatment of "fallen" women or single mothers is being denounced. Essig sympathizes with socialist and

proletarian women's rights advocates who acknowledge and criticize not only the sexual abuse of women and its social consequences but who repeatedly address the conflict between motherhood and money earning.

Of course, authors like Sternheim, Stadler, Essig, and many others address problems of gender, of discrimination and abuse as *male* authors of their time, and there is little evidence that they are aware of the "maleness" of their gaze or of the seriously sex-linked world of meaning surrounding them. However, they make visible something—or somebody—that was normally ignored. Or as Ann Rosalind Jones puts it: "In the discourses of humanism and bourgeois family theory, the proper woman is an absence: legally, she vanishes under the name and authority of her father and her husband; as daughter and wife, she is enclosed in the private household. She is silent and invisible: she does not speak, and she is not spoken about."²²

In Expressionism the voice of the woman, even—or especially—of the marginal woman, was to be heard. Even if we still consider the male Expressionist's gaze as limiting or as inevitably resulting in Expressionist chauvinism, the representation of the prostitute in many Expressionist literary and artistic works proves her presence, a presence which demands the reconsideration of prejudices and stereotypes, and which serves as a rereading and reinterpretation of the social, political, and moral status of the sex-industry worker. Expressionists create in the most marginalized woman of all—the prostitute—a character of vital importance, as the following pages will attempt to show.

The Expressionists' predilection for the marginal figures of modern society cannot be overlooked, for their literature and art is teeming with mad (wo)men, bums, and hookers. But, again, were they craving the expression or even allegorization of the social, political, or cultural crisis, or was this just a means of provocation that relocated the margin right in the center of the Expressionist stage or canvas? Is it the often mentioned solidarity of a *bohème* who does not belong either? Or is it rather an effort to shred the moral corset of bourgeois society to make room for an Expressionist utopia? All of these constitute possible answers, but there is more to be established.

The perception of the prostitute in Expressionism is immanently connected with the Expressionist vision as such. When Kasimir Edschmid wrote in 1918, "der expressionistische Dichter sieht nicht, er schaut. Er schildert nicht, er erlebt,"²³ the bourgeois "Weltgedanke," as Edschmid calls it, came to an end: an end which implied both the demise of positivistic knowledge and a deconstruction of the marginality-centrality paradigm. All that was left was the possibility of a vision. In their paradigmatic effort to uncover an essence of being, Expressionist writers refused to perceive the prostitute as anything other than human: "er sieht das Menschliche in den Huren."²⁴ Now, as Edschmid put it, "[e]ine Hure ist nicht mehr ein Gegenstand, behängt und bemalt mit den Dekorationen ihres Handwerks. Sie wird ohne Parfüm, ohne Farben, ohne Tasche, ohne wiegende Schenkel erscheinen.

[...D]enn die Wirklichkeit ihres menschlichen Daseins ist ohne Belang. Ihr Hut, ihr Gang, ihre Lippe sind Surrogate. Ihr eigentliches Wesen ist damit nicht erschöpft."²⁵ All those substitutes for a human essence, perceptible by the senses though they may be, cease to exist for the Expressionist writer; the context, that which allows for signification, is shattered. "Jeder Mensch (...) wird in dieser Kunst nichts als das Erhebendste und das Kläglichste: er wird *Mensch*. Hier liegt das Neue und Unerhörte gegen die Epochen vorher. Hier wird der bürgerliche Weltgedanke endlich nicht mehr gedacht. Hier gibt es keine Zusammenhänge mehr, die das Bild des Menschlichen verschleiern."²⁶ Edschmid declares that in Expressionist literature, any context, any coherence is recognized as an illusion and therefore discarded. The context is the veil covering the vision of the modern human being. Unveiled, the essence can finally come to light.

This "enlightened" Expressionist representation of the prostitute takes many forms. Most predominant, however, are provocative declarations of solidarity with marginal women, and efforts to shatter bourgeois contexts and prejudices which manifest the peripheral (female) space.

One of the most striking examples of this complete demolition of the bourgeois *Weltbild* is Alfred Lemm's "Die Hure Salomea."²⁷ In this story, Salomea, a young, well-educated, and semi-bourgeois Jewish medical student, who suffers from chronic boredom, sits in her favorite café observing the masses "floating by," when the First World War breaks out. She decides to volunteer as a nurse, but fails to dedicate herself totally to her new assignment. She finally has to leave the hospital, due to her neglect of a patient. Unable to understand her own indifference and lack of devotion, she returns to her café. One night she has a vision: "Sie sah die jungen Mannesleiber in ihrem Anatomiesaal, plump zerlegt zur Präparation, zerrissen und blutig. Die weichsten Muskeln waren in strähniges, oxsenhaftes Fleisch der Schlächterläden verwandelt. Dunkelbraune Höhlungen, Obdach für Maden, stanken die zähfasrigen Rippenbuchtungen."²⁸ Suddenly aware of the impossibility of stopping the war machinery, she at least wants to cover the soldiers' wounds with her body, and give herself as often as they wish. Salomea hurries through the barracks, distributing herself "mit fieberhafter Kraft."²⁹ She soon becomes a legend among the soldiers, who joyfully wait for her as a touchable personification of the "New," a utopia that soothes pain, erases fear, and conveys hope. After journalists discover her among the soldiers and publish a story about her "commitment," she is arrested and—in a truly Kafkaesque trial—sentenced to eight years in jail for indecency during a time when everyone else had to think about serving their country. Being ignorant of the fact that serving was precisely what she was doing, the judges send her to prison in a freight car overcrowded with seriously injured prisoners of war. By this time suffering from cramps and hallucinations, she makes love to several of these casualties to ease their pain: "Leid, Leid ist ausgeschüttet über euch alle (...). Ich will euer Leid auffangen."³⁰ When a Croat—"in plötzlichem Erkennen"—recognizes her as his patron saint, the other soldiers join his prayers to

their own saint or to the Virgin Mary whom they see in the body “der zerfallenden ‘jüdischen Hure.’” “Inbrünstig lobten sie, jeder in seiner Sprache, die Gebenedeite,”³¹ wrote Alfred Lemm at the end of this narrative, knowing that this comparison signified the most radical destruction of a bourgeois value system.

But Alfred Lemm was not the only Expressionist to correlate, or even equate, the prostitute with a saint, if not with God. Otto Zareck’s poem “Lied einer Dirne,”³² published in 1919 in the journal *Neue Blätter für Kunst und Dichtung*, depicts a “hlessed” prostitute, who gives herself to save and nourish, going through her “Hexenküche”—or hell on earth—for the sake of the reader and the human race. Like Jesus, she takes all earthly wrong and sin onto her own shoulders, chosen as she is to suffer for the world.

In Ernst Stadler’s poem “Die Dirne,”³³ which appeared in *Die Aktion* in 1913, it is the prostitute’s first lover who is compared to God, and her suffering which is construed as nothing but a divine trial. It is always to Him that she is offering herself while exercising her profession; He is the one penetrating her, and revolting victuals seem like consecrated wafers in her mouth³⁴.

Carl Sternheim’s novella *Busekow*,³⁵ published for the first time in *Die weißen Blätter* in 1913, also exemplifies the Expressionists’ effort to uncover the essence of the human being or prostitute and their simultaneous attempt to shatter the bourgeois *Weltbild*. Gesine, a young prostitute, becomes the lover of Christof Busekow, a nerdy policeman. Through her positive and rejuvenating influence, Busekow manages not only to break out of his *Kleinbürgerexistenz* of order and suppression, but also to gain promotion in his job due to his sudden understanding and enthusiasm. Gesine turns out to be a deeply religious Catholic intoxicated with devoutness. When Gesine becomes pregnant, Busekow cannot but regard this prostitute as the personification of *all* divine miracles: “Vom Schöpfungstage angefangen lag Gott mit allen Wundern in dieses Weibes Leib.”³⁶

The miracle of the liberated body was also an integral part of Vitalist philosophy. Ludwig Klages’s book *Vom kosmogonischen Eros*, based on lectures he held in 1918, summarizes the Expressionists’ desires when it ends with the quote: “So herrsche denn Eros, der alles begonnen!”³⁷ The influence of Vitalism on Expressionist literature becomes most explicit in Curt Corinth’s novels *Trieb*, *Potsdamer Platz*, and *Bordell*. In chains of ecstatic visions, prostitutes are presented here as the saviors of modern times, for their liberated bodies offer freedom and divine force.

Fiebrig irrt Suchen straßenlang.
Während das Dämmern sinkenden Tages mantelig
die springenden Glieder umschlägt.
Auge schreit.
Da: Antwort.
Gedörte Kehle preßt keinen Ruf mehr hervor.

Gblendete Schau

erspäht nicht mehr Schönheit oder Häßlichkeit.

Mannhafter Körper weiß nur das Eine:

Löserin Weib.

Hand winkt.

Zwei zergehen im Dunkel.³⁸

Hans Termaden, the main character in *Potsdamer Platz*, is portrayed as the “new Messiah” once he learns to be guided completely by his physical urges.³⁹ Corinth’s “New Man” is represented as the paradigm of a creature of instinct, and the prostitute—as one who has unfastened the moral corset of bourgeois society—is depicted as his aid and companion in this celestial journey. In his novel *Bordell*, Corinth describes the little barber Pasentrall’s sexual liberation which ends in his madness and death. Here, Pasentrall himself is turned into a prostitute by upper-bourgeois women, and the hypocritical society is the brothel that finally destroys him. Again, only the harlots are presented as human in this bestial society and are held to be superior to all the pathetic hypocrites of a so-called elite, as Pasentrall tells the daughter of his former landlady:

Ahnst du verlorene Pflanze im Mist gar nicht,

wie turmhoch die [the prostitutes] über dir stehen, he?

—haben noch Mut zu ihrem Wandel—unangekränkt von dem

Phrasentratsch und Moralitätenssens einer dekanten [sic!]

untergangsreifen Bourgeoisie!

Freudigkeit des Fleisches! Bekennung aller natürlichen, unverbogenen

Triebe! Ekstase der Ekstase!

Das allein ist Zukunft! dort allein ist Zukunft!⁴⁰

In Curt Corinth’s view, the future lies in this liberation of physical desires, and the female ideal has to embrace its urges to become divine. Here, the prostitutes alone have already reached this promising state of heavenly sinfulness.

The Expressionist representation of the prostitute cannot therefore be satisfied with a simple transformation of a whore into a saint. The essence of the harlot is not her profession, Expressionism seems to tell us; it is, however, always also exactly that. She must be both—hooker *and* saint—in order to succeed in deconstructing the “possibility of difference,” as Jacques Derrida⁴¹ would call it, and to be able to rebel forcefully against the comfortable world of bourgeois antagonisms.

It is in this first dialectical “vision” of the prostitute, the fact that her “essence” lies beyond the unambiguity of bourgeois spaces, that we begin to understand a second, and even more fundamental “vision” of no less dialectical proportions. For, like the prostitute and in fact sheltering her, it was the opacity of the modern city that exerted both fascination and repulsion on the imagination of its inhabitants. Small

wonder, then, that in transcending a simple antibourgeois canonization of harlotry, the prostitute's essence in Expressionism is often secured through her correlation with and existence in modern urban spaces, spaces which, if we follow the sociologist and neo-Kantian philosopher Georg Simmel, are utterly determined by the "Geldwirtschaft." This consequently leads to the specialization of social activity and the depersonalization of both individual and social relationships. It is *money* which represents the sole relation that remains between the city dwellers. In his *Philosophie des Geldes* (1900), Georg Simmel depicts the prostitute as the most striking example of the power and mechanism of money in the modern metropolis. The price of the prostitute is not only subject to supply and demand, as Simmel points out; her value is completely integrated into the machinery of the modern metropolis through the possibility of acquisition of her body by a male client, as Luce Irigaray also emphasizes.⁴² Even fashion may dictate her personal value, a value which nevertheless remains a monetary one. For Simmel, as for Karl Marx, this monetary value thus incorporates what Simmel himself called a "Nivellierung"⁴³ or "levelling out of objects"—with 'objects' here comprising human beings as well, for they have long since turned into objects themselves. This "Nivellierung" is at the same time cause and effect of the interchangeability of things. In this process, nothing but the common value of a spaceless and timeless exchange mechanism remains to guarantee the readability of increasingly complex urban landscapes.

Within the modern metropolis the prostitute becomes one of the most salient of "dialectical images" of capitalism, as Walter Benjamin would later phrase it.⁴⁴ No longer an accidental fly in the soup of bourgeois societies, the prostitute is now commodity and seller, owner and means of production in one, and is thus beyond the reassurance of a designated marginality. A symbol of capitalism, she is now beyond any simple synthesis of "the form of the commodity and its content,"⁴⁵ as Susan Buck-Morss put it. Rather, the synthesis is here thesis and antithesis in one without losing the dialectic of contradiction between the two. At once object-to-be-sold and subject-to-sell, merchandise and merchant, the prostitute embodies the quintessential qualities of any commodity: the flexibility to become whatever sells and the relative stability that accompanies any money-oriented market.

But again we are twice denied any form of sociation, for the harlot in Expressionism always remains directly *inside* and at the same time entirely *outside* of modern society; the Expressionist representation consolidates the prostitute's complete integration into immense production processes as well as her lethargic dwelling in total isolation. She appears as a woman thoroughly determined by the money economy of the modern metropolis, who at the same time fixes her own price on the street corner. And again, it is precisely her ambivalent nature and her implicit lack of certainty which makes her—in the eyes of Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin and the Expressionists—almost an ideal symbol of a dialectical capacity that still characterizes the metropolis and modern capitalism today.

The original meaning of harlot—or its Old French root *arlot*—was “vagabond” (and is, however urbanized, still present in the term “streetwalker”). In Expressionist literature and art the prostitute often appears as a nomad, wandering the streets of the roaring metropolis of Berlin, belonging and yet not belonging, familiar and yet strange. At once invited into and yet by definition outside bourgeois space, she is akin to “the stranger” who was so pointedly described by Georg Simmel in 1908 as “the man who comes today and stays tomorrow.”⁴⁶

The stranger *and* the prostitute bring themselves into the most inner circle of society while at the same time remaining spiritually, socially, or even legally remote. Following Simmel, the stranger represents “a synthesis of (...) remoteness and nearness, indifference and involvement,”⁴⁷ which is surely also true of the prostitute. The stranger and the prostitute are neither friend nor enemy and therefore incongruous with Wilhelmine society. Again they lack the comfort of such a stable opposition that—to quote Zygmunt Bauman’s essay on “Modernity and Ambivalence”—“sets apart truth from falsity, good from evil, beauty from ugliness.”⁴⁸ It is precisely in such terms that the Expressionists’ representation of the prostitute denounces the bourgeois *Weltbild* and its cosy set of oppositions, and thus denies that which makes the world “readable” for certain classes: it indulges in doubt and confusion, for this, according to the Expressionists, is the essence of modern spaces and their inhabitants.

These immanent dialectics in the Expressionist representation of the prostitute pose the most severe threat to the bourgeois *Weltbild*. A simple provocation or opposition could be dealt with, but this awesome figure represents illegibility itself and threatens the mere possibility of difference and sociation. The prostitute is neither friend nor enemy, but she could be both.⁴⁹ She is undecidable, to borrow Jacques Derrida’s term, like the Greek word *pharmakon* which can mean remedy as well as poison, or as Derrida puts it, “neither remedy nor poison, neither good nor evil, (...) neither speech nor writing;”⁵⁰ or *hymen*, to give one more example, which stands for both membrane and marriage. “The *hymen*,” Derrida writes in *Positions*, “is neither confusion nor distinction, neither identity nor difference, neither consummation nor virginity, neither the veil nor unveiling, neither the inside nor the outside (...).”⁵¹ The *hymen*, however, is always at the same time precisely this, Derrida’s “neither/nor, (...) is *simultaneously* either *or*.”⁵² Thus, undecidables cannot be included in a philosophical world of binary antagonisms, but this is where their power lies. Or, as Zygmunt Bauman phrases it: “Their underdetermination is their potency: because they are nothing, they may be all. (...) They bring the outside into the inside, and poison the comfort of order with the suspicion of chaos.”⁵³ And is this not exactly what prostitutes do?

In Expressionist literature, our attention is consequently drawn to the prostitutes’ deconstructive potential and power. It was certainly no accident that Alfred Lemm described his Salomea as the personification of the “New.”⁵⁴ Prostitutes in Expressionism are hookers and saints, but they may be neither, they are and remain

unclassifiable. Sternheim's Gesine or Lemm's Salomea appear as unascertainable beings in a society which still firmly believes in the illusion of its self-created definitions and boundaries. As they emerge like colorful birds of paradise from the masses of the metropolis they can no longer be categorized or placed within a world of binary antagonisms. And it is exactly in this capacity—not as a fixed ideal but as a character representing complete ambivalence—that the prostitute in Expressionism is able to symbolize the modern experience as such. Therefore the Expressionists' choice of the prostitute as a major character in so many of their works served not only to shock or to declare the author's solidarity with marginal women but intended to go beyond a straightforward provocation of bourgeois society.

The revolutionary potential of this disorganization of the common *Weltbild* cannot be overemphasized. Expressionists like Alfred Lemm or Ernst Stadler deny us certainty, and thereby shake bourgeois society to its very foundations. Once again the prostitute had been employed by artists and writers as a symbol of resistance, but this time she is no longer the heroine leading the people over the barricades as Delacroix depicted it. Delacroix's and Heine's "Venus of the street" embodies revolutionary passion, dominant resolve, and, of course, liberty. Her half-naked body accentuates her standing beyond the traditional role prescribed for female members of society: Marianne is here depicted as neither passive nor chaste, but as a leader. However, when the Second Republic was proclaimed in 1848, Marianne was to become a more respectable allegory of freedom—seated and fully clothed.⁵⁵ Expressionists revive Delacroix's image of the revolutionary woman, for their representations of prostitutes often include characteristics of independence, passion and power. But at the same time, their worn-out bodies can signify their subjection, their frisky exuberance might only be the practiced behavior of professionals, and their dominance time and again coincides with the experience of daily marginalization and oppression. Delacroix's allegory is thus split open and through its fissures leads us over the barricades of binary antagonisms to a new and more truthful representation of modernity. The representation of the prostitute in Expressionism shares this potential: her experience epitomizes the essence of modernity and the modern metropolis by simply reminding us of an enigmatic and ambiguous existence.

¹ Heinrich Heine. "Gemäldeausstellung in Paris 1831." *Sämtliche Schriften* Vol. III. Ed. Karl Pörnbacher. Munich: Hanser, 1971. p. 39.

² Heine (1971), 39–40.

³ Cf. George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality. Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe*. New York: Fertig, 1985. See especially chapter 5, pp. 90–113.

⁴ Mosse (1985), 93.

⁵ This essay is focused on the female prostitute only. Although there are a few allusions to male prostitutes in the literature of Expressionism, the female prostitute is much more prevalent. Concerning a more detailed analysis of the issue of prostitution in Wilhelminian Germany cf. the first chapter of my book on *Dialektik und Utopie: Die Prostituierte im Expressionismus*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1996.

⁶ Cf. Abraham Flexner, . *Prostitution in Europe*. [1914]. Reprint: Montclair, N.J.: Patterson Smith, 1969. p. 28. Flexner bases his study on numbers published in the *Zeitschrift für Bekämpfung von Geschlechtskrankheiten* and in A. Moll's *Handbuch der Sexualwissenschaften* (1912).

⁷ See Gertrud Bäumer. "Der Sieg des Abolitionismus in Deutschland." *Die Frau* 30 (1922/23): 296. Cf. also Ute Gerhard and Ulla Wischermann. "Liberalismus—Sozialismus—Feminismus. Zeitschriften der Frauenbewegung um die Jahrhundertwende." *Deutsche Literatur von Frauen: 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*. Vol. II. Ed. Gisela Brinker-Gabler. Munich: Beck, 1988. p. 269.

⁸ Cf. Mosse (1985), 96.

⁹ Mosse (1985), 111. Cf. also Gertrud Bäumer (1922), 296–300; Amy Hackett. "The German Women's Movement and Suffrage, 1890-1914: A Study of National Feminism." *Modern European Social History*. Ed. Robert J. Bezucha. Lexington, Mass., 1972. pp. 366-75; Lüders, Elisabeth. "Ein moralischer Erfolg." *Die Frau* 15 (1907/8): 117-19; Judith R. Walkowitz. *Prostitution and Victorian Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

¹⁰ See for example Hedwig Dohm "Zur sexuellen Moral der Frau." *Die Aktion* 12 (1911): 360.

¹¹ Michel Foucault . *The History of Sexuality*. Vol 1. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1990. p. 4.

¹² Foucault (1990), 4.

¹³ As most influential pre-Expressionist examples should be mentioned Frank Wedekind's *Erdgeist* (published in 1895 by Albert Langen) and *Die Büchse der Pandora* (the first edition of 1904 was confiscated on Wilhelm II's order). Wedekind's plays—depicting the life and death of the prostitute Lulu, the "Engelskind" and "Teufelsschönheit,"—were not only meant to provoke, they already portray the prostitute as an ambiguous mixture of an "untermenschliches Elementarwesen" (Wilhelm Emrich. "Wedekind: Die Lulu-Tragödie." *Das deutsche Drama*. Vol. II. Ed. Benno v. Wiese. Düsseldorf: Bagel, 1958. p. 207) and a divine figure.

¹⁴ Cf. Della Pollock . "New Man to New Woman: Women in Brecht and Expressionism." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 3 (1989): 88; Barbara Wright.. "Expressionism and German Feminism." *GQ* 60 (1987): 582-99; and Maike Leffers article on Carl Sternheim "Die Maske als Ausdruck der Herrschaftskrise. Carl Sternheim. 'Die Hose', 'Der Snob', '1913'." *Expressionismus und Kulturkrise* (1983), 131-46.

¹⁵ Marion Adams. "Der Expressionismus und die Krise der deutschen Frauenbewegung." *Expressionismus und Kulturkrise*. Ed. Bernd Hüppauf. Heidelberg: Winter, 1983. p. 123.

¹⁶ See Stadler's poem "Die Befreiung" in Ernst Stadler. *Dichtungen, Schriften, Briefe*. München: Beck, 1983. 157.

¹⁷ See esp. the volumes of verse *Styx* (1902), *Der siebente Tag* (1905), and *Hebräische Balladen* (1913).

¹⁸ Cf. Adams (1983), 113-16.

¹⁹ Emmy Hennings. *Das Brandmal. Ein Tagebuch*. Berlin: Reiß, 1920.

²⁰ Wright (1987), 597.

²¹ Hermann Essig. "Die Gänsemagd." *Neue Blätter für Kunst und Dichtung 1918*. Dresden: Kraus Reprint, 1970. p. 55.

²² Ann Rosalind Jones. "Surprising Fame: Renaissance Gender Ideologies and Women's Lyric." *The Poetics of Gender*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986. p. 74.

²³ Kasimir Edschmid. "Expressionismus in der Dichtung." *Die neue Rundschau* 1 (1918): 364.

²⁴ Kasimir Edschmid. *Über den dichterischen Expressionismus: Über den Expressionismus in der Literatur und die neue Dichtung*. [1917] Tribüne der Kunst und Zeit I. Berlin: Reiß, 1919. p. 54.

²⁵ Edschmid (1919), 56.

²⁶ Edschmid (1919), 57.

²⁷ Alfred Lemm. "Die Hure Salomea." *Zwischen Trauer und Ekstase*. Ed. Thomas Rietzschel. Zürich: Arche, 1988. pp. 99-120.

²⁸ Lemm, 105f.

²⁹ Lemm, 109.

³⁰ Lemm, 119.

³¹ Lemm, 120.

³² Otto Zareck. "Lied einer Dirne." *Neue Blätter für Kunst und Dichtung 1919/20*. Ed. Hugo Zehder. Dresden: Kraus Reprint, 1970. pp. 118f.

³³ Ernst Stadler. "Die Dirne." *Die Aktion* 27 (1913): 662f.

³⁴ "Und wenn ich unter Schauern mich vergrub, war ers, dem sich mein Schoß entgegenreckte./ Und wenn mit rohem Wort die Welt mich überfiel./ Floß selige Marter und im Fernen leuchtete der Prüfung Ziel./ Und ekle Speise, die aus Gram und Schmach an mich erging./ War die geweihte Hostie, die mein Mund aus seiner Hand empfing./...." Ernst Stadler. "Die Dirne." *Die Aktion* 27 (1913): 663.

³⁵ Carl Sternheim. "Busekow." *Prosa des Expressionismus*. Ed. Fritz Martini. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1970. pp. 163-84. First printed in *Die weißen Blätter* Jg. 1, 1. Semester, 1913, pp. 6-15, 107-16.

³⁶ Sternheim (1970), 182. This, of course, could also be interpreted as reference to the "new man" the soon to be born God of modernity conceived by the prostitute Gesine, an embryo to be read as the incarnation of Expressionist or Nietzschean utopia.

³⁷ Ludwig Klages. *Vom kosmogonischen Eros*. Munich: Müller, 1922. p. 158.

³⁸ Curt Corrinth. *Trieb*. Munich: Müller, 1919. p. 27.

³⁹ Curt Corrinth. *Potsdamer Platz oder Die Nächte des neuen Messias*. Munich: Müller, 1919.

⁴⁰ Curt Corrinth. *Bordell*. Berlin: Jatho, 1919. p. 229.

⁴¹ Cf. Jacques Derrida. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. G. Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.

⁴² Cf. Luce Irigaray. *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*. Paris: Minuit, 1977. See esp. chapter on "Le marché des femmes."

⁴³ Georg Simmel. *Die Philosophie des Geldes*. Gesamtausgabe Bd. 6. Frankfurt/a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1989. p. 540.

⁴⁴ "Zweideutigkeit ist die bildliche Erscheinung der Dialektik, das Gesetz der Dialektik im Stillstand. Dieser Stillstand ist Utopie und das dialektische Bild also Traumbild. Ein solches Bild stellt die Ware schlechthin: als Fetisch. Ein solches Bild stellen die Passagen, die sowohl Haus sind wie Sterne. Ein solches Bild stellt die Hure, die Verkäuferin und Ware in einem ist." Walter Benjamin. "Paris, die Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts." *Das Passagen-Werk*. Vol. I. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983. p. 55.

⁴⁵ Susan Buck-Morss. *The Dialectics of Seeing. Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1989. p. 185.

⁴⁶ Regarding Georg Simmel's essay "Der Fremde" (*Soziologie*. Munich and Leipzig: Duncker & Humbolt, 1908. pp. 685-91), cf. the English translation: "The Stranger." *On Individuality and Social Forms*. Trans. Donald N. Levine. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1971. pp. 143-49. 143.

⁴⁷ Simmel (1971), p. 145.

⁴⁸ Zygmunt Bauman. "Modernity and Ambivalence." *Theory, Culture & Society* 2-3 (1990): 144.

⁴⁹ My argumentation here was inspired by Zygmunt Bauman's outstanding essay quoted above.

⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida. *Positions*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981, p. 43. The term "undecidables" was coined by Jacques Derrida in *Disseminations* (London: Athlone, 1981) and *Positions*. Cf. also Bauman (1990), 145f.

⁵¹ Derrida, *Positions*, 43.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Bauman (1990), 146.

⁵⁴ Lemm (1988), 109.

⁵⁵ Cf. Mosse (1985), 91.