

An Upside-Down Masquerade

TLS, March 7th 2003

Review of Max Beckmann exhibition (Tate Modern) & catalogue, and *On My Painting*, Max Beckmann

In the Tate's magnificent retrospective, Max Beckmann (1884-1950) stakes out a territory distinct from every other major contemporary. One defining theme is complexity, at its most extreme in the crowding of his large late picture, "The Cabins". Perhaps conceived in America, begun when briefly back in Amsterdam and completed in St Louis, *The Cabins* became a kind of rite of passage between his wartime experience and his new life. After years of entrapment in occupied Holland, to cross the Atlantic twice in an ocean liner was an overwhelming experience. Beckmann here creates a skewed, polyphonic space, probably best read from the band of blue/green "ocean" at the right, where a two-funnelled boat steams along the vertical horizon, vignettted through a porthole. From her cabin, a young woman gazes out and makes an image of the ship she sees; while all the rest of this weird composition could be interpreted as her apprehension of the many-decked boat piled up behind her. The compartmented, conglomerate cascade of *The Cabins* seems to imply an entire cosmology: perhaps William James's formulation, that the world is not a universe, but a multiverse.

Throughout, pictorial space is made to convey a far wider range of meanings than we're accustomed to in modern painting. As Charles Haxthausen writes in his catalogue-essay, "space was not an inert envelope on which the actions of his painted figures unfolded: it assumed a semantic dimension." And even in the portraits and self-portraits that provide some of the most rewarding works at the Tate, Beckmann's mode of composition constantly asserts between self and other not only a spatial but a psychological relation, registering proximity or distance with exceptional intensity.

Responding across forty years to each shift of European history with an equally dramatic shift of pictorial language, Beckmann's art benefits from a full-scale retrospective. The story could be told in various ways. In the opening room, he seems a florid painter, almost swish or slick. Then, for several years, the imagery becomes crabbed, bloodless, drained of colour, with paint subordinate to line; until, a decade or so later, Beckmann expands

again into a loose sensuous brushing – the rich, fluid idiom with which he will confront all the troubles of a disrupted life. Stylistically, he starts out awkwardly suspended between the Munch-like hysteria of *Small Death Scene* (1906) and the far more solidly academic *Conversation* of two years later. The *Sinking of the Titanic* (1912) brought him the doubtful sobriquet of “The German Delacroix”: only much later would that aspiration – to revive the history-painting, the “machine” – make sense. At the Tate, his long reformation of language is felt as a series of ugly jolts. Beckmann had been an acknowledged young conservative master in Berlin, with a glamorous wife and young son, contemptuous of any Expressionistic primitivism. After his breakdown as a stretcher bearer in the trenches in 1915, he leaves all that behind, taking refuge in the attic of friends in Frankfurt. The new jagged works that climax in *The Night* of 1918-19 come clearly out of a reconsideration of German Gothic, not only the painters (Grünewald, Ratgeb) but also the crammed-together crowds of carved wooden altarpieces. In South Germany, he discovered the masks of *Fastnacht*; he came to see his own life as Carnival, as an upside-down masquerade. Masks play all the roles in the superb dry-points of *Faces*, originally entitled *Theatre of the World* – the array of open-mouthed Yawners, the voyeurs lurking behind the sofa of Lovers. Writing to the portfolio’s publisher Reinhard Piper, Beckmann outlines his new lineage: “Brueghel, Hogarth, Goya. All three have the metaphysical in the objective. That is also my goal”.

Beckmann’s negation of *belle-peinture* had released a vein of cruel caricature, of mean and repellent forms, that brought his imagery into alignment beside “critical” contemporaries such as George Grosz and Otto Dix. Yet by 1920 other dimensions are becoming evident. Not only the door at the right of the “*Family Portrait*”, but the whole space, has become “unhinged” – as though this assembly of large-headed puppets were about to burst the room apart. In *The Synagogue*, the space is so discontinuous that we feel the eye being constantly yanked about: down the street to the little revellers, then soaring with the glass globes and the balloon high above the news-kiosk, to end in a wonky façade. These spatial contradictions signal not the madness of *Caligari*, so much as uneasy reverie. The huge crescent moon in the white sky establishes this as an eerie nocturne, perhaps seen with the night-vision of the foreground cat, suspended two or three storeys high.

The quietness of the beautiful little *Landscape Near Frankfurt* (1922) seems like the silence after an earthquake, with chimneys, trees, and apartment-towers still leaning in different directions. Beckmann enters gently into this complicated miniature world, into each separate allotment, allowing every component an unforced completeness and *Sachlichkeit*: I'm reminded of Léger's post-war *Paysages Animés*, or of Carrà's attempt to reconstruct the world of objects – and, standing behind both, the model of Henri Rousseau, so evident here in Beckmann's *Landscape with Lake and Poplars*. This pan-European return to the object is however given by Beckmann a dream-like, somnambulistic slant, a “magic realism”, which I suspect owes much to the early Chagalls left behind throughout the war in Herwath Walden's *Der Sturm* Berlin offices.

Beckmann's second marriage, to a twenty-one-year-old Viennese, gave new impetus to his art's retrieval of the sensuous. The nude becomes a prominent theme, as in the sexy little picture from 1927, with Quappi seen from above, upside-down, cross-legged, only her lower face emerging from behind the bedboard, her Pekinese in attendance. From the same year comes the five-and-a-half-foot panorama, *The Harbour of Genoa*, an exhilarating clash of black sky, white-and-black architecture, against the emerald ocean. In *The Bathing Cabin* of 1928, another masterpiece from these years of renewed travel, the apparent hedonism of beach and sea is put in question by the framing structure: the artist's own presence, his sponge and shaving-tackle and favourite novel (Jean Paul's *Titan*), intrude with an almost imprisoning closeness. By the late 1920s, in Paris for much of the year, learning from Léger and Matisse, Beckmann has reopened the possibility of an art of affirmation. The angular has become curved, the forms larger, more generous, more architectonic. On a dark underpainting (at first blue or red, but usually black) Beckmann has learnt to spread buttery paint with a relaxed, almost off-hand finesse, realizing arm or breast as a wonderfully tangible surface, a flesh unrivalled by any contemporary. Forms are often carved out of the black, as in the famous shirt-front of *Self-Portrait in Tuxedo*. It is as though the fabled quest for a synthesis of German with Mediterranean, of Teutonic and Classical, might at last be fulfilled.

But as this show moves into the 1930s, other, deeper continuities are reasserted. Beckmann had started out as a catastrophe-specialist: *The Earthquake at Messina*, *The Sinking of the Titanic*. The trenches had given him first-hand experience of the apocalyptic. And now, although in Paris he

had escaped the worst of the German inflation, he found himself once again in a collapsing world. The Paris version of this exhibition was subtitled *Un peintre dans l'histoire* and punctuated with four large rooms of video-installations, based on documentary footage. The Tate, with a lighter touch, have unobtrusively distributed a four-page "newspaper", *The Beckmann Times*, assembling archival extracts, presumably to be read while looking at the pictures. Beckmann's own view of "History" had, however, by now moved far beyond mere humdrum politics. His reading tended towards the esoteric, with Jung and Blavatsky as guides towards a syncretic vision. "To create a new mythology from present-day life," Beckmann explained; "that's my meaning."

In *Departure* (redated here 1932 and 1933-5) he is able to sidestep some of the pitfalls inherent in the genre, by building his "grand machine" out of a dialectical structure: a triptych that juxtaposes torture to either side of transcendence. One possible text to set beside *Departure* is Nietzsche's famous passage in *The Birth of Tragedy*, where Raphael's divided Transfiguration is made to signify both Dionysian pain, "the sole ground of being", as well as the Apollonian realm emerging from it, "a new illusory world, invisible to those enmeshed in the first". We are shown:

how there is need for a whole world of torment in order for the individual to produce the redemptive vision and to sit quietly in his rocking rowboat in mid-sea, absorbed in contemplation.

After Beckmann made his own departure from Hitler's Germany, some such "master-thought" sustained him through all the years of exile. *Departure* hung for decades in sight of *Guernica* at MOMA in New York, influencing generations of American painters. It remains, however, problematic. As a young artist, Eric Fischl at first found it "daunting"; "my fear was that I could never penetrate its content without first reading what he or others had to say about it". Wisely, the organisers of the present show have gone easy on the exegesis. Yet the absence at the Tate of all the five pictures which really demand explanation and, for many, constitute the core of Beckmann's achievement – the great triptychs of exile that follow *Departure* – does distort the balance. In this exhibition, the complex pictures are too often the weak ones. To understand the impact of Beckmann on a postmodern generation, *Temptation* or *Acrobats* or *Blindman's Buff* are needed in all their epic scale. Towards the end of the decade, together with the Genoa picture and four others, *Temptation* came to London. (It was illustrated on the cover of the

TLS of July 23, 1938.) Beckmann delivered his longest statement, *On My Painting*, to an English audience; the Tate have now published it as a little booklet. Sean Rainbird's afterword gives us the context: the Twentieth Century German Art exhibition was devised partly by the Artists' International Association as a riposte to Hitler's "Degenerate Art" campaign of the year before, though the project was compromised by appeasement. I can supply a footnote to this. In 1981, Stefan Lackner (who had owned *Temptation* and accompanied Beckmann to London) told me he had offered the triptych in 1938 to the then director of the Tate, Charles Manson – at first for £300, then as a gift. Both were refused. Lackner's impression was that Manson's reasons were political: one should not provoke Herr Hitler at such a delicate moment. Today, *Temptation* – the only Beckmann triptych not in America – hangs in Munich, unlikely ever to travel again.

As Lackner makes clear in his own writings, Beckmann saw his mythologies as provisional, improvisatory, and, in their jostling carnival absurdity, ultimately humorous. "Basically, my thing originates in an almost demented mirth, but then it aims at not leaving anything out." Beckmann, now in his fifties, was physically imposing. "His solid round head looked like a boulder. His massive body moved slowly, deliberately, swaying from side to side like that of a captain on the deck of his ship." But then, at a reception in Paris, "We walked across the lawn, and suddenly Beckmann pulled down his hat more firmly over his forehead and did some cartwheels, whirling sideways on stiff arms and legs without losing his hat".

The triptychs cease to be alarming in their congestion and portentousness when one becomes alert to the "cartwheels" there also – the sudden wild bursts of exuberance out of which each apparently impermeable structure is cobbled together. In these "Post-Christian Altarpieces" (Lackner's phrase), what Beckmann is really doing is filling the void. As early as 1914, he'd written of "this infinite space, which one must constantly pile with any kind of junk, so that one will not see behind it to the terrible depth". His greatest triptychs are painted on a black ground – so that one glimpses the void through the interstices. What might appear most grandiose in Beckmann turns out to be most fragmentary, broken, vulnerable.

At the end of *On My Painting*, in a dream sequence, he salutes Henri Rousseau, and then, "nearby", encounters William Blake (whose pictures he had admired at the Tate earlier that day). Blake counsels him, waving "friendly greetings to me like a super-terrestrial patriarch ... 'Do not let

yourself be intimidated by the horror of the world'... I awoke and found myself in Holland, in the midst of a boundless world turmoil. But my belief in the final release and absolution of all things, whether they please or torment, was newly strengthened". The affinities with Blake, creating his own encrypted mythologies in the midst of the Napoleonic Wars, could be pursued further. Yet Beckmann's Amsterdam themes are often simply remembrances of the good times before the catastrophe, at parties, bars, hotels. (In the triptych *Carnival*, Adam/Max and Eve/Quappi will be expelled from the Eden Hotel.) Missing here are the best of the memory landscapes, such as Frankfurt Station, painted from a postcard in 1942, or the various Riviera scenes, including the delightful *Monte Carlo by Night Seen from a Touring Car*. Monte Carlo does feature in the large, louche *Dream* of 1940-43, the gambler-girl sprawling on the green baize table, oblivious of the masked intruders, lighted bombs in hand. The Tate's own scintillating *Prunier's* of 1944 recalls the lost world of Beckmann's favourite Paris restaurant, where sinister "gobblers" are themselves transmogrified into red-boiled langoustines.

The outstanding piece in the catalogue is Jill Lloyd's biographical study, introducing us to a world of "good Germans" all struggling to keep Max and Quappi afloat. Helmut Lütjens, the manager of Cassirer's Amsterdam gallery, helped to hide some of Beckmann's work, took the couple in when times grew dangerous, shared his rations. In the touching large portrait of the Lütjens family shown at the Tate (not in Paris, and hardly ever reproduced) they are shown in the warm glow of candlelight, perhaps sitting out an air-raid blackout. The little daughter plays with her puppet, while the father sits smilingly in his wife's lap; Beckmann's proximity is felt in the table-edge protruding from the right margin.

Some of the sub-themes running through this show come to a climax in Amsterdam. *Balloons*, for instance. Racing balloons rise up as we enter, in a composition of 1908; in a more mysterious image of 1917, a balloon hovers above a Frankfurt park; and in the next room, another is glimpsed to the right of *The Synagogue*, echoing its bulbous dome. Later, we encounter the seven-foot tall *Aerial Acrobats* of 1928 – she waving the stars and stripes from her dangling balloon-basket, while he tumbles out, brandishing a tricolour. (A little background parachutist suggests all will be well.) But when we next catch sight of the balloon, in an astonishing image from the end of the Amsterdam years, it has sailed into far more perilous territory, suspended

beside a monstrous windmill. Victims (possibly identified as Jews by the Hebrew inscription, though one of them has blood on his hands) are imprisoned within the turning sails. One may think of Lear, bound upon his “wheel of fire”. As the label points out, “a traditional symbol of the peace and beauty of Dutch life has been transformed into an instrument of torture”. Finally, not balloons but floating sky-craft are seen in the background of one of the last New York images – the Falling Man whose flaming skyscrapers strike such an uncanny note today.

When the war ended, Beckmann resumed his correspondence with Lackner in a splendidly lugubrious letter:

The world is rather kaput, but the spectres climb out of their caves and pretend to become again normal and customary human beings who ask each other’s pardon instead of eating one another or sucking one another’s blood. The entertaining folly of war evaporates, distinguished boredom sits down again on the dignified old overstuffed chairs...

And it could be said that he was a little lost without catastrophe, without his “whole world of torment”. He’d chosen not to return to Germany, but the American pictures are among his least convincing. No longer carved out of blackness, but painted on a white ground, they often combine raucous colour with too obvious outline. The figures seldom have the daring and autonomy of his best work. Yet even in this brief finale, Beckmann continues to hold the centre-stage. While each of his contemporaries has appeared briefly in vivid character-parts – Paula Modersohn-Becker, Emil Nolde, Ernst Kirchner, Grosz, Dix, Charlotte Salomon – only to drop away as the scene changes, Beckmann has moved like the hero of some expressionist quest-play, a Baal or a Peer Gynt, through all five acts of Germany’s tragic drama.

The show’s catalogue is quite hard to negotiate, with its “Chinese-box” structure: folded into the principal essays (such as Robert Storr on the “Filiation” of Philip Guston to Beckmann, from 1939 through to his “Tiered Universe” of the 1970s) are briefer studies, including “endorsements” by a cannily chosen trio of contemporary artists: Leon Golub, Ellsworth Kelly, and the South African animator, William Kentridge (who writes about Beckmann’s upside-down chorus in *Death*). None of it quite coheres into a book. But for those who saw this exhibition in Paris, the Tate version offers a completely different experience, adjusted with great intelligence by Sean Rainbird, the curator. Paris began only in 1917; London has added a room of pre-war pictures, essential if we are to understand his subsequent conversions. Many

more drawings have also been borrowed, and made to interact with the paintings to an unusual degree. In Paris, the large Pompidou spaces seemed to dissipate the force of these pictures; in London's smaller rooms, one realizes that Beckmann's imagery needs to be confined. And if Paris tended to emphasize the grandiose, London's far more sympathetic hang conveys both the monumentality and the fragile intimacy of Beckmann's vision. It is a show to revisit many times, even if not quite an ideal retrospective.