Modernism, Kafka and Thomas Mann: Some Thoughts

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Modernism and Mimesis is a rich book, teeming with fresh and challenging ideas and insights, and ranging across modern literature, music and painting. Few people would be competent to review it, and I am glad that I have been asked to single out only a few aspects for discussion. I will say something about Dowden's general thesis and then about his interpretation of Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, a key text in his arguments.

›Modernism‹ has always seemed to me a term so broad as to be nebulous and unusable. It is supposed to comprehend elephantine constructions such as *Ulysses* and *The Magic Mountain* along with tiny prose texts by Kafka and Beckett. Dowden sweeps this problem aside by arguing that ›Proust, Mann and Joyce […] are culminating giants of Victorian-era fiction‹ (pp. 66–67), principally because they explore subjective inner worlds. Hence they are still committed to representation, and so they reach only the threshold of true modernism. Even the stream of consciousness technique is a means of representation, though of inner, not external reality.

Modernism rejects ›representation‹ in favour of ›mimesis‹. Dowden's use of the latter term is somewhat idiosyncratic. He means art that seeks, in a well-worn phrase, not to *mean* but to *be*; that is interested in the true and the real – in experience that is fresh, arresting, impossible to classify under general concepts. Examples of such experiences might be the epiphanies reported by Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos, in which such a mundane object as a watering-can can suddenly become the vehicle of an ineffable revelation. The art that centres on such moments of vision is not esoteric, obscure, or highbrow. Its difficulty comes from its immediacy. It takes us aback because it breaks through the shell of second-hand pseudo-experience in which we are normally encased.

This is a powerful conception, put forward by Dowden in clear, quietly passionate language. It would find support from the most original book on Kafka to have come my way recently, Emily Troscianko's *Kafka's Cognitive Realism* (London: Routledge 2014). Drawing on expert knowledge of psychological research, Troscianko argues that Kafka's writing breaks with the long standard ›pictorial‹ assumption that perception consists in making an internal picture of external reality. Psychologists now prefer the ›enactive‹ theory: we focus on the external objects that concern us

and simply assume that everything else is there, on the basis of our acquired familiarity with the world. Kafka's ›cognitive realism‹ corresponds to enactivism: instead of setting a scene, he mentions only the details on which his protagonist focuses at any given moment. Hence Kafka's minimalist writing makes immediate sense because it matches how we actually perceive, but it is also innovative and disturbing because it contradicts the long-established assumption of pictorialism. Kafka gives us the real, not what we have unthinkingly assumed to be the real.

Dowden has no difficulty in illustrating his conception of ›mimesis‹ from painting. A red square by Rothko, say, does not *represent* a red square: it *is* one. Music, of course, is almost always non-representational. What then is special about modernist music? Dowden's answer comes in his discussion of Schönberg, who stripped his music of decorative features and aimed at ›a fresh and rigorous but flexible form, a new denuded style whose function would be ethical insofar as style directly expresses the invisibilia of the lived historical moment, the spirit of a time‹ (pp. 189–190). Such art, in a phrase Dowden repeatedly quotes from Beckett, ›is not about something. It is something‹ (p. 190).

Here Dowden captures the ethical impulse behind the simple, economical style of many modernist works, famously formulated by Adolf Loos in the title of his treatise *Ornament as Crime*. The best account I know of this link between economy and ethics is in Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin's *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, a book that has evidently been important for Dowden.

But how can literature, dependent on the medium of words, avoid ›aboutness‹? We all know assertions by Archibald MacLeish (›A poem should not mean | But be‹) and Wallace Stevens (›A poem is the cry of its occasion, | Part of the res itself and not about it‹). These statements, however, occur in poems which thereby fail to illustrate them. At first blush it might seem that the paradigmatic modernist literature for Dowden would be Dada sound-poems like those of Hugo Ball. On further reflection, though, one sees what he means. What is Kafka's *Metamorphosis* about? It is certainly meaningful, indeed it proliferates more meanings than one can cope with, but it is not the expression of a preconceived meaning. In trying to explicate it, one feels as helpless as when attempting a traditional interpretation of a poem by Celan. With Celan, contextual knowledge is often necessary – you need to know something about Hölderlin when reading ›Tübingen, Jänner‹, a poem discussed here – but what matters is the way the poem returns us to the basic fluidity of language. At the very least, Dowden has suggested productive ways of talking about some central modern literature.

The difficulties with Dowden's approach arise from its terminology rather than its substance. ›Modernism‹ is perhaps one of those period terms, like ›Romanticism‹, which we cannot use with precision but cannot get rid of. Dowden offers us a modernism without Joyce, which seems strange. He does not mention Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, a novel which seems quintessentially modernist yet is remote from

Dowden's examples of stripped-down expression. Hermann Broch, evidently a personal favourite, makes several appearances, but only as a theorist. I cannot see how his huge, unwieldy (and in my opinion mostly dull) novels could fit Dowden's conception of modernism.

›Mimesis‹ too is problematic. Dowden wants to distinguish it from representational art. He is interested in art's origins in a primeval delight in playing, making and shaping, still dominant in children. The nonsense-words Celan quotes from the mad Hölderlin (›Pallaksch. Pallaksch‹) belong to language as raw material. Dowden seeks to confirm this view by reproducing a cave-painting from Altamira. But the cave-painting complicates his general argument, because it *represents* horses and a rhinoceros. And the pleasure of representing something can also claim to be primeval. Aristotle says in the *Poetics* that ›we enjoy looking at the most exact portrayals of things we do not like to see in real life, the lowest animals, for instance, or corpses‹.

In his use of the term ›mimesis‹, Dowden is following Benjamin and Gadamer. In Benjamin's essays ›On the Mimetic Faculty‹ and ›Doctrine of the Similar‹, mimesis in language is exemplified by onomatopoeia, by contrast with the referential or representational function of language. Gadamer in *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, often cited here, speaks of children's make-believe as a basic form of art, and concludes that in mimesis ›it is not so much an imitation that occurs as a transformation‹. His argument is that the *activity* of imitation is pleasurable, independently of the accuracy of the imitation. From these thinkers Dowden derives the crucial insight that the sheer pleasure of making something, and having it recognized, is an essential part of modern art. Art does not *need* to represent something outside itself in order to give pleasure. But children's games, like the Altamira cave-paintings, often consist in imitation (›I'm a lion!‹) and hence in representation. So it is confusing that Dowden seeks to decouple ›mimesis‹, in something like Benjamin's and Gadamer's sense, from ›mimesis‹ in the sense familiar from Aristotle. On the other hand, Dowden's claims that modern art appeals to the play instinct (he often cites Schiller's *Spieltrieb*) and that it focuses on moments of vision that disclose the real are important and compelling. He really is on to something. It would be a shame if his valuable argument were obscured by his perhaps unfortunate choice of terminology.

Doctor Faustus is a constant reference point for Dowden, because its central figure, the composer Adrian Leverkühn, is an exemplary modernist. Initially inspired by Debussy, he finds that the styles available to him at the beginning of the twentieth century are all outworn and can only be used in a spirit of parody. Describing his aims to his biographer Zeitblom, he imagines ›an art without suffering, emotionally healthy, free from solemnity and sadness, but intimate, an art on friendly terms with humanity‹ (chapter 31). Dowden quotes a letter by Mann himself that formulates a similar ambition (28 January 1946). How far this statement applies to Leverkühn's works is open to debate. The *Apocalipsis cum figuris* is clearly an exceptionally chal-

lenging work which parodies musical styles from impressionism down to jazz and enhances its force by means of megaphones. It conveys Mann's worry that modernist art, by its recourse to primitivism, moves disturbingly away from humanist and humane values (Dowden has some memorable pages on cruelty in modernism, citing Artaud and Francis Bacon as well as Leverkühn).

Leverkühn's last and greatest work, the *Lamentation of Dr Faustus*, may fit Dowden's conception of mimesis somewhat better. Though deeply personal, it does not express its creator's subjectivity. Evoking it in Chapter XLVI, the narrator Zeitblom tells us that it contains no vocal solos but makes heavy use of the echo, which, ›in repeating a human sound as a natural sound and revealing it as a natural sound, is essentially a lament, the melancholy ›Ah, yes!‹ with which nature responds to humanity and the attempt to convey humanity's loneliness‹. Yet in evading direct personal utterance, Leverkühn achieves ›expression in its first, primordial manifestations, expression as lament‹. Leverkühn's use of the echo seems to correspond, on the highest artistic level, to Benjamin's words about onomatopoeia, the artistic imitation of natural sounds.

Finally, a few words about Dowden's interpretation of *Doctor Faustus*. The standard reading is that Leverkühn makes a pact with the Devil which will secure artistic inspiration at the cost of renouncing love. Hence he feels compelled to contrive the murder of his lover Rudi Schwerdtfeger, and he thinks that the death from meningitis of his beloved nephew Nepomuk is due to contamination by his sinful presence. He is therefore convinced that he will be damned, like his sixteenth-century prototype. Dowden, however, argues that Leverkühn is redeemed by love – above all, his love for the prostitute ›Esmeralda‹, who later reappears as his invisible patroness Madame de Tolna. Dowden already proposed this interpretation in his book *Sympathy for the Abyss* (1986), but it has received little attention in the copious research on Mann.

How plausible is it? There are hints in the text that despite his religious melancholia, Leverkühn may be redeemed. His musical puppet-play, the *Gesta Romanorum*, includes the story of the sinner Gregorius who was eventually elected Pope (Mann later retold this story in the novel *Der Erwählte*, known in English as *The Holy Sinner*). Zeitblom, listening to the *Lamentation*, discerns a barely audible expression of hope in the after-echo of its final note, ›the high G of a cello‹. G is the first letter of *grace* and of its German equivalent, *Gnade*. But this is an extremely tentative suggestion. The upbeat tone of Dowden's interpretation is hard to reconcile with the atmosphere of tragedy that increasingly surrounds Leverkühn. Nevertheless, I could accept it in qualified form. A further difficulty, however, is that the two people Leverkühn loves, Rudi and Nepomuk, meet horrible deaths, whereas nothing happens to Frau von Tolna. Why should she be exempt from the Devil's rage?

That aside, Dowden's reading compels one to look afresh at a particularly murky section of *Doctor Faustus*. The events surrounding Rudi's death are seen through

a double screen: Leverkühn's final confession, which is partly and perhaps wholly delusional, and the unreliable narrative of his biographer Zeitblom. Dowden's interpretation involves further details, too numerous to discuss here. At the very least, it can renew our interest in a work which is full of mysteries and complexities.

Within Dowden's book as a whole, his anti-tragic interpretation of *Doctor Faustus* fits into his presentation of modernism as a humane and friendly kind of art that helps us to feel at home in the world. There is far more in this book than I can indicate. Dowden writes with equal confidence, and always illuminatingly, about Schönberg, Franz Marc, Karl Kraus and Mandelstam. I can only urge readers to tackle the book, learn from it, and argue with it whenever it provokes them – which will be often.