

# 'Viewing my *Night*': a Comparison between the Thinking of Max Beckmann and Ludwig Wittgenstein

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## 1. Introduction

'It is surely the most foolhardy and unsatisfactory endeavour to wish to express things about art in words or writing; since whether they wish to or not, each person speaks only for their own house, their own soul, and absolute objectivity or justice is impossible.' With these words the important 20<sup>th</sup> century German painter Max Beckmann begins his 1948 lecture at Columbia University, *Three Letters to a Woman Painter*. In those instances where he has transgressed against this motto and expressed himself with regard to his painting, I would like to view such passages from the preserved writings and conversations to a certain degree in the light of his contemporary Ludwig Wittgenstein.

It is easy to point to a number of biographical correspondences between Beckmann and Wittgenstein. First of all, their dates: Beckmann 1884 to 1950, Wittgenstein 1889 to 1951. In the First World War Beckmann was a volunteer medical auxiliary, Wittgenstein an Austrian volunteer. Beckmann's impressions of the First World War were crucial for the further development of his painting, and during the same period Wittgenstein was preparing his first work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. It is also important to mention that both engaged intensively with Kant and Schopenhauer.

## 2. On the picture

In his *Six Aphorisms on the Composition of Pictures*, the foreword to a catalogue written in 1924, Beckmann gives some very precise information about his painting. 'The construction of the image is conditioned by the alteration of the visual impression of the world of objects by a transcendental mathematics in the soul of the subject. In principle, therefore, any modification of the object is permitted which can prove itself through adequate powers of organisation. The decisive factor is the consistent use of a formal principle which is related to this modification.' This is a remarkably precise and philosophical, stylistically terse formulation of his thoughts on the matter, whose form and content recalls many propositions of the *Tractatus*, the picture theory, and the general proposition form. At various times and in various circumstances, for example during lectures, Beckmann finds a new home for these precise words from his first aphorism, quoting it even when he had achieved a vivid and powerfully visual type of language to describe his work. It seems as though he wanted to create a sober theoretical basis for the potential of painting. Knowing the impossibility of communicating his intentions linguistically, he confines his theory to an observation of this kind, in order then to disregard it and refer to feelings and circumstances (he writes of the enjoyment of beauty, intoxication, dance, ecstasy, nature, music, God, etc.) which, by their mere enumeration alone, are intended to determine his work more specifically. This manner of proceeding very closely resembles certain interpretations of the *Tractatus*, if one thinks of the relationship of the picture theory and linguistic analysis to questions of ethics and

aesthetics in Wittgenstein's work, for example on the problem of boundaries.

Beckmann developed a style characterised by strong figures and explicitly sought to point towards the invisible through the visible. Or, as he says in his lecture *On my Painting*, given in London in 1938, 'However, it is in fact *reality* – which forms the actual mystery of existence!' In a note which has been preserved, written on 2 February 1937, he writes: 'All things which exist are there *only* so that we can learn to get by (to cope?) without them.' One notes that Beckmann was concerned with a representational form of painting; on this point, here is a quotation from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: '6.4321 All of the facts belong only to the task, not to the solution.' The proximity of these two ideas strikes one at once. But does it also reveal itself clearly in Beckmann's actual work, in his painting? Yes, it does indeed *reveal* itself; if one will, almost in Wittgenstein's sense of the word and, from the point of view of painterly technique, quite explicitly.

## 3. Out of the picture

In a letter written in 1919 to Ludwig von Ficker, Wittgenstein writes the following with regard to the *Tractatus*: '... the book's meaning is an ethical one'. By restricting itself to meaningful propositions, it points indirectly towards all the non-meaningful things that can be said, and moreover at that which reveals itself in this: ethics and logic which, as precondition of the possibility of linguistic expression *per se*, cannot be judged true or false. Once again in his talk *On my Painting* – after some observations 'roughly' concerning good and evil and their unity in God – Beckmann declares: 'Therefore, almost without wishing it, I moved on from formal principles to transcendental ideas – an area which is definitely not 'my field' ... In my view, all essential aspects of art ... have always arisen out of the deepest feelings for the mystery of BEING.' By comparison, we find the following in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (6.44): 'Not *how* the world is, but *that* it is – that is the mystical.' Logic is transcendental and precedes the *how* (perhaps as aesthetics does in Beckmann's case).

This configuration still lacks what is possibly the connecting factor: the metaphysical subject as boundary of the world. On this point, here is Beckmann in his *Address for the Friends and Philosophical Faculty of Washington University, St Louis*, given in 1950: 'Important and ever again the most important: ruthless recognition and criticism of one's own ego.' What might be implied here perhaps becomes somewhat clearer with the help of one of Beckmann's paintings, one which occupies a key position in his life's work. It dates from 1918-9, in other words from the same period as Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. The picture is called *The Night*.

What we perceive in it are, to a certain extent, actual forms. It is a stark portrait of a complex process. In his afterword to *Die Realität der Träume in den Bildern* ('The Reality of Dreams in Pictures') Rudolf Pillep notes that the scene takes place '... in a "civilian" city district, in a mean,

convoluted attic room belonging to poor people, in which perpetrators and victims are penned in together'. Besides the powerful, and also cryptic, symbolic language of the picture – which I will not go into here – there are also elements which project questions out of the picture towards the viewer. The essential question is that of the light. As we know from a conversation with Reinhard Piper, the latter had already asked Beckmann in 1919 which direction the light was coming from, since the candles in the foreground would not be adequate for this purpose. Beckmann's answer was: 'You are right. But I imagine the whole scene illuminated by electric light, which is burning outside the scene.' Pillep comments on this as follows: 'Remarkable – we too, the picture's viewers, are outside the scene. Perhaps we must imagine that a door into the room or a curtain has been opened for the viewers, and in the light entering from outside the gruesome events suddenly reveal themselves.' The light source is therefore not 'on stage'. The lighting points to an observer outside the picture. This is the explanation in terms of painterly technique which I mentioned earlier, and an unmistakable reference to the subject which – as boundary of the world, not belonging to it – first allows good and evil to enter. But it is much more important to keep in mind Beckmann's claim to reveal the invisible through representational painting, or as he puts it, to disclose the 'magic of reality'.

In his afterword Pillep also speaks of Beckmann himself: 'The painter could be described as a "moralist" in a deeply human sense ... In their absoluteness, his pictures are moral entities.' *The Night* processes war experiences and makes a strong anti-war statement. According to Pillep it is concerned with the exposure of crimes of violence – murder, torture, rape and capture which, by

virtue of the fact that they are located in a civilian space, not only show how such everyday vicissitudes of war are perceived in themselves, but also put life and war on an equal footing. Pillep also notes that 'the captive's beseeching hand and the status of the dying man as witness reach out of the picture: out towards us, the viewers. This is all the more astounding since nothing else, not a single glance, is projected beyond the pictorial space.'

#### 4. Viewing my Night

It is not *in spite of* the two elements reaching out of the picture just mentioned, but *by means of* these, perhaps humble, clues on the part of the painter that we can recognise that the painting, like Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, acts indirectly. The viewer, for their own part, must arrive at insights by their own efforts, after they have 'thrown away' the individual, unreal, unwieldy representations of the picture, like Wittgenstein's ladder.

In the conversation with Reinhard Piper about *The Night* already mentioned, Beckmann also said: 'Everything must remain representational' and '... when viewing my *Night* you must forget the representational through the metaphysical'.

#### Literature

Wittgenstein, Ludwig (2003), *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp

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