A brief note on *The Dancer and the Body*

Dualism seems to have been part of his Döblin's nature. In an amusing early 'interview' *My Double*, he divides himself into 'Döblin the neurologist,' a harassed clinician who has no time to read books, and 'Döblin the writer' who positively fawns on his association with the neurologist with the same name. It is a humorous way of telling the reader that the *homo urbanus* who was beginning to become known for his left-leaning novels into the sordid reality of the big city, with all its temptations and dangers, is not necessarily the same man who works on the public wards in the morning. Even his novels exhibit a kind of dualism, shifting away from Europe to examine alien tracts of geography and history, only to return to Berlin as a standard theme. Part of Döblin's humanity come from the fact that he is a writer uneasy both with his role in society, and with the way that humans in general are treated in that same society. Although he called his working method 'Naturalismus,' the same term that Zola used to describe his positivistic world-view, he was much more sceptical than the previous generation had been that the application of science would solve all the dilemmas of human life. This scepticism would deepen as he aged.

The Dancer and the Body comes from the early period of Döblin's creative life, when he was most consciously avant-garde and even Futurist in his approach to writing fiction. It is a brief, matter-of-fact description of an exitus, in which a young girl on the verge of adulthood loses control over a body that she has honed to a high degree of expressiveness: she is a kind of virtuoso, of a highly technical kind. Döblin has chosen a theme that was a staple of literature at the end of the 19th century: the consumptive woman. In fact, his child-woman's illness is very sketchily described, although it appears to be a classic case of tuberculosis. Ella, whose artistry emerges solely from her will-power, seems to lack not just sensuousness — 'She managed to waft a chill over the most voluptuous dance' — but also fellow-feeling. Once hospitalised, she and her body embark on a monumental struggle before dissociating completely to run 'separate households.' Her moods fluctuate from childish helplessness, through fear and dread, to frank revulsion at the medical staff and other patients around her. In spite of the absolutely dispassionate ('clinical') narrative stance, which to some degree mirrors Ella's own distance from her fate, her plight and desperation are obvious. The 'dark master' asserts its prerogatives until Ella, psychiatrically unbalanced perhaps, orders needle and thread, and embroiders a cloth with the situation as she perceives it symbolically. But far from reconciling body and mind, it is her last attempt to restore the terms of the old power-relationship: she wants to dance 'a marvellously suave waltz with the one who had become her master.' And she is going to be the leading partner. Calling for one of the hapless medical staff, she kills herself in his presence with the scissors. The story ends on what could almost be taken as a model phrase from a manual of Expressionist writing techniques: 'A piercing shriek froze somewhere in the corner of the ward.'

There is a final dualistic irony in the fact that the ailing body described in this story is that of a dancer, for it was precisely in the first decade of the 1900s that dancing, as epitomised by Isadora Duncan and Nijinsky, became an image of liberation. Dance was a cult. Against the hammering repetitiveness of the machine stood the figure of the body as pure form: Duncan owed much of her fame to the fact that her body appeared to think for itself in what was called 'the fully plastic art of the human body,' liberating women from their stifling bondage to 19th-century clothes. Ella, however, is fated never to become a dancer or a sexual being (which would have been incompatible with her kind of dancing); and Döblin would have shocked his contemporary public by portraying her as refusing to be ennobled by her suffering. But in its suggestion that the body can be used as a vehicle for expression rather than an encumbrance, the story is entirely of its time.

Iain Bamforth

Further reading

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