The Modernist Mimetic Imagination

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The relation of art to reality is at the heart of modernist art and literature. Yet for modernist writers and artists truth is found neither in the technical replication of reality nor in ideals that transcend it, but in the vital engagements of perception and thought with material life as manifest in creative expression. Of course, modernism's most striking innovations may appear to turn away from the real or from truth in favour of wholly aesthetic goals or subjective preoccupations. Such innovations include, for instance, the proliferation of perspectives from Picasso's cubist paintings to the narratives of Virginia Woolf and the prose poems of Gertrude Stein; explorations of dreams and the unconscious from Proust to surrealism; advocacy of purist abstraction, as in Vasily Kandinsky's spiritualist manifesto. But rather than departing from the real, modernist approaches encounter it differently.

The configurations and meanings of modernism are of course contested. Yet in Stephen Dowden's breathtakingly detailed yet boldly focused account in *Modernism and Mimesis*, modernism conveys truth more directly and vitally than realist representation or Romantic subjectivity.[1] By assuming this role, modernist art, music, and literature revitalize, even reenchant, our relation to a world otherwise reduced to a fallen materialism as known by modern rationality. Modernism, Dowden argues, does not reject mimesis or tradition, but revises and redeploys them, overriding both the metaphysical critique of mimesis as mere representation removed from reality and realist equations of unadorned representation with truth itself. Mimesis ›is not a copy but a transformation‹ (126); it becomes in modernism not just representation of, but a productive participation in, the real, affording ›a deepening of our relationship with the world‹ (6). Overcoming the idea that modernism trades truth for merely aesthetic satisfactions or psychological preoccupations, Dowden alights upon what may be modernism's most important aim: the creative accomplishment of reality, and thus its ›renewal and redemption‹ (222).

Modernism's embrace of ephemerality orients Dowden's productive revision of modernism as dedicated to momentary and ineffable, but for that truer, glimpses

1 Stephen Dowden: Modernism and Mimesis. Palgrave Macmillan 2020. Citations to this work in text.

of the world. Our truest experiences cannot be formulaically stated, endowing a vision of life that refuses ›fixity and formula‹ (1). Resistance to propositional statement or summation, such as expressed by Samuel Beckett in rejecting questions about what his work was supposed to mean, constitutes ›a truth claim‹ for modernist art (13). While advocating its truth-seeking, Dowden emphasizes the humility of modernism: tarrying with the ephemeral evades authoritarianism, since what is most deeply known is only glimpsed and in a way that can never be fully expressed. He emphasizes modernism's return to naïve and instinctual play, rather than its affiliation with arch aesthetic ironies or cultural deconstructions. By eschewing emphasis on meta-aesthetic values or tapestries of cultural allusion in favour of direct access to the real as a form of creative vitality, modernism can be seen as both egalitarian and optimistic.

This goes a long way to explain the impulses of modernism to reveal and renew our experience of the world which have also been the focus of my own work, starting with *The Ecstatic Quotidian*, which traced in modernist art and literature the phenomenological disclosure of the everyday and its transformation.[2] One way to approach this is through what is taken to be modernist distortion, its defamiliarization of the world it presents. Cubist painting, an important example for Dowden, does not merely slice up and fragment visual reality but explores the multiplicity of stances from which it can be seen, thus finding what Dowden describes as ›not a final, but a more precise, more truthful way of seeing the world‹ (14). Cubism is also deeply indebted to Cezanne, scarcely mentioned by Dowden but central to the emergence of modern art. Cezanne claimed to be not reproducing but attempting a piece of nature – an effort requiring the perspectival distortions of his paintings. While at first denounced for these »distortions,« they came to be appreciated by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke and the phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty as registering the shifting substantiality of living perception. Cezanne at once laid bare the living perception of a world and created within and as the picture a world within itself. The experience of ›learning to see‹ described by Rilke's protagonist in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* is influenced by this sense of revelation. While his author returned again and again to a retrospective of Cezanne, Malte sees Paris through encounters with the paintings of Manet and Impressionism and the poetry of Baudelaire. In all of these examples, modernist art affords not only perceptual but epistemic transformation: the world may be more deeply known when we can break away from cognitive and aesthetic expectations and see things freshly. Modernist expression parallels the phenomenological description of reality and achieves analogous insight, but goes beyond description to explore its latent possibilities for

2 Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei: The Ecstatic Quotidian: Phenomenological Sightings in Modern Art and Literature. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press 2007.

creative transformation, both uncovering and augmenting the ecstatic potentiality of quotidian life.

Yet modernism responds at once to this ecstatic potentiality and to a sense of rupture attributed to the evolution of the modern world. For all its accomplishments, modernity provokes ambivalence, or as Dowden describes it, modernism is uneasy. Scientific discoveries from Darwin to Einstein and Heisenberg rattle the foundations of any premodern view of reality, uprooting our sense of place in and observations about the world, but such paradigm shifts also liberate writers and artists from the hold of tradition. The relentless acceleration of production, consumption and urbanization and the perceived distance from nature in modern life at once alienate and inspire innovation. This ambivalence is reflected by Rilke's Malte who while rapturously discovering modern art in Paris is distressed by its traffic and crowds, repelled by its factory-like hospital for the dying across from his lodgings, and after a breakdown submits to electroshock therapy. Hugo von Hofmannsthal stages the (anachronistically modern) crisis of his fictional Lord Chandos as alienation from rational scientific thought, a breakdown that yields however an extreme empathy, dissolving boundaries between self and world. Dowden is right to find in Hofmannsthal's conveyance of unmediated being ›a clue to the nature of aesthetic modernism‹ (2), yet for Chandos the whole order of his experience, thought, and expression are challenged such that, he reports, he can no longer write or even think coherently, and he must propose the invention of a new form of language to cope creatively as a writer. In other works, the redemption is found in modern visual art. The epistolary narrator of Hofmannsthal's *Letters of One Returned* returns from abroad to find European life artificial and alienating, but he is overwhelmed with wonder, and restored, by a chance encounter with van Gogh's paintings. As Dowden points out, high modernism emerges in the shadow of world wars and their mechanized destruction, issuing a ›catastrophic era‹ for modernists who also reflect in their works the monstrous, grotesque and inhuman (17). Yet often breakdown and renewal are inseparable. For example, in *The Wasteland*, T.S. Eliot likens post-war London and an exhausted Europe to a ›dead land,‹ yet it is one out of which lilacs grow, and jazz inspires a tone and rhythm for a new poetry of ›broken images.‹ Poetry and art bring new possibilities in the rubble of destruction, reflecting the promise that art has not only epistemic value – the promise of a truer grasp of reality – but generative potential to create a new world. Dowden brilliantly finds ›a crucial germ of the modernist outlook‹ (20) in the recovery of a Schillerian naïveté, an open unselfconscious directness, yet the critical and imaginative origins of generative renewal may also complement and complicate this stance.

There are of course other, older anxieties at work in modernism, longings for higher truths that evade the brutalities of finitude. Not only Baudelaire's reverence for the ephemeral, but also its rescue, motivate Rilke's aim to preserve the brief and finite in life within poetic consciousness. In Rilke's late cycle *Sonnets to Orpheus*, po-

etic song is to achieve nothing less than a metamorphosis of the fallen world of modernity. For Rilke art offers remediation by enveloping what Baudelaire famously described in *The Painter of Modern Life* as the ›ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent‹ within its ›other half,‹ the eternal – a connection which for the modernist, however, must be achieved rather than discerned. If for Baudelaire the eternal can be distilled from the ephemeral, for Rilke the ephemeral must be salvaged from irretrievable loss. It is a difference perhaps of emphasis, one that can converse with Dowden's analysis of how modernist mimesis does not merely represent but *is* its world. For the poem, or the painting, salvages by condensation, selection and iconic augmentation (terms familiar in Ricoeur's treatment of the productive imagination) what endures beyond the temporal flow of experience. In this light Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway,* like works of Kafka and Beckett, is not just about something but ›really is something that needs to be grasped in its own right‹ (87). This both draws from the repertoire of the real and goes beyond what existed before.

While Dowden does not consider Rilke at length, the confrontation with the eternal and transitory is figured differently in Kafka, whose aim of wanting to ›raise the world into the pure, the true, the immutable‹ Dowden ingeniously reads not as a tribute to the infinite but to the ›unrepeatable singularity‹ of the finite and to its ›unique brevity‹ (28). It is also a question of literary style: for Kafka's aim to elevate to this pure, true, immutable status is ›to express something with such clarity that it shines‹ (74). This draws Kafka's work into the orbit of modernist elementality – expressed in Kandinsky's spiritual purism, Stein's demand for the total present, Beckett's stripping down of language. While revealing the direct simplicity in Kafka in a fresh and illuminating light, however, this view does not address the impulse to transcendence and its frustration that also pervade Kafka's work.

Kafka's truth cannot be known, is glimpsed if at all momentarily, and cannot be fixed; this may be not only because ›living experience, which is the focus of Kafka's modernism, is fluid and fleeting‹ (40) but because the truth of the flux eludes any grasp from within the flux; it exceeds our capacities, our remit, to know, and thus limits the possible forms truth can take for us. Resonating not only with Baudelaire but also with Rilke, Kafka contends with the tension between the temporality of experience and the orders of thought, the instability of being within becoming, that he inherited from Nietzsche and Kierkegaard and which will also preoccupy Eliot's treatment of time in *Four Quartets*. We are on the wrong path if we demand the truth for which Kafka's protagonists are seeking, for example K's fruitless quest to enter the castle in Kafka's novel of that title and receive legitimation by its authorities. If we are to be better readers of Kafka we must admit with Dowden that there is ›no secret hidden in the castle, no deeper meaning‹ (43). Yet the persistence of its magnetic draw, and the compelling, contradictory elusiveness of its rendering throughout Kafka's novel, remain to be reckoned with, and for the reader can neither be evaded nor resolved. The meaning to be sought is not in the castle itself but

in ›unrelieved wandering‹ to find it (50). This is not merely a psychological problem, as Dowden points out, but an epistemic one. It may also be metaphysical: the nature of reality remains a live question in all of Kafka's worlds.

Kafka's style is also beguilingly vital. That Kafka ›translates what he sees into clear, exact prose,‹ that he ›does not speculate or exaggerate‹ (42) wonderfully captures the concreteness of Kafka's writerly style and the literal reportage of his narrating ape in »A Report to an Academy.« At the same time, Kafka's linguistic straightforwardness produces tension with the imaginative departures from reality it so disarmingly conveys. Contrasts between reality as we know it and its impossible configuration are almost violently staged, as for example in *The Metamorphosis*, and in all his animal stories, yet this is hardly noticed at the level of form, while in moments of »A Country Doctor« and *The Trial* time and space are contorted. In this way Kafka's writing reads neither as sentimental nor as wholly naïve but as transforming the naïve contact with the world through imaginative generation of a new alternative world that may yet disclose the limits of the world we know. In his lecture ›On Modern Art‹ Paul Klee describes the visual deformations of the object in modern art as the transmission of other possible formations of it. Art thus reveals ›the present state of outward appearances in his own particular world as accidentally fixed in time and space‹ and that thus world ›in its present shape […] is not the only world.‹[3] While Dowden's alignment of Kafka with Beckett is wonderfully illuminating, Klee's advancement of a child-like simplicity of rendering and playful distortion perhaps resonates with Kafka here too.

Central to Dowden's articulation of the creativity of modernist mimesis are post-phenomenological hermeneutic philosophies, including Hans-Georg Gadamer's association of mimesis with the phenomenon of play that transforms rather than merely represents its content, and, as aforementioned, Ricoeur's notion of productive reference. Play for Gadamer also aligns art with nature, for play reverberates both in human creative activities – dance, music, poetic rhythm – and natural entities and energies – waves, the movements of the stars. Through play a work of art shapes the real, bringing it into presence from a state of hiddenness and withdrawnness, and thus offers its ›redemption and transformation back into true being.‹[4] Play, crucially, is never merely about something else, even if it relies indirectly on references; rather, play, like the work of art, *is* the something to which it refers. Ricouer's account of productive mimesis is engaged too, for which mimesis does not merely represent reality but amplifies and completes it, in the process generating a new reality beyond any existing referent. Yet since reality is recognized as such only in and through the ways in which it is interpreted, brought to the fore,

3 Paul Klee: On Modern Art. London: Faber and Faber 1945, p. 47 and 45.

4 Hans-Georg Gadamer: Truth and Method, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall. 2d rev. ed London and New York: Continuum 2004, p. 112, cited in Dowden, p. 163.

shaped within a context or perspective, and so expressed, reality can be said to be accomplished through art. Thus understood, modernism offers not mere fantasy, illusion, art for art's sake aesthetic gratification, but epistemically and metaphysically rich undertakings to know the world more deeply and fully. This view, of course, relies not only on Gadamer and Ricoeur but their predecessor Heidegger, for whom art was a mode of revealing being, an event of truth. Dowden echoes another view of Heidegger by asserting that art ›establishes the real as real for us by making it intelligible‹ (9). Heidegger argues that poetry (by which he essentially means all arts) reveals being but also establishes it, founds it, institutes it. This is one ramification of the idea that reality is completed or accomplished through art.

Our contact with reality – perceiving, measuring, interpreting, knowing, experiencing – is a part of, included in, that reality, and recognition of this may enable a deeper and truer understanding of it. As I argued in *The Life of Imagination*, our capacity to both reveal and to create world, to understand what is there and to generate newly, brings art, including that of modernism, into connection with other creative efforts of human endeavour, such as scientific discovery.[5] All achievement of truth requires not only knowledge but imagination, in variable modes and measure. Yet by revealing reality we also augment it, which poses the difficulty of achieving any true, at least any exclusively true, rendering – and here modern art's express resistance to univocity, its recognition and proliferation of perspectives and invitation to multiple interpretations, are instructive.

Other beings may not see the sky as blue, and a physicist may describe it as a scattering of light rays by molecules of air in the Earth's atmosphere, but as Wallace Stevens pointed out, when we look at it also in human terms, and freshly, without taking it for granted, we may realize that ›we live in the center of a physical poetry, a geography that would be intolerable except for the non-geography that exists there.‹[6] Stevens, unmentioned in Dowden's account of modernism, advocates recognizing not only the real within the poetic experience but also the poetry within in our ordinary experience of the real. When we really see the blue sky, Stevens says, we understand this physical poetry that both is of the world and is our interpretation of it endowed by the involvement of imagination in perception. Wittgenstein glimpsed this involvement in his notion of ›seeing as,‹ where perception itself is enriched by imaginative interpretation. It is through art we can best reflect upon this, and it is on the basis of poetic seeing, among other creative engagements, that new worlds emerge. The whole of Stevens' poetic oeuvre is devoted to the play between reality and imagination – the striving for the really real beyond our own perspective on it,

5 Gosetti-Ferencei: The Life of Imagination: Revealing and Making the World. New York: Columbia University Press 2018.

6 Wallace Stevens: The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination. New York: Vintage 2011, p. 65.

and the delights of metaphoric invention through which we creatively vary our experience of it. If we consider the imagination's interventions in perception and expression as variable, as allowing for revealing as well as augmenting and departing from reality, as I have argued, and recognize this variable imagination at work in modernist mimesis, this may strain the thesis that ›for the modernists, the point of art is first and foremost to afford a view of the real that is truthful‹ (10). For while Dowden uncovers this aim with majestic clarity in his treatment of modernism, we might also consider, alongside it, how modernist art also, in playing with and departing from reality as it is ordinarily experienced, sometimes relieves us from what Stevens called ›the pressure of reality.‹ It does so not only by showing it to us in new ways, but by offering alternatives to the real, other worlds that are not, or are no longer or not yet our world, those other configurations which Klee thought the modern artist could transmit. As Sartre pointed out, in order to be able to know reality as real we must be able to contrast it with what is not, and the recourse to irreality, illusion, impossibility, and the contortions of the real may be valuable not only for defamiliarizing but for generating reflection apart from its dominant configuration. This in no way diminishes the significance of modernism's striving for truth, but complicates modernism's ever unresolved, open, encounter with the world and the difficulty of achieving simplicity or naïve contact with the world. We might understand the mimetic imagination of modernism as the creative intervention in the real that may alternatively – or indeed at once – play with, deeply capture, and depart from reality, yet all of that contributing to what Dowden describes as its ›redemption and renewal.‹