

Beckmann Variations & other poems

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Beckmann Variations
& other poems

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For JA

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Beckmann Variations

1.

Hard to forget that London morning in the winter of 2003 when my wife and I stepped on to the Number 4 bus to visit the Beckmann exhibition at the Tate Modern. We sat almost like little gods on the upper level of the bus looking down into the busy streets, watching the sere of neighborhoods change. From the north side of London, from Islington, past Angel with its milling young people, an animate sea washed against leafy Clerkenwell, ebbing and swelling around the new Sadlers Wells, the dingy newspaper offices and paper makers. And there we were, high up, going by the pubs we'd sat in and read poetry to others in. So much looked sweet and pleasant in that gritty London way. Then came the creaking turn on south to the river, a blinding arc of sun in our faces as though reality had suddenly struck out at us. Now the City lay there in all its criss-crossed busyness as did the old dilapidated East End. And finally we came to the area around St. Paul's awash in its grim English history, the Tower, Execution Dock, the rusted cages at Wapping, the Isle of Dogs. Here, where the Thames bulges north and makes a curve, the old cathedral dominates, towering over the streets, and on its grassy island, the great

rain-stained edifice is docked like a battleship howsered to old England and ancient, supernatural Europe. Many years ago, I'd walked around in St. Paul's, breathing in the smoky air from the stands of burning candles, the soot blackening the paintings of Christian martyrs and saints, its spot-lit altar, a delusion or paradisaical offering seen from afar over the rows of chairs that filled the floor.

But it is a short walk from St. Paul's to the Embankment and across the spidery post-modern Millennium footbridge to the South Bank and the Tate Modern with its disused brick smokestacks. I recall, on that cool morning, the two of us, walking hand-in-hand across its slim white arc. The river breezes rippled the Thames. Bright sunlight dazzled the old trim of buildings lining the banks and caught the glass windows of that architectural comedy of an office building, the Gherkin, down near Docklands. And there was a feeling in me that we were passing through ourselves, out beyond the skin and into a flow bearing our history and culture and all its entrainments, even our companionship and years of talk. That walk across the bridge, then, was part of a meditation, not only because we had so often spoken in the same breath about art and poetry but also because there were times it seemed when pictures and words so reflect on each other that they offer a powerful illumination of the world we walk through. And I thought then not only of Beckmann, whose terrifying late work I barely knew but also of Yeats, speaking to "Maurice," Maud Gonne's daughter Iseult, in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, telling her that he wanted to put down all things he said and had wanted to say on that day they walked together.

2. SPACE

Reise auf dem Fisch (Mann und Frau)
(Journey on the Fish [Man and Woman]), 1934

We had seen the blue spun with thin white webs
of contrails left by jets out of Heathrow,
had hoped for the promise of an infinity

that would leave a foreground for the finite,
for the savor of bodies in a room, for memory
and for this present, an entwine of emotion

and object such that its simplicity would shame
unless met head-on, as one would meet an offered glass
of wine lifted in salute, the taste of bread and butter.

Not perfection, but their transitory being in the world
to be shared with others. And so we looked up to see
how wind blew the chalky lines left by the planes

into blowsy arcs, watched the waves' ruffles as they moved down the brown expanse of the Thames, flowing toward Whitehall and the towers of Parliament.

It was as though we were striving against a power impacted in those buildings. And then, in the painting, we saw the man and woman bound by silken sashes to the backs of fish, the waves' surfaces to be breached.

And who now could live only by a word or by an image; who could stand back, look and speak, only to fall silent? Who, in these times, did not sense death and non-being as a shadow, something brushed against the cranial wall?

The bound lovers in their journey are plunged downward and must embrace fear, rapture, the throes of love, their lips clamped shut against the pressure. Great silvery fish sound the ocean's deeps and seed the darkness with their silence.

If you wish to get hold of the invisible, wrote Beckmann, you must penetrate as deeply as possible into the visible.

Space is the infinite deity.

3. ENTARTETE KUNST

. . . the term stands for degenerate art, but “entartet” which has traditionally been translated as “degenerate” or “decadent” is essentially a biological term, defining a plant or animal that has so changed that it no longer belongs to its species. By extension, it refers to art that is unclassifiable or so far beyond the confines of what is accepted that it is in essence ‘non-art.’—from the catalog for the Smithsonian’s “Degenerate Art” exhibition which replicated the Nazis’ Entartete Kunst of 1937. . .

Beckmann’s work, along with that of most of Germany’s modernist masters, was included in the Nazis’ display of “degenerate art,” the “Entartete Kunst” exhibition held in Munich in July of 1937. It was then that the category of “art” fell prey to the Nazi logic found in their eugenic doctrines concerning “degenerate” Jews, homosexuals, the mentally impaired. The night before the exhibition was to open, Hitler made a speech to the nation about this un-German art. Beckmann heard the broadcast, packed his belongings and with his wife fled Germany the next morning, never to return.

But there was an unintended double irony in the usage of “entartet” by the Nazis. Most serious and important art often changes in such a way that it only nominally belongs to the species it came from. Beckmann’s work was “entartete,” only distantly related to the flora or fauna of pictures then existing; it was already a rebuke to the art culture in which it had been created.

Beckmann’s genius involves a remarkable and unsettling simultaneity of the contemporary and the archaic. In his notes, he writes of the “last days of drowned continents,” of art seeking a new, evolving consciousness. The flood is part biblical, part Jungian. Beckmann’s imagery is cluttered with flotsam, a detritus of objects that jar anachronistically against each other. Ancient ritual swords and modern torture machines, the kind found in the cellars of the Nazis or indeed the palaces of Saddam, co-exist on the same rectangle of canvas. Vicious plant life populates the landscape, and lovely eroticized bodies suffer excruciating cruelties. Hyperbolic realism and fantasy co-exist, held together by powerful compositional skills.

And Beckmann can deploy a remarkable sense of color and line to reinforce the drama, as with the slate greens and blacks of his early *The Sinking of the Titanic*. Here, Beckmann’s unique strokes of color make the waves look less like water than like stony altar pieces on which the hapless, drowning victims are sacrificed to the new, heartless gods of modernity. The night sky above this scene of misfortune is rendered in the fiery reds of the burning ship as though it were simply another morphing of implacable malevolence.

The figures of fish, man and woman, in his painting *Journey on the Fish*, refer to the Babylonian fertility god, Ones-Dagon, part man and part aquatic animal. In Babylonian mythology, Dagon brings culture and civilization to the crude, animalistic Babylonians. He is a savage yet saving god.

But Beckmann also had before him the Great War, its “last days” offering up a continent drowned not in water but in

blood. Beckmann, born in 1884, was a medical orderly on the Belgian front where he experienced first hand the disaster's physical and human rubble. Its horrors led not only to a nervous breakdown but found their way permanently into his work. The faces, the flayed and torn bodies, the clutter of ominous ritualized objects of warfare were a response, he wrote, "to an infinite space, which one must constantly pile with any kind of junk, so that one will not see behind it the terrible depth." For Beckmann, that "terrible depth" is the very space of the human arena, a seething ground of aggression and passion, iron-bound into the symbology of religion and culture but, ultimately, a place not susceptible to the curbs of reason.

Initially a patriotic even enthusiastic participant in the German cause, Beckmann, after his breakdown, came away chastened by his time on the front. The landscape of war, he wrote, was a "horror vacuii," a "depopulated sublime," a "black hole." It had produced in him an unbearable aloneness, a "boundless forsaken eternity."

This was not new, the warring men, the atrocities or mass murder of civilian populations who had at one time been put to the sword and were now bombarded or burnt alive in their homes or churches. No, the shedding of innocent blood was not new, nor was the originality of Beckmann's "entartet" creations born alone out of the unprecedented scale of the slaughter he witnessed. Yes, these same horrors saturate the work of Beckmann's contemporaries such as George Grosz and Otto Dix. And they can be found, though highly complex and distorted, in Beckmann's *Hell*, a series of eleven lithographs depicting a society gone mad with authoritarian order, lust, venality and envy. Already, in this series, where satiric commentary is dropped for a kind of investigative graphics, Beckmann's oeuvre had become "entartet." Suddenly, societal relations are depicted as spatial and juxtapositional forces. Everything shown is both villainous and hopeful, and totally interdependent. Take one element away, say the torturer and his knife in *The Night*

(number 6 in the series), and the composition collapses. The “entartet” work, whether the creation of Nazi ideology and violence or of Beckmann’s disturbing reconstructions of the visual field, touch the bottom of what it means to be human. Their message is overwhelming: there is nothing to be removed that will make things right.

We cannot say for sure what drove Beckmann. Possibly, coming to this “entartet” vision produced a change of heart, something of a refutation of the patriotism and theomorphic spirit that had enabled nation-building, war and conquest for thousands of years. His “eternity,” he wrote, had become an “unending void.” Simone Weil, in her essay on the *Iliad*, “The Poem of Force,” sees in Homer’s poem the inklings of the disgust and horror Beckmann felt after his experiences in the Great War. At the very least, Beckmann participates in a kind of aesthetic stoicism, transmuting his disgust and pessimism into craft. “I don’t cry,” he writes, “I hate tears, they are a sign of slavery. I keep my mind on my business—on a leg or an arm, on the penetration of surface.” And, in a way, Beckmann’s contemporary in the shift of consciousness is Goya, whose *Capriccios* and *Disasters of the War* are “entartet” with the work of painters of his time.