Literary Study and the *dokei moi*

Conversing with *Modernism and Mimesis*

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Modernism and Mimesis arrives at a critical moment for the humanities. In the aftermath of deconstruction, New Historicism, and other forms of high theory, with their typically turgid rhetoric and frequently adversarial approaches to the works they read, Dowden exemplifies a more recent phase of literary study that responds to a renewed sense of vocational crisis. Whether validating the experience of »lay reading« over specialized theoretical critiques;[1] calling for an embrace of the humanist scholar's expert authority to judge and to evaluate and not simply to describe;[2] or pleading for a professionalism that could accommodate certain celebratory attitudes toward its given objects of study;[3] whether turning attention to the aesthetic surface (to preclude the usual academic presupposition that a work of art is something to be unmasked or demystified);[4] or abjuring a »hermeneutic of suspicion« that can discern only symptoms and distortions,[5] thoughtful scholars of literature and of art are searching for new justifications for the study of literature that are more in tune with how we actually respond to works of art. Though he belongs to this matrix of fresh approaches, Dowden does not directly address them. Rather, he defends serious reading by exemplifying it – which proves so persuasive because it is done generously and well.

The generosity of Dowden's sensibility appears in his contestation of the supposed »difficulty« of modernist art. Rather than a repellant obscurity that reserves

1 Rita Felski: Uses of Literature. Blackwell Manifestos. Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell Pub. 2008.

2 Michael W. Clune: A Defense of Judgment. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2021.

3 John Guillory: Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2022.

4 Stephen Best/Sharon Marcus: Surface Reading: An Introduction. In: Representations 108.1 (Fall 2009) 1–21.

5 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You. In: Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity, Durham, NC: Duke UP 2003, 123–151.

artworks for a trained elite, Dowden discerns in the formal experimentation of modernism a relatable »strangeness« that can and should be appreciated by any observant audience.[6] Though *Modernism and Mimesis* is clearly the result of a great deal of scholarship and serious discussion, it does not aim to be an academic book in the usual sense, pursuing the program of a specialized scientific discipline. The book's sweep is magisterial, moving gracefully through literary fiction, painting, sculpture, musical composition, lyric poetry, with occasional references to movies, baseball or the blues. Helen Vendler, Terry Eagleton, Martin Jay (and others) are marshalled in support of certain readings, and a number of literary-historical observations are bolstered by citations of technical journal articles. Yet for the most part, the critics Dowden cites in the body of his text are artists themselves: T. S. Eliot, Hermann Broch, Thomas Mann, Theodore Adorno. The typical academic division of labor, in which artists create works that are then interpreted by scholars, is challenged by this staging of a debate that ranges across the cultural landscape of modernity.[7]

If we consider Dowden's book in the context of academic literary study, we notice immediately certain unusual characteristics. The form of the title, two abstractions linked with a conjunction, has many and august precedents, but as academic readers we have come to expect the weight of a book's thesis to be borne by a subtitle. Here there isn't one. Modernity, Mimesis, but no colon introducing an explanatory postulate. We are left to wonder: What is meant by these troublesome terms? A contested cultural period juxtaposed with a contested representational principle. Will modernity prove mimetic or anti-mimetic? Will mimesis prove modern or archaic? Dowden lets the questions themselves draw us toward his reflections, deepening the invitation by means of an intriguing cover: *Grazing Horses IV* by Franz Marc. Whatever the book eventually will have to say about modernism and mimesis, this splendid expressionist painting makes the offer to explore their relationship – as struggle, as collaboration, as rupture or as reconciliation – simply irresistible.

The book dallies over few preliminaries: it begins without preface or introduction, its first chapter plunging the reader into »the history of European literature, music, and pictorial art.« – »Uneasy modernism,« the chapter is titled, but the rhetorical ductus is hardly timorous. »In this book,« Dowden tells us, »the defining issue will be art's relation to the real and to the true, the here and now, but also its unfolding over time and with special attention to the refusal of fixity and formula« (1). The sweeping program gestures toward a dizzying horizon. This is not the specialist's nook or the pedant's cranny; this is art itself, the protean forces of true

6 Stephen D. Dowden: Modernism and Mimesis. (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan 2020), pp. 5–6, 127–131 and 207ff. (Further references are given in the text.)

7 »The origins of modernism lie deeply embedded in modernity, i.e., since the end of the Middle Ages, rather than in the short-term changes that occurred toward the end of the nineteenth century« (9).

creation and real destruction in their historical trajectories, as a field of reflection. Author and reader do not meet within the confines of a preexisting discipline but share the here and now with an aesthetic corpus that is offered for common consideration. It is the shared present that provides a mobile perch on a protean tradition. This, then, is the first approximation of a meaning for »modernism«: art that addresses the moving present moment in history.

Dowden's wide and confident range may remind us of the pronouncements of a critic such as George Steiner, who also speaks in his own voice with the authority of a deep and expansive familiarity with the tradition of European culture. But there is a basic difference between their two situations. Steiner brings into the postwar chaos a memory of the intact European tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whereas Dowden inherits a culture intestate, uprooted by the twentieth century from any mnemonic foundation in collective experience. His hermeneutical gesture never adopts the reverential posture that betrays ideological canonization. Rather, his engagement with the works he writes about is convivial, and we might call his selection of art *curricular*, that is to say, not made with reference to an impersonal criterion of membership, but chosen on his own authority as opportune occasions for reflection. Dowden's book is not an academic book per se, but it is very much a book by someone who has read and discussed great art with students, and who skillfully distills these discussions for the reader.

Modernism itself, Dowden finds, is not fully coherent: Joyce's *Ulysses* and Kafka's *Castle* do not simply represent two instances of modernist literature; rather, the category runs between them. While both writers confront the modern aesthetic dilemma, the exhaustion of the representational logic that governed Western art for centuries,[8] Joyce's modernism, Dowden argues, is still beholden to nineteenth century realism. Joyce may have relocated the reality that language is charged with representing into the interior stream of consciousness, but the representational mandate and the confidence that language can fulfill it remains the same as with Gottfried Keller or George Eliot. Franz Kafka, on the other hand, enters literature with a huge burden of skepticism, a profound suspicion of any use of language that claims to transcend the sensory world, and in particular of metaphoric displacements. In a limpid, matter-of-fact prose Kafka demolishes the analogy between a human being and a vermin, or between a man's conscience and a ubiquitous but hidden court of law, by literalizing these metaphors in *The Metamorphosis* or *The Trial* respectively, and observing the resulting monstrosities. This distinction between those who retained confidence in language's ability to mediate reality and those who did not serves as an organizing principle. On the side of the »optimists« Dowden puts Woolf, Proust, Thomas Mann, Stravinsky. On the other hand, Beckett,

8 »The central issue of literary modernism was and is the exhaustion of expressive forms at the writer's disposal« (217).

Schoenberg, Karl Kraus, each in his own way, embody the same skepticism that Dowden sees in Kafka.

To see Dowden's book as in part a reaction against the technical specialization of high theory is by no means to suggest that his discussion is theoretically uninformed; again, quite the contrary. He has convincingly driven the theoretical underpinnings of his book down, past the hermeneutical aesthetics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, through Heidegger and Hegel, back to Friedrich Schiller's 1795 essay »Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung.« Schiller's seminal Enlightenment contrast between the self-coincident naïveté of spontaneous nature, and the irreducible incongruity of self-conscious judgment, whose distance from the world in which it finds itself is bridged by sentiment, serves as something like a theoretical origin for Dowden's exposition. »The question of mimesis overlaps with the question of naiveté,« Dowden writes (24), and the implicit correlation between Romanticism and sentimental representation on the one hand and modernism and naive mimesis on the other governs much of the exposition.

But where Dowden's view of literature is perhaps most compelling is the idea he draws from Gadamer that the artwork is not to be understood as a particular type of object, or the critic as a particular type of expert. Rather, »any work of art resembles a party,« Dowden writes. »Art is by nature social, interactive, a species of conversation. It is not primarily a kind of object but is instead an event more closely resembling social intercourse than objecthood« (91). Here, it seems to me, is the essence of Dowden's congress with literature, the link between his reading and his writing, and the reading and writing of his audience.

This generous attitude culminates in Dowden's illuminating reading of the Tower of Babel legend as presented in Genesis 11:5-8. In his last chapter, »The Gift of Babel,« Dowden points out that nothing in these ancient verses suggests that YHWH saw *Himself* threatened by humankind's ziggurat, or that He confounded human language as a punishment for hubris. On the contrary, the construction project poses a threat *to human beings*, namely to human diversity and to the variety and richness of individual experience. God introduces a plurality of languages to disrupt the totalitarian *Gleichschaltung* that constructing a tower to the heavens calls for, and to disperse its participants »abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth.« Far from being the fall of paradisical language into the contentious world of mutual opacity and violence (*pace* Benjamin), the diversification of human languages was a merciful gift, returning to an instrumentalized collective a sensitivity both to the differences of human experience and to their articulation in multiple languages. »The supposed catastrophe of Babel has turned out to be a blessing,« Dowden writes. »After Babel we must attend to language in a way that, in the golden age of automatic communication, had been unknown. In that primordial garden of understanding, communication was effortless, requiring no attention. Now we must translate« (242).

Translation in this sense is not simply the semantic transfer between different idioms but paradigmatically the creative rendering by one lyric poet in his or her own language of verses by another lyric poet in a different language. Celan's translations of Mandelstam are Dowden's primary example, and the possibility of such profound interlinguistic encounters rests upon a general »structure of attention« (243) that is also at work in more prosaic transmutations between languages. The *felix culpa* of Babel imposes a certain humility on human experience: »No one owns his own language. We are all outsiders in that respect, even at that moment when we feel most at home. English was here before I was born, and there is every reason to suppose it will outlast me, too. I am merely a guest enjoying its hospitality« (237).

In a discussion of the influence of Socrates on philosophy, Hannah Arendt points to the Socratic *dokei moi*, the »it seems to me« that is implicit, if rarely acknowledged, in all of our philosophical judgments. We forget this, Arendt thinks, because we are the heirs of Socrates' student Plato, who, disillusioned by the Athenian verdict against his teacher, took *doxa*, or opinion, to be the fatal relativism that threatens the purity of truth, and retreated from the agora to the academy outside the city walls to pursue a search for absolute measures. But for Socrates, the *dokei moi* was the social element of all thinking, the recognition that philosophical truth must arise in discussion and inquiry in the marketplace beyond the secure possession of any particular individual, as a discursively interminable process of shared understanding. The *dokei moi* »was neither subjective fantasy and arbitrariness nor was it something absolute, valid for all. The assumption on the contrary was that things appear, reveal themselves in a different way to each man, and that the ›sameness‹ of the world resides in the fact that the same world appears.«[9] In *Modernism and Mimesis*, Stephen Dowden shares what modernism *seems to him*, and in so doing sets an example of scholarly work of existential and not merely academic significance. What Dowden says of Franz Marc's *Grazing Horses IV*, that the painter »captures the unselfconscious dynamism and animal vitality of both creature and landscape and sets them into motion for the viewer« (116) could be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of his own depiction of modernism. The proper response to such a generous gesture, it seems to me, is gratitude.

9 Hannah Arendt: VI. Typescript. In: Hannah Arendt. The Modern Challenge to Tradition: Fragmente eines Buchs. Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 6. Ed. Barbara Hahn/James McFarland, Göttingen: Wallstein 2018, p. 426.