

Elmer Rice's Adding Machine as an Expressionistic Alienation

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Abstract

In many respects, Modern life is the life of various complications not because Human is altered bodily or spiritually but because life itself has changed totally as the importance is assumed not to Man but to the modern specifics that control his existence. One of these facts is the part of knowledge with its recompenses and difficulties. This breakdown in life has led humankind to live in a threatened ring until life reaches to its final harbor. Elmer Rice (1892- 1967), the American dramatist illustrates this tendency in his tragedy *The Adding Machine* (1923), a drama that is emulating the expressionistic approach that thrived in Germany after World War I.

Keywords: *Adding Machine*; Expressionism; Germany; life; Rice; technology.

مسرحة الة الاضافة للمررايس كاغتراب تعبيرى

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المخلص

اصبحت الحياة الانسانية في زمن الحداثه اكثر تعقيدا لما تحمله في طبيّاتها من عقبات، لا لكون الإنسان واجه تغييراً شاملاً ؛ ولكن لكون الأولوية لم تُمنح للإنسان بقدر ما منحت للتغيرات الحديثة التي تحكمت في اسلوب حياته. ومن هذه التغيرات اثر التكنولوجيا بمحاسنها ومساوئها مما أفضى ذلك إلى تفكك الحياة ، الذي جعل البشرية تعيش في دوائر مغلقة الى ان تصل إلى ميناءها الاخير. يُوظف الكاتب الامريكي المررايس (١٨٩٢-١٩٦٧) الحقيقة هذه في تراجيدته الة الاضافة (١٩٢٣) ، وهي دراما تحاكي المدرسة التعبيرية والتي ازدهرت في المانيا مابعد الحرب العالمية الاولى.

كلمات مفتاحية: الة الاضافة , المررايس, تكنولوجيا, المدرسة التعبيرية, الحياة, المانيا

“What do you think I am – a Machine?”

(Rice, *The Adding Machine*- Scene 2: p.199)

Expressionism denotes to the 20th century inventive German school that has influenced all genres of; poetry, drama, and fiction in addition to other forms of Art as painting and music. It arose after the World War I (1914-1918). Expressionism thus attempts to prompt sentiments, dispositions, and all other aspects of internal experience by expressing them through non-realistic devices:

“The expressionists achieve this aim through distortion, exaggeration, primitivism, fantasy and through the vivid, raucous, violent, or dynamic application of the formal elements. In a broader sagacity, expressionism is one of the main art movements of the later 19th and the 20th centuries, and it enjoys the qualities of exceedingly subjectivity, personal, spontaneous self-expression and it abandons the philosophy of objectivity” (Azunwo)

Expressionism is thus “unquestionably one of the more significant early-twentieth-century artistic isms, exerting enormous influence on the shape and scope of creative expression in the West, including the practice and theory of theatre.”(Chambers: 395) It involves a dreamlike falsification; trimmed, disconnected dialogues, unexpected, bizarre, actions, and nonrealistic stage settings. (Morner and Rausch: 76)

Elmer Rice (1892- 1967) in his prior to its time play *The Adding Machine* seems coarsely modern in its attack against the dehumanizing and brutalization effects of manufacturing capitalism. The play in many respects is an American classical play for it signifies one of the early expressionistic dramatic productions that display themes extremely applicable to contemporary technologically progressive human life. Written before the stratification of the technology of computers and cellphones, the play presents a terrifying vision of society's forthcoming future. Thus, if technology

sustained its speedy progression, the human employee would eventually become invalid. (Venkateswarlu: 13)

The Adding Machine presents the story of Mr. Zero who is just – a nobody - and his life, trial, execution, and excursion or tour into the eternal life. Through the entire sequence of this random journey, Mr. Zero is astonishingly unaware of his deepest desires, needs, and wishes, needs. Mr. Zero works an accountant at a large company. Spending twenty-five years in this job, he realizes that the company will replace him by an adding machine. In an action of rage and agony, he loses his sense and kills his manager. Mr. Zero is then prosecuted for murder and is found guilty. Eventually, when he is hanged, he wakes up in a place that is identified as the Elysian Field; a heaven-like scenery. Mr. Zero then begins to work on an adding machine as he used to do in first life. Ironically, one day the boss of the Elysian Fields tells him that he is a discard or a burden of space and thus his soul will be sent back to earth so as to be reused. The play ends up with Zero's chasing a very attractive lady whose name Hope off stage. (Gascoigne, 21-22)

What distinguishes Rice's *Adding Machine* from other dramatic texts then is its mixture of Realism and Expressionism. The scenes on Earth and in Heaven, for instance, serve as metaphysical journeys. The elaboration of Expressionism is seen mostly in the scene whose setting is Heaven, but at the same time, it is nothing more than a disguise for the realism which it signifies. (Brietzke, 176) Moreover, the obscurity of the big city and the impersonality of the workplace reflects reality as Mr. Zero is locked in a hollow life. For instance, the dialogue between Mr. Zero and his co-worker Daisy does not contain anything but numbers. Sometimes, these dialogues are interrupted by Zero's protests: "Aw, don't be givin' me so many orders. Sixty cents. Twenty-four cents. Seventy-five cents. A dollar fifty. Two fifty. One fifty. One fifty.

Two fifty. I don't have to take it from you and what's more I won't." (Rice, *The Adding Machine*, Scene. 1)

The only subject that interrupt numbers is Zero's complains from his irritating wife whom he desires her death when he speaks to Daisy: "Maybe she'll die soon. I noticed she was coughin' this morning" (Scene 2). His feelings are equivalent to the realistic feelings of any equally lifeless couples. As a result, the new man, or the new Mr. Zero, is substituted by the Neurotic. Simultaneously, expressionism is elaborated to dramatize not only the spiritual quest, but the process of mental deterioration that leads Rice's Zero to be kicked out of his colorless existence and murders his manager simply because he wants to replace Zero by a machine (King, 457):

Boss: We've been planning a change in this department for some time...The fact is that my efficiency experts have recommended the installation of adding machines.

Zero: [Staring at him]: Addin' machines?

Boss: Yes, you've probably seen them. A mechanical device that adds automatically.

Zero: Sure. I've seen them. Keys—and a handle that you pull.

Boss: That's it. They do the work in half the time and a high schoolgirl can operate them. Now, of course, I'm sorry to lose an old and faithful employee—

Zero: Excuse me, but would you mind sayin' that again?

Boss: I say I'm sorry to lose an employee who's been with me for so many years."

(Rice, Scene 2)

Ironically, Mr. Zero has been always imprisoned in a trivial world, loaded with insignificant tasks and completely incompetent to run away. He is filled with feelings

of blame and disgust, but far too reliant on the narrow dark streets. He roams alone looking for his identity or his realistic existence and to be just able to make choices that can in anyhow liberate him from his current reality. Zero has expected to be rewarded for his sincere efforts by his boss. He has imagined that he too valuable to his boss because he has spent his life serving the company. Nevertheless and contrary to all these hopes and wishes, Zero is dismissed in the very humiliating way. His wife, boss, and even society dehumanize this man brutally. He is a 'nobody' and of no value to any living individual. Such cannibal dehumanization urges him to be wholly alienated to any common logic inside him. (Ruland and Bradbury, 276) Thus, he turns to reply with a totally fury reaction against his boss. This fury is identified as 'the noise' through which Zero seeks to revenge himself from the world that has done no justice to him: "The noise is deafening, maddening, unendurable. Suddenly it culminates in a terrific peal of thunder. For an instant there is a flash of red and then everything is plunged into blackness.]" (Rice, Scene 2)

Technically, Rice presents pioneer elaborations for the sound effects in *The Adding Machine*. At the moment Zero is fired by his boss, the stage is spinning madly and overflowing with terrifying sound effects as: "the wind, the waves, the galloping horses, the locomotive whistle, the sleigh bells, the automotive siren, the glass-crash. . . . The noise is deafening, maddening, unendurable. Suddenly it culminates in a terrific peal of thunder". (Ibid, Scene. 3) Notably, such hectic visual and auditory effects are gathered to show Zero's bewilderment at losing his position in the company and in life. (Beard, 64) Notably, part of the expressionistic technique which Rice elaborates; sound and visual effects, serve as a method of illustrating simultaneous inner thoughts and bitter reality. Eventually, the audience know that the result of such noise as Zero himself confesses is that he has killed his boss, but he confesses his crime this calmly.

The injustice practiced against Zero is continued in the court of justice that turns to be the court of prosecution to Zero. He expresses his great disappointment in life in a way that is too painful and full of his personal misery:

“Sure I killed him. I ain't sayin' I didn't, am I?... Them lawyers! They give me a good stiff pain,... Half the time I don't know what the hell they're talkin' about. Objection sustained. Objection over-ruled... You ain't heard me do any objectin',... Twenty-five years, see? Eight hours a day, exceptin' Sundays. And July and August half-day Saturday. One week's vacation with pay. And another week without pay if you want it. Who the hell wants it? Layin' around the house listenin' to the wife tellin' you where you get off... Sure I killed him. Why didn't he shut up? If he'd only shut up! Instead o' talkin' an' talkin' about how sorry he was an' what a good guy I was an' this an' that. I felt like sayin' to him: "For Christ's sake, shut up!" But I didn't have the nerve, see? I didn't have the nerve to say that to the boss.”
(Rice, Scene. 4)

Zero's last words before his execution do strike chords as he addresses his prosecutors to imagine if they were him. Zero is reduced by those people into an animal held in captivation and this leads him to a feeling of distant primal instincts which he is completely incapable of realizing or understanding. Dramatically, Zero is Rice's Modern American hero or more precisely, he is the modern everyman as he is treated as “a waste product. A slave to a contraption of steel and iron”. (Rice, Scene. 5)

The second part of the play functions to reveal how even when being given the entire freedom in the Elysian field or the socialist Utopia, Mr. Zero remains Nobody. Ironically, he finds himself drowning in this new after-life liberty. Instead of seizing the chance and living new experiences, Zero once again chooses to work on an adding machine. Instead of living true love or to live unhindered reality forever, he chooses to live the same routine once again. This scene thus presents a completely pioneering modern view of freewill versus determinism. Willingly, Zero has the authority to choose but he goes after the wrong choice not because of the power of fate but because

it is his choice. Moreover, this scene paves the way to a new assumption that any attempting to lose oneself in love is the opium for the estranged alienated labyrinths.

In the last scene of *The Adding Machine*, Zero is told that he will be sent back to earth to do it all again; to re-live his prior life and to pass by the same experiences. He is terrified and grips the table screaming why should he pass by all this once again; why should he be tortured and punished for no guilt. In this scene, Zero is transformed into a Classical protagonist who is punished by the power of fate. The first step is to erase his memory and to be sent back to the first life to begin a new life as a baby and that he can be innocently alienated all over again. The journey of Mr. Zero's incarnation will restart all over once again. He is told that his existence in the eternities of time is descending and thus his new second personification will be worse than his last. He is hardly fascinated by this opinion. (Hogan, 194)

Rice's postulation is that once an individual becomes aware of his alienated state, he/she will act or attempt to change it. The tragic truth is that sometimes those who are conscious, having abandoned the project to change things, will desperately envy Zero for his memory loss and endeavor his innocence as an ideal. (Hayes) Of course throughout the outlets of the play Rice symbolically forwards the question if it is better to let people employed in worthless jobs and to replace them out of a sudden by machines. Zero has spent twenty-five years working with no dignity. He is Zero and treated as zero. Time is also nothing; days run like weeks and weeks run like months and years. So everything has lost its meaning and significance. There no importance neither for man nor for time. (Hogan, 194)

Thus, *Elmer Rice's Adding Machine* is remarkable play as it discusses an essential point for those who are searching to understand the human condition in the twentieth

and twenty-first centuries. Significantly, the Expressionistic configurations in the play add to the play elements of the fantastic and the surreal. (Durham) Rice's portrayal of a Man living in an alienated existence, being exploited and operating mostly all his life as a machine, and living in the briefest margins of his life appear quite clichéd or so used. What is pretty remarkable is the absolute absence of sympathy that the viewer may feel with this alienated character. It is a hard feeling to feel that he is nothing and it is also hard that the audience would feel nothing for they lack any unification or sympathy with the misery of a human being. It is not only that a man is a zero has no value but the human sympathy is a zero as well.

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