

## IVAN GOLL

Preface to *Methusalem or The Eternal Bourgeois* (1922)

Aristophanes, Plautus, Molière, had an easy time of it; they got their best effects by the simplest means in the world: beatings. We have lost this sort of naïveté. The clown in the circus and Charlie Chaplin in the cinema still hand out kicks and punches, etc., but these are the points where the audience laughs least. Lack of primitive naïveté? Or is our more refined ethos to blame? This is certainly the case: but is the plebs also so refined? Even in army barracks physical punishment is frowned upon: this was not the case in the times of Aristophanes and Molière. And besides, modern man is now-a-days much more liable to have a gun than a stick. But a gunshot is not so funny as a simple beating.

So the modern satirist must look for new stimuli. These he has found in Surrealism and Alogic. Surrealism is the most forceful negation of realism. Surface reality is stripped away to reveal the Truth of Being. 'Masks': crude, grotesque, like the emotions they express. No more 'heroes', just people, no more characters, just naked instincts. Quite naked. To know an insect you must dissect it. The dramatist is research-scientist, politician and legislator; as surrealist he reports on these things from a distant realm of truth. These things he learns by listening at the impenetrable walls of the world.

Alogic is to-day the most intellectual form of humour, and therefore the best weapon against the empty clichés which dominate all our lives. Almost invariably the average man opens his mouth only to set his tongue, not his brain, in motion. What is the point of talking so much and taking it all so seriously? Moreover the average man is so sensitive that he takes any highly flavoured word for an insult and will throw death into the scales to avenge it. Dramatic alogic must ridicule all our banalities of language, exposing the basic sophistry of mathematical logic and even dialects. At the same time alogic will serve to demonstrate the multi-hued spectrum of the human brain, which can think one thing and say another and leap with mercurial speed from one idea to another without the slightest ostensibly logical connection.

But to avoid being a moaner, a pacifist and Salvation Army type, the

author must perform a few somersaults, that you all may become as little children once more. For what is he after: to present you with dolls, to teach you to play, and then to scatter the sawdust from the broken dolls to the four winds again.

Plot of the drama? Events are so powerful in themselves that they contain their own intrinsic drive. A man is run over: an experience hurled hard and irrevocable into the stream of life. Why is only the death of man called tragic? A conversation five sentences long with an unknown woman can well become far more tragic for you in eternity. Drama should be without beginning or end, like everything else here on earth. But sometime it has an end – why? No, life goes on, everyone knows that. The drama stops because you have tired, grown old in a single hour, and because truth, the most potent poison for the human heart, may only be swallowed in very small doses.

Berlin 1922

Translated by J. M. Ritchie

This piece prefaces a play whose protagonist, Methusalem, 'the original bourgeois', is a worthy descendant of Jarry's Ubu, transported to the age of cinematic montage and harsh political struggle.

**Ivan Goll** (1891–1950), from Lorraine, was 'by fate a Jew, born by chance a Frenchman, made by the whim of a rubber stamp a German'. He made the best of his borderland background by writing in both German and French, and fusing in his work expressionism and surrealism. Goll was a warm admirer of Apollinaire, and his dark satire is propelled by an exuberant inventiveness. The ideas expressed here are a development of those put forward in his 1918 preface 'Two Superdramas' (included in Walter Sokel's *Anthology of German Expressionist Drama*, Ithaca, NY, Anchor, 1963), where he calls for the magnification of reality, denatured masks, 'oversized ears, white eyes, stilts' – the grotesque enlisted to disturb 'reasonable attitudes'. 'It is not the object of art to make life comfortable for the fat bourgeois.'