

**DISCUSSION OF MAX BECKMANN'S EYES AND THE TEMPTATION
OF THE BREAST BY THOMAS BROD, M.D.**

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It constitutes a great challenge to attempt to engage in a piece of applied psychoanalysis involving the gigantic scope and variety of Beckmann's paintings. His drastic rendering of barbaric brutality in paintings like *The Night*, for example, both repulses and fascinates us. We viewers can't look at the event as tragic nor identify with the victims. It is also hard to look at these paintings without remembering the socio-political milieu Beckman was a part of. As one art historian puts it, "In our century, no artist has been more a part of its own times (Burke, 1984, p.53)". For all the displayed erudition, art historians' attempts to interpret the work leave one wanting. Even the mere, supposedly "objective" descriptions of the elements in a painting are loaded with the projections of the scholar and one begins to wonder if it is at all possible to separate the painting from what we put into it. For example, In one of the self portraits (1911), Beckmann is depicted standing and smiling at the viewer as he seems to hold some papers. This is interpreted by Burke (1984) as a link with nature of some of Rembrandt's self portraits and as a self-mocking stance.

Dr. Brod has alerted us to the absence of eye contact between Beckman's characters. One art historian states: "the lost gaze, which signals isolation within the environment, becomes a characteristic trait of the artist's self portraits...Beckmann seems to be looking at an undefinable goal which is inaccessible to us" (Schultz-Hoffman, 1984, p.20). Is this an "objective" description? Another art historian (Kuspit, 1988) goes further in his assessment. Referring to the *Family Picture* (1920) and *Before the Mascarade* (1922) Kuspit writes, "While Beckmann and the other figures are all too human -equally

depressed and self-absorbed, perhaps on the verge of profound introspection - it is Beckmann alone who has the aggressive, truculent will to unflinchingly look inward, the steadiness to endure what he will see in himself, however wounding it may be to his conventional self-conception and vanity...The self-absorption of the other figures exists in vain - signals both their naive self-preservative narcissism and their unconscious feeling of the futility of their lives". Later on Kuspit concludes, "both optimistic and pessimistic self-absorption lead nowhere. Each is simply a kind of creature of comfort, really a deadend, a sign that the figures have been stopped by life - an articulation of the deadended self (Kuspit, 1988, p68)". The more one reads on, the more one has the feeling that the scholar has taken off from Beckmann but is no longer talking about Beckman. He is rather using him as a basis for expressing his view about the ultimate sterility of the narcissistic personality.

This problem with objectivity is no less true of the psychoanalyst. Our analytic experience make us cautious as to our own personal projections into the work and we have to a great extent done away with the pathologizing of concepts such a repression and sublimation when it comes to creativity. However, we do something that is as misleading when we approach the work with our theoretical orientation and attempt a "fitting job", however compelling. As with art historians, we are also suspect of the temptation to act on our envy of the artist by our clever formulations (Rodman, 1988). The artistic work is not the living patient who responds to us and, through our countertransference reactions, forces us to examine our preconceptions before they run away with us. One could then ask the artist if he or she is still alive or has written about the work. What does Beckmann himself say? This presents another problem because, when asked, Beckmann was never able to account for the origins of his images. To make things worse, his diary entries are full of contradictions and one has the impression that he does more to comouflage his inner self than to reveal it. In addition, the work goes beyond the conscious intentions of the creators and, as we have seen, Beckmann left plenty room for the irrational in his work.

One could attempt to get away from the problem of the viewer's projections into the work

by looking at the formal aspects of the paintings and disregard the content but this is easier to do with abstract art where we can better examine how perceptual characteristics engage the emotions of the viewer. There are some elements which produce tension and some that lead to a resolution of tension. Experimental aesthetics has shown that the aesthetic response is linked to a special ratio between tension and relaxation, between what is new and what is familiar. In Beckmann's paintings this analysis is difficult: the content of the work is so compelling that the formal characteristics recede to the background, even though, we as viewers, respond to the combination of content and form, which are bound together as the two sides of the same coin. In a diary entry of Nov. 23, 1949 Beckmann writes, "Rested one day and already all kinds of nonsense boils up in me demanding a form - perhaps The Story of David - or something, we'll see (Heimberg, 1984, p129)".. Beckmann's feelings seem to demand a form, not an uncommon experience for artists. In this regard, it is useful to remind ourselves that the expressive power of art is not to be confused with the expression of the artist's own emotions or with the communication, conscious or unconscious of them to the observer (Rose, 1991). Beckmann's own impressions of a brutal battle end with the following, comment: "the small black mass was strange on the large, snow-covered square. The sad, angry voice echoed up along the buildings of the square to the huge, dark night sky, in which bright, long, narrow shreds of clouds passed with tremendous speed" (Schultz-Hoffman, 1984, p20). He does not seem dismayed over the brutality among humans but fascinated with sounds or contrasts of color and form, giving us a typically painterly description.

In other statements, however, Beckmann does not shy away from more personal revelations. He writes about a dread of his instinctual needs, with all its implications. He says, " The more strongly , deeply, and burningly moved I am by our existence, the more resolutely my mouth is closed; my will is all the colder to grasp this horrible quivering monster Vitality and lock it up in sharp lines and planes, clear as glass, to repress it, to strangle it " (quoted in ibid, page 28). The closed mouth is like those closed spaces in some of his canvases. Space and vitality are constricted or denied. One is reminded of Fairbairn's (1952) notion of the anti-libidinal ego, the ego that hates the enticing object as

well as the self that needs it, wants it. Beckmann's tight mouth is an expression of this anti-libidinal ego which protects him in all his vulnerabilities. In this sense, the tight mouth and the cigarette in his hand in some of the self-portraits may both be an expression of an omnipotent declaration "I have it. I don't need anything, anyone!" and thus, his outward self-assuredness and arrogance. In an often quoted diary entry of July 4, 1946 he writes, "Cold wrath reigns in my soul. Is one ever to be set loose from this eternal, hideous, vegetative physicality? Are all our acts ever to remain laughable inconsequentialities in relation to the boundless universe?...Nothing is left to us but protest - Boundless contempt for the lascivious bait with which we are repeatedly lured back to take life's bits in our mouths. When we are then half dead of thirst and want to quench it, the mocking laughter of the gods appears. -You lick salt, you poor megalomaniacal slave; sweatily and endlessly comical, you dance in the arena of endlessness to the thunderous applause of the divine spectators. The better you do it (take the bait, that is), the more comical you are. The most comical are the ascetics, who invent for themselves yet another sensuality in renunciation or self torment. -Saddest of all is the absolute profligate, because he drinks pitch instead of water. -Let us hold on to contempt" (italics mine). The anti-libidinal ego is at work here, mocking the temptation - which he calls a lascivious bait - and mocking the self via the mocking gods who laugh at the sight of his thirst. Here not even a closed mouth seems to help. He laughs at the ascetics' solution since they cannot escape the masochistic pleasures inherent in self-torment. He also laughs at those who surrender to the dissipation of the flesh: they drink tar instead of water. He writes that we are lured to take life bits in our mouth. One can't help thinking of the baby being lured by the mother's presence to take the nipple into his mouth, as though she stimulates a desire that he wants to squelch. His only solution is thus contempt. Contempt may represent a focus of Beckmann's defensive denial of his dependency of others, which supports his omnipotent stance (Klein, 1940).

The vulnerable Beckmann reveals himself in some of his early self-portraits. In an early one in drypoint (1901) he shows only his face, his mouth wide open to the viewer in an outcry, reminiscent of Munch's painting, *The Scream* (1895). The self portrait as a

medical orderly (1915) reveals him in an unstable pose and he looks at the viewer confused and terrified. In a masterful portrait drawing in 1917 he clutches his own throat. In this light it is easy to think that defiance and contempt are defensive solutions that permeate his work from 1920 onwards. As one art historian puts it, "It is not clear if the world is inherently "diseased", a place where it is impossible to feel comfortable, or the disturbance is in the self (Kuspit, 1988, p 73)". Defiance and contempt are expressed in grotesque caricature in his allegorical paintings.

In an attempt to study my own creative process through the ongoing work in one painting I was struck by the mobility and successive alternation of images and colors that suggested power and destruction and those that suggested helplessness. I was also struck by those images that indicated the masculine and feminine side of my nature. It looked as though the painting merely served as a screen to argue for and against these images. Opposite elements ended up standing side by side in the canvas, as though the purpose was not wish fulfillment or a need to reconcile opposites but merely to represent conflict, intrinsically irreconcilable. In Beckmann each painting represents conflict and may set the stage for subsequent integration by other thought processes such as induction and logic, a step he may not have been willing to take. The documentation of conflict in his work serves as a container for it, it does not resolve it.

As we have seen, the crowded spaces in Beckmann's paintings do provoke the viewer in many ways. The oppressive situation expresses a helplessness that transcends personal fate. At the same time it is possible to think that these crowded spaces represent Beckmann's internal world. The claustrophobic feeling may result from the unconscious fantasy of intruding inside mother's body and fusing with her and then feeling trapped (Rosenfeld (1965). These paintings suggest that there may have been a boundary problem between him and his mother resulting in a disturbed relationship with anyone he was dependent on. The absence of gaze in the double portraits with his wives suggest a "taking for granted" characteristic of an unconscious fusion with them. They were part of him and perhaps they functioned merely as self-objects. The state of fusion with his

objects may account for the sense of entanglement with others where he is alternatively attacking and being the victim of an attack. We are left wondering if the distinction between innocents and victims, Good and evil, is deliberately blurred on the canvas, implying that it is man's fate to be both. Most of the characters in Beckmann's paintings seem to endure this fate and seem deprived of psychic freedom. The absence of psychic space then finds a representation in pictorial space where the people involved are in close proximity but where there is no communication between them. In this light, the small cat reaching for Frida's breast may be an attempt at possessing and fusing with the mother's body as a way to escape from the pains of dependency and the loss of the union with her. In one of the entries in his diary he complains of not ever having had a carnal experience that was truly satisfying. A satisfying experience would have required that he be able to separate from his object. (Klein, 1940)

The actual madness in Beckmann's world and his own potential madness is most clearly reflected in his treatment of the relationship of men and women, who always appear to be at odds with one another. In *Temptation* the woman is shown either bound, viciously seductive, or bestial. Beckman mocks motherhood by showing a woman suckling a dog. In *Woman Bath* (1919) they are cruelly rendered, shown as grotesquely vulgar. The main point in *Adam and Eve* (1917) and *Man and a Woman* (1932) seems to be that the woman represents a threat to man's integrity. She seems to carry another point of view toward life that is absolutely alien to his own, which is premised in a radical individuality and defiance. This calls to mind Winnicott's (1971) views on the female element of both men and women that bases one's sense of self in a capacity for being as opposed to the masculine element of both men and women that has to do with doing. In Beckman's paintings women seem to exist without struggle. In the words of Kuspit, a self-psychologist art historian, Beckmann's women..."seem immune to narcissistic injury (Kuspit, 1988, p78)". She seems indifferent to the heroic, defiant mode of being. Her passivity is a better instrument of survival than Beckmann's active confrontation of the gods. Her being implies indifference to the uniqueness of his Promethean striving. Her fullsome presence implicitly undercuts and trivializes his own. Beckmann seems to

despise and envy woman's basic attitude, her ontological self-containment, which makes her so desirable. Thus, he represents her more as a victim than as erotically desirable and he devalues her generativity (remember her suckling a dog). His envy of the woman comes through clearly in his depiction of her: the more erotically desirable, the more he tends to mutilate her body, violating the reality of her being by violating her appearance. The woman who potentially frustrates him becomes a bad object that has to be annihilated. We see here again the workings of his anti-libidinal ego who attacks the object of desire as well as his desire.

After a year in the war as a medical orderly, Beckmann suffered a psychotic break of which there is practically no documentation except that by this time he was racked with nightmares and recurring terrors. He had been eager to be part of this grand event, to stare horror in the face and to document it, which he did, but may have been unable to keep his distance from the carnage. In *The Night* (1919) he may be attempting to distance himself from the violence and we may wonder if here he identifies with the dog in the left hand corner, that is attempting to leave the scene. But, in keeping with my disclaimers about projections by the viewer, you may wonder if it is not I who, as the dog, is trying to get away from that wretched scene.

With all the pathologizing of Beckmann, how can we account for the integration in his work? As Rembrandt, whom he greatly admired, his central concern seems to have been a representation of humanity with all its contradictions. For both artists there have been many unsuccessful attempts to assign a precise meaning to any portion of their work. As the scene becomes more allegorically distorted in Beckmann, the surface of the painting decompensates into crude painterliness. This would denote for some the loss of a firm grasp on the reality being depicted, which becomes more and more mad. Just as a defensive omnipotent structure can temporarily pull a person together, the glue that pulls Beckmann's paintings together seems to be his omnipotent defiance and contempt of man's passions and society's ills. According to Kuspit, "Consciously Beckmann is aware of social and self disintegration, unconsciously, he defies them, which at best reintegrates

the self, if not society, which remains monstrous, mad (1988, p80)". The tension between these disintegrations and the insistence upon integration and survival is resolved in an incorporation of the madness in the grotesque portrayal of self and others. Still another way to think of the glue is by remembering that Beckmann was not alone with the canvas. His wives Minna and especially Quappi must have provided him with the holding environment that would allow him to use the canvas as a container for his despair, loneliness and confusion, as well as for his defiance and contempt. We have another instance of a mad artist for whom imaginative achievement goes hand and hand with his use of primitive defenses. Beckmann wanted to experience life in all of its manifestations, including the grotesque and evil. As Thomas Mann wrote in one of his letters (1947), "A work of art, even if it is one of despair, can ultimately only be interpreted as an expression and a belief in life (Eikemeier, 1988, p127)".

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