Dancing With the Stars

Modernism as Art Itself

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In the opening pages of his classic *Narration in the German Novelle* (1979), John Ellis sweeps away the morass of theoretical speculation that had grown up over the years since Goethe's famous pronouncement of 1827 (»eine unerhörte Begebenheit«), showing that none of the theories actually withstands close scrutiny. We were asking the wrong questions, he says; we failed to see that it was never really about a discrete literary genre, a well-defined category for which appropriate specimens could simply be lined up, and others excluded. For everything claimed on behalf of the novella could of course be attributed to literature more generally, in not a few cases, to art itself. In the end, he shows, the term »novella« answered the need of 19th-century German philologists to delineate German literature's distinctive prose achievements (which did not include many great novels) from French and English »rivals.«

There is something of this same magisterial clearing of the air to the opening pages of Stephen Dowden's *Modernism and Mimesis*, in which he states, essentially, that modernism is a definitional embarrassment. We can do much better, he insists; and his book makes good on that promise. In order to move toward greater conceptual coherence, he readily dispenses with conventional wisdom: Neither James Joyce nor Thomas Mann really exemplify the movement (they belong more to Realism, he argues); and neither Ezra Pound nor T. S. Eliot should be accorded the authority to pontificate on, let alone define, literary modernism. But gatekeeping is here more byproduct than principal goal. In elaborating his view of modernism, Dowden is quite ready to admit that he is not in fact talking about just one particular literary subset – definable as a period, style, or technique – but about great art itself. Far from offering a competing taxonomy, a new delimiting genus, he explodes the whole classificatory enterprise as we have known it. This all-encompassing purview is truly exhilarating, but does not come without particular challenges.[1]

1 This is an expanded and substantially revised version of a review that first appeared (January 5, 2023) in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*: »Truths That Cannot Be Offered Outside of Art: On Stephen D. Dowden's ›Modernism and Mimesis‹«, online at https://lareviewofbo

The study's defining and counter-intuitive gesture is to reclaim modernism from abstruse erudition and aesthetic connoisseurship to place it squarely within an egalitarian framework of aesthetic play. Modernism, on his account, seeks to reveal what is true and real, and offers essential if evanescent insights unavailable to any other kind of inquiry. It is a way of knowing reality unequaled by–and unavailable to–any other.

Like Dowden, the modernists identified their mission with art itself, and viewed their work as nothing less than indispensable. If art is relegated to secondary status, to the role of illustrating truths established elsewhere (for example in political science, anthropology or sociology), why bother? For it then becomes an expendable luxury, a decoration or indulgence. The modern academy, along with modern society more generally, however, appears not to share this conviction, preferring to see art as a supplement, an amusing decoration, or at best an expression of subjective feeling.

Unlike the postwar literary theory that has thus far governed our understanding of modernism (or at least my own), Dowden does not hesitate to emphasize the movement's unabashed confidence in revealing truth. There is no trace here of modernism's wariness of »the real« or of its skepticism of truth. Dowden, who spent a decade at Yale during the heyday of high theory, refuses to make modernism a prooftext of modernist (or postmodernist) literary theory. Those heretofore influential gatekeepers do not interest him in the least and are not even mentioned; deconstruction does not darken the doorway of this study.

The philosophers of interest to Dowden are first of all those with whom he disagrees, those who would deprive art of its epistemological autonomy: Hegel, who influentially subordinated art to philosophy and the natural sciences; Kant, who essentially rendered aesthetics a matter of subjective taste; and Max Weber, whose influential »Wissenschaft als Beruf« (Science as Calling) proudly celebrated the superiority of the natural sciences to the detriment of religion and the arts–pursuits that modernity has, he asserts, effectively rendered moot. But these thinkers make brief appearances here mainly to set up the problem that needs to be solved.

Those thinkers in whom he finds solace, who offer a philosophical grounding for the modernists' quasi-mystical yearnings for truth are Heidegger and, for this study most importantly, Hans Georg Gadamer. With key terms such as aesthetic »Vollzug« (culmination) and »Verwandlung ins Gebilde« (transformation into structure) Gadamer provides Dowden the philosophical vocabulary to explain how modernism is at its core all about mimesis.

And here is yet another nugget of conventional wisdom boldly dispatched: unlike its more common usage, mimesis here has nothing to do with traditional re-

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oks.org/article/truths-that-cannot-be-offered-outside-of-art-on-stephen-d-dowdens-modernism-and-mimesis.

alist verisimilar representation. It is, rather, a way of articulating the modernists' access to the »real«: their work resonates with being itself, echoing, imitating and transforming the universe's own patterns and rhythms into new works of art. The example from Gadamer that most stands out–though one to which I cannot here do justice–is the reverberation of the »Sternentanz« (dance of the stars) within the movement of actual dancers. Modernist art pulses to the »thrum,« Dowden likes to say, of the universe itself.

Is this all beginning to sound, well, a bit mystical? It should. Dowden is both direct about this and on occasion vaguely apologetic. »The problem with accounts such as these,« by which he means here ones by Gadamer, Heidegger, Virginia Woolf and Kafka, »is that they sound so dreamy and mystical« (103). Yet on the whole he unabashedly affirms the »spiritual« element that was central to modernists like Musil, Kandinsky, Wittgenstein, and others. He will not let this core element of their self-understanding be suppressed by a theoretical framework unwilling or unable to acknowledge it. Moreover, he affirms this not only as central to *their* poetics, but to his own understanding and experience of modernism as well. *Modernism and Mimesis* passionately recommends modernist poetics to its readers as the kind of art most likely to achieve insight and autonomy in the modern age.

This is advocacy–not just dispassionate academic description–offered by a partisan who has spent a lifetime pondering the matter. He knows modernism like few others–authoritatively citing the Russians, Germans, Austrians, French, Irish, British, Polish, and American. He has spent a career (first at Yale, now at Brandeis) immersing himself in their work and mulling over their commonalities and distinctive characteristics. The sheer depth of learning, conveyed in precise and often witty prose, shines through. Moreover, he is equally interested in modernist music and painting (which constitute two of the five chapters of this book), revealing a transmedial investment typical of the modernists themselves. Rather than proceed from a single normative theory of modernism, and using that as a filter for supporting texts, he argues from the diverse works themselves, as well as from the sundry (and often contradictory) manifestos of their creators. He is the first to acknowledge their inconsistencies, ill-considered formulations, and blind spots. Yet amidst all this diversity he divines a persuasive profile, a discernible family resemblance, a »unified field.« He tells us when he is arguing alongside them and when they stand in need of correction. There is no false or imposed sense of uniformity, as far as I can see.

So why have readers–or at least reviewers–left Dowden out in the cold? (At the time we conceived this forum discussion, not a single review had appeared.) Why do we resist his revisions? It may be that his book simply fell victim to COVID-paralysis, appearing precisely at a point in time when academia was constrained to learn, virtually overnight, how to provide online instruction, a time when reviewing scholarship seemed like a luxury we couldn't afford. That is surely part of it. But from the

perspective of literary studies it appears to me that there were other factors at play. Postwar literary theory, specifically the hegemonic school that Rita Felski (along with Toril Moi and Amanda Anderson) refers to as »Kritik,« will have impeded the uptake of his provocations.

Dowden's »mystical« account of modernism asks us to set aside almost everything we thought we knew not only about modernism, but also about theory. Habermas, so unambiguously ascendant in the postwar period, taught us to be leery of tradition. He carried the day in his famous debates with Gadamer (beginning in 1967 and stretching into the early 1970s). As a result, Gadamer, I think it is safe to say, played a relatively muted role in critical discussions ever since. In the eyes of many, and for understandable reasons, Heidegger's Nazi past discredited him, and with him any valid insight on art he may have had. Thus Dowden's two star witnesses, so to speak, are rendered virtually moot.

Furthermore, Dowden cannot easily be assimilated to hegemonic constructivism, a philosophical worldview so taken for granted today that it is often not even articulated. It is truly the picture that holds us captive. At first glance, however, this would seem to be no problem at all, as Dowden himself underlines art's core *creative* function. »Reality does not exist as such,« he says, approvingly citing Paul Celan (but channeling Proust, Renoir, and others), »reality needs to be sought and achieved« (3). And yet it does also exist, powerfully and independently, if elusively. Central to Dowden's claim is that none of modernism's truths are subjective fantasies or illusions: »Crucial to modernism is the thought that art is … an active way of exploring, understanding, and knowing the world, of actively situating ourselves within it. Art establishes the real as real for us by making it intelligible« (9). There is an unmistakable assertion of reality's ontological integrity–though one that can only be briefly intimated and sparsely formulated by the modernist artist–that would make a constructivist blush. Neither fish nor fowl, Dowden's modernism intriguingly straddles the objectivist/constructivist fence that has perhaps too neatly demarcated the landscape of our aesthetic imagination.

But there is more. To speak, as Dowden does, of reality itself »thrumming« in modernist art may raise the specter in some readers' imaginations of Nazi-era vitalism. »The mimetic is and remains,« writes Dowden, quoting Gadamer, »a primordial phenomenon in which it is not so much an imitation [that] occurs as a transformation.« Elsewhere, he explains that »among the modernists, the link between mimesis and instinctive behavior seemed self-evident, which is to say: an impulse rooted in nature« (117). This talk of instinctual behavior and nature will raise red flags in the minds of some colleagues, who may divine a possible connection between this »primitivism« and fascism, or harbor some fear of untoward political affiliation. After all, what in this potentially labile energy flow (Dowden likes to speak of an aesthetic »molten core«) keeps it from fueling nativist politics or violent domination? Is there space in these lava flows for cool reason and enlightenment critique?

The answer, like so much else in this study, emanates from modernism's unique mode of cognition. Mantra-like, Dowden intones the lines from Baudelaire's 1860 essay, »The Painter and Modern Life,« a »defining insight into the task of the modern poet« (290), which highlights »the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent; the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable« (143). From this ethos of epistemological humility he derives a modernist ethic of respect for alterity and a refusal of objectification. He has spent much of the study casting modernism as the antithesis of the Cartesian »res cogitans,« which, as the book's villain, rears its ugly head not only in the naked forms of instrumentalizing science and colonial conquest, but also in Realism (the artform most in cahoots with objectifying science), and also (though in a somewhat more camouflaged manner) in Romantic subjectivity itself, which sought to evade Realism's objectivist errors, but only ended up re-inscribing them at another level.

The almost ritual reiteration of modernism's ephemeral nature brings with it at least two advantages for his argument: the unique flashes of transitory insight are *ipso facto* indefinable, and thus cannot be cataloged: »To pin down an exact denotative meaning,« he writes (channeling Benjamin), »would be to falsify it, because spiritual realities are transient, fugitive, and ephemeral–but no less real for being so« (16). Moreover, modernism figures as an aesthetic practice of solidarity, sympathy, and non-sentimental compassion. It is, in other words, just plain good, and constitutionally incapable of being co-opted by nefarious actors. Mimesis »models a way of creative, non-authoritarian dealing with the world« (126), and the resulting art »is cosmopolitan, unpretentious, and egalitarian–which is to say, *modernist*« (127).

Yet to some this will seem just a bit too convenient, goodness by fiat, an ethics more asserted than illustrated or explained. A study that so adamantly insists upon modernism's cognitive prowess should be able, one feels, to give a more precise accounting of what modernism knows. One might complain that Celan's hermetic poetry works quite well for an argument such as this, but what are we to think, for example, of Ernst Jünger's controversial, and in some respects indisputably pro-war *Storm of Steel* (*In Stahlgewittern*, 1920)? Dowden would no doubt have a response. The book is structured dialectically, posing challenging objections to itself and responding in turn.

Though I have remarked upon his use of Heidegger and Gadamer, Dowden depends to a much greater extent on modernist artists themselves–specifically Thomas Mann–than on philosophers to make his point, which is an interesting and productive shift in authority figures. Indeed, one of the things I most admire about this study is the way in which he deploys *Doktor Faustus* (1947) intermittently to make his larger point, though this will certainly antagonize some Thomas Mann scholars. Here again we are asked to look with fresh eyes upon an alleged specimen of canonical modernism. For many years, the critical consensus was that Adrian

Leverkühn, the musician-protagonist, descends as a consequence of his deal with the devil to the status of a proto-fascist, his modernist music serving to illustrate his »inhuman« turn.

Not so, argues Dowden. What we see instead is an artist who learns to eschew irony and parody (at which he, like Mann, excels) in favor of a naive form of composition that expresses his profound grief at the loss of his beloved nephew, Nepomuk. Though this reading of the novel has since gained some traction (most recently in *The New Yorker*),[2] it stood alone in 2020, when he first published this book. More importantly, it transforms a simple (and frankly simplistic) allegory of Nazism into a much more compelling narrative of modernism as an art form that strives for simplicity, directness, and yes, naivety in the process of bringing people together rather than dividing them by class and educational attainment. Rejecting Eliot's notion of modernism as grist for the educated elite and academic specialists, Dowden's is a far more egalitarian and positive image of the movement.

For art, he tells us, is essentially a game or party, with no prerequisite of arcane expertise. We are simply invited to play along. To support this view he pulls out all the stops, drawing our attention to the long, rich tradition of art as game or festival from the ancient Greeks to Schiller's famous »Spieltrieb« (play drive) to Kleist, Nietzsche, Gadamer and others. Key in this conception is the prominent role of active participation in the language game; as readers (and spectators, performers, dancers, etc.) we engage, realize, and complete (vollziehen) the aesthetic process. It can only come alive because of us–indeed it remains a dead thing without us–and we can only participate by shedding our self-consciousness, at least provisionally. It is a massive shift from puzzling over abstruse literary allusions to unself-conscious play; from feelings of frustrated inadequacy to experiences of inclusion and naive delight.

But if this is so, it is true of art itself, one might fairly object, not modernism only. Here, too, Dowden is ahead of us, conceding the point, but arguing that modernism just happens to be the best there is. He's gone a long way in dissociating modernism from its negative association with elitism and difficulty for its own sake; from despair, abstraction, and nihilism. And he's pulled off an unlikely success by taking back mimesis (differently understood, to be sure) from Realism, while exonerating modernism from any kind of referential »aboutness« whatsoever.

Still and all: I've watched students shrink timidly from modernist poetry (and frankly have often felt inadequate myself). I've also watched them throng noisily, joyously, and unselfconsciously into our stadium on football Saturdays. The latter is frankly nothing like their mood in a seminar on modernist poetry. Dowden's insistence on play and his suggestion that team »spirit« is analogous to what Kandinsky

2 Alex Ross: Thomas Mann's Brush With Darkness: How the German Novelists Tormented Conservative Manifesto Led to His Later Modernist Masterpieces, January 17, 2022, online at http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/01/24/thomas-manns-brush-with-darkness.

and possibly Musil meant to evoke in their art is undeniably exhilarating. I want it to believe it. I really do.

Modernism and Mimesis is meant of course to bridge that gap, to help make it so, by explaining how modernism works–or how it might yet work. While this study does not address itself to the actual reception of art (except in a hypothetical, normative manner), the implication is that if modernism has thus far failed, or failed to live up to its potential, it is in part due to cultural elites and professors who have built a wall around it, using it for cultural capital rather than as the life-force it was always meant to be. Fair enough. But still: if modernism is play, Dowden has at least implicitly conceded that it requires a 300-page instruction manual.

No study can do everything, or everything equally well. In foregrounding modernism, Dowden has, perhaps inevitably, slighted Realism and Romanticism, the movements that, rather than treated in their own right, serve here principally to throw his favorite topic into contrastive relief. I don't think Romanticism can really be reduced to a kind of subjectivity in which nature is made comfortably subordinate to and other than the human observer. Objections (Tieck's *Der blonde Eckbert*, E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Der goldene Topf*, and Droste-Hülshoff's *Die Judenbuche*), in which this very subjectivity is radically questioned, spring to the mind of even this inexpert observer.

Neither is Realism treated here with great subtlety, except perhaps, by admitting Joyce and Proust to its ranks (which is brilliant). Used primarily as a prop in his argument in favor of modernism's rejection of representation–its refusal to be »about« anything else–realism is almost inevitably set up for caricature. I can't imagine any of this would surprise Dowden: pragmatically, he needs to background and simplify these movements in order to foreground modernism. He needs to be selective, and he quite intends to provoke.

So let me take the bait. If this study has an Achilles heel, it is perhaps its tendency toward an all or nothing approach (with crucial tactical concessions along the way). Maybe it is the teacher in Dowden who wants repeatedly to return to what is most distinctive about modernism, to dwell upon those starkest of specimens (such as Celan, Beckett, Kakfa, etc.) that set it most clearly apart from prior aesthetic movements. But for all that, it seems unnecessary to dismiss »representation« (and thus realism) as a second-class kind of knowing, one that merely repeats the insights of, say, the social sciences. For one can of course »re-present« conventional and routinized perceptions in fresh and critical ways; and a realist aesthetic does not necessarily imply–please God, let us move beyond this tired argument!–an unreflective acceptance of the social status quo. Brecht thought of realism as a way of discovering what is truly real, of piercing false consciousness, not replicating it; and Canetti deemed his modernist novel, *Die Blendung*, a mode of »realism« in the sense that it shone a light on a culture that did not yet know itself in the way he had portrayed it.

Too driven by the need to establish modernism's unique cognitive conduit, Dowden feels obliged to wall it off from other ways of knowing. But this is not necessary. For the truth is, these kinds of cognition can work together in a number of ways: complementing and contesting one another. It is the work of interpretation to tease them out, rather than proscribe their intermingling.

To exclude art that is »about« society or concerned with social justice merely because it is epistemologically congruent with other ways of social knowing would be to expunge or delegitimize much of contemporary aesthetic practice and experience. It would be to return to the very elitism and social aloofness Dowden otherwise – and so refreshingly – seeks to overcome. It would, I fear, constitute a retraction of the ballgame and a return to the ivory tower.

Agree or disagree with that or that plank, one has to admit that the field of modernist play has been profoundly remapped. After Ellis, no one could speak or write about the German novella in quite the same way. A topic that had for generations occupied some of the best minds of *Germanistik* had been fundamentally reframed. The same will be true of Dowden on the larger and more complex question of modernism.