

**WOLFGANG BORCHERT: BIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT, OEUVRE, AND
PSYCHOPOETICS—ON THE FORMATION OF EXPRESSIVE MINIMALISM**

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Abstract: This article reinterprets Wolfgang Borchert’s post-war prose through a psychopoetic lens, arguing that his much-remarked “expressive minimalism” emerges not as mere stylistic economy but as a functional system for representing traumatized consciousness. Building on narratological and translation-oriented approaches to short fiction, the study integrates biographical context (war injury, imprisonment, terminal illness), an overview of the oeuvre with emphasis on short prose and the play *Draußen vor der Tür*, and a close reading of “Das Brot” and “Die Küchenuhr.”

Methodologically, the paper proposes an operational set of psychopoetic markers—internal monologue, free indirect discourse, pause/silence, focalization shifts, ellipsis/parcellation, and subtext—which together encode a rhetoric of restraint. The readings show how Borchert’s lexical parsimony, syncopated punctuation, and tightly focalized perspective redistribute affect from overt statement to structural gaps, thereby constructing ethical attention to the ordinary and the wounded. Borchert’s expressive minimalism is best understood as a cognitive-affective strategy forged by embodied wartime experience and oriented toward a pacifist poetics of witness.

Keywords: Wolfgang Borchert; short story; expressive minimalism; psychopoetics; post-war German literature; trauma narrative; Trümmerliteratur

Introduction

Wolfgang Borchert (1921–1947) remains a crucial voice of early post-war German literature. Critics have long described his style as sparse, laconic, and “raw.” This essay reframes such descriptors within a psychopoetic model: expressive minimalism is treated as a system that functionally renders fractured perception and ethical reticence. Combining biographical evidence with close reading, I show how prosodic silence (pauses, ellipses), grammatical compression, and focalization create an aesthetics of withholding—where meaning and affect migrate into the interval, the unsaid.

Biographical Context and Oeuvre

Borchert’s brief life—frontline service, repeated prosecutions by military courts, severe illness, and death at twenty-six—forms a context of bodily precariousness and legal-existential exposure. His oeuvre concentrates on short prose and the 1947 play *Draußen vor der Tür*, each piece shaped by spatial and temporal constriction. Rather than merely reflecting scarcity, these constraints produce a distinctive textual psychology: the ordinary meal, the kitchen clock, a dark street—minimal surfaces carrying maximal psychic load.

Method: Psychopoetic Markers and Expressive Minimalism

This study delineates and operationalizes six recurrent textual markers in Borchert's prose which, in concert, instantiate what I term expressive minimalism

1. **Internal monologue / interiorized deixis** – thought-proximal diction, micro-hesitations, and deictic anchoring (“here/now/this”) that collapse distance between narrator and figure.
2. **Free indirect discourse (FID)** – untagged slippage into the character's evaluative language, yielding intimate yet ambiguous access to cognition and mood.
3. **Pause and silence** – dramatized through punctuation (dash, ellipsis), white space, single-sentence paragraphs; silence is not absence but carrier of meaning.
4. **Focalization shifts** – quick toggling between perceptual planes (object → memory → bodily sensation), creating a staccato phenomenology.
5. **Ellipsis and parcellation** – syntactic pruning and short clauses that simulate breath-work, fatigue, or self-censorship.
6. **Subtext and pragmatic implicature** – ethical content moves offstage; understatement solicits readerly completion.

These markers are treated not as stylistic embellishments but as a compact functional set for representing traumatized consciousness, a configuration I refer to as Borchert's functional expressivity.

4. Case Study: “Das Brot” (1946)

“Das Brot” compresses marital intimacy, scarcity, and shame into a nocturnal fragment. The plot is minimal: a husband secretly eats bread at night; the wife discovers him; both maintain a fragile fiction at breakfast. Borchert's expressive minimalism appears in three coordinated moves:

Prosodic Silence and Ethical Withholding. The dialogue is perforated by pauses and unmarked hesitations. Short paratactic lines and dash-like breaks stage a performance of consideration: the couple spares one another explicit accusation. Silence functions as an ethics of tact; the crucial speech act is the one not performed.

FID and Subtextual Economy. The wife's interior stance bleeds into narration via FID: evaluatives surface without reporting clauses. The text thereby encodes cognition as micro-adjustments rather than declaratives. Affect is displaced from lexical intensity to pragmatic inference.

Object Minimalism. The bread is both metonym and moral barometer. By stripping descriptive excess, Borchert lets the object accrue meaning diachronically across micro-scenes (the kitchen, the breakfast table). The austerity of description compels interpretive labor, producing a readerly co-construction of empathy.

Result: The story's “smallness” is an instrument: syntactic parsimony + punctuational syncopation + focal restraint = visibility of vulnerability without pathos inflation.

Case Study: “Die Küchenuhr” (1947)

Here the kitchen clock is a relic from the bombed home, carried by a young man who narrates to strangers. Expressive minimalism appears as temporal focalization under constraint:

Temporal Parcellation. The narrative toggles between the clock's frozen time and the survivor's present. Short, evenly weighted clauses mimic the monotony of shock. Parcellation equalizes memories and perceptions, imitating dissociation.

Substituted Affect. Where a conventional text might name loss, Borchert substitutes texture: cold air, a bench, the clock's surface. This substitution records trauma as sensory artifact rather than as rhetorical declaration.

Communal Minimal Scene. The addressees remain sketched, the space generic. This voluntaristic anonymity universalizes the scene—what matters is the gesture of telling under the pressure of too much to tell.

Result: The clock's immobility becomes an organizing metaphor for arrested time; minimal discourse renders maximal temporal injury.

Toward a Theory of Expressive Minimalism

Across both stories, the six markers co-operate to convert narrative surface into an instrument of psychic registration:

Form as respiration: ellipsis and parcellation follow breath; punctuation mimics the ethics of self-interruption.

Affect as inference: silence and FID move pathos from words to gaps; empathy is reader-co-produced.

Ethics as restraint: minimalism curbs voyeuristic exposure of suffering; the ordinary is dignified by linguistic economy.

In this study, 'expressive minimalism' designates a psychopoetic strategy operationalized as compression of linguistic means, heightened salience of moral tact and cognitive fragility, and systematic displacement of affect from lexical statement to structural omission.

Contribution and Implications

This account reframes Borchert in three ways. First, it aligns stylistic economy with embodied cognition: prosody and syntax simulate damaged attention and cautious sociality. Second, it clarifies why Borchert's prose travels well in translation: the meaningful units are portable markers (pause, ellipsis, FID) rather than culture-bound allusion. Third, it offers a shareable analytic rubric for editors and translators (e.g., retain pause punctuation; avoid explanatory inflation; preserve focalization integrity).

Conclusion

Borchert's minimalism is not absence but intricate presence. By structuring silence, curating syntax, and disciplining point of view, his prose builds a pacifist poetics of witness. The art is not to say more, but to make space where the unsayable can be felt. Recognizing expressive

minimalism as a psychopoetic system recovers what is ethically singular about Borchert's voice—and why it remains necessary.

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