

THE SHADOW OF MR. DOWN

JOSEPH A. MANN

Years ago, I worked at a school that lived in a shadow, the shadow of Mr. Down. Though he only worked there for a few years, his touch left the school permanently changed. Nary a week would pass without his name being spoken, sometimes in harsh tones and sometimes in hushed ones. Even students who did not know him knew him for years after he had left. And yet, his fame was a sick infamy, carrying with it a certain glee, like the way people talk about a vacation gone comically wrong.

Superficially, Mr. Down was Poe-like. Slightly younger and slimmer than Edgar Allan, Mr. Down had the same dark countenance, the same Romantic spirit, yet one updated for the post-modern age. To look into his eyes was to see the void staring back at you. If he deemed it true, then it was, for no higher power and no greater authority existed in his mind than his own. His gravity was such that light might actually have bent around him, or perhaps, it might not be able to escape his event horizon.

One day, I was walking down the hall past Mr. Down's classroom, when I heard what sounded like a rapturous disquisition on the subject of morality. I stopped to listen, as I had often heard of but never experienced the wonders of the oraculous Mr. Down. His tone caught me before his words. He was like a toolbox falling down a flight of stairs, shake-pause-slam, shake-pause-slam, over and over again. Still not aware of what he was actually saying, I heard a student say, with hesitant courage in response to Mr. Down, "I don't think that's true, because..." "True..." Mr. Down interrupted and continued in a *supito piano*, "what is truth?" like an unironic Pontius Pilate whispering to Christ himself.

I was compelled to look through the window at the drama of Mr. Down's words, I will not say at the music, for it was not at all harmonious, and at that moment, I saw him lean suddenly in the direction of the student, like an owl catching sight of potential prey. He looked the student directly in the eye provocatively, and the student looked away. The struggle of wills won, Mr. Down stood to an incredible height and turned to walk across the room. The crowd of acolytes erupted in a shower of snaps, thus signaling their assent to Mr. Down's rebuttal. I scanned their faces to see what emotion this had elicited, yet I saw no emotion on their faces.

In yet another burst of courage, the student to whom Mr. Down had leveled his devastating question returned to his interrogation: “the truth is what is, and some things are objectively wrong.” Like a cyclone, Mr. Down spun with such force that the papers on his desk were sent skyward. He closed the distance between them in less than a second with his crane-like stride and poked the student on the shoulder with the ½” dowel he carried about the room like a cane: “that, Mr. Smith, is easy to say from your position of privilege. Could you really tell a homeless parent with a child to feed that stealing is wrong?” Mr. Down smiled, again assuming his triumph, as he poked Mr. Smith two more times playfully, as if to say, “touche!” Again, like the sound of a buzzing hive, the snaps came from the majority of students in the room.

“That’s such an ignorant thing to say, Johnny,” sneered one student in the corner nearest to my position on the other side of the window. “Now, now, Ms. Croft,” said Mr. Down in a sickeningly gentle tone, “he is ignorant, but we are here to help the ignorant. We are here to bring him out of the darkness into the light.” At this, Mr. Down opened his arms as if to welcome all those who hold quaint notions into his loving embrace. Again, the snaps, like the sound of a roaring fire, came from the majority of emotionless figures in the room.

Having other business to attend to, I turned to leave. Just then, I heard the door to Mr. Down’s classroom open. I couldn’t help but turn back to see who was leaving the den of Mr. Down. It was Johnny Smith, his head down and body hunched. As he noticed me, he raised his head, and our eyes met awkwardly. We both froze in place for a few second: he like a child who has been caught in sin and I like someone caught eavesdropping.

“Interesting class,” I said hesitantly. “Yeah...” said Johnny as his eyes turned downward. “Is it always like that?” I said with more confidence. “Yes...” said Johnny as his eyes returned to mine. I could see he was on the verge of tears. “Your peers seem to love it,” I said with an upbeat tone. “They know what’s expected of them to get what they want,” said Johnny as the shake-pause-slam, shake-pause-slam sound of Mr. Down’s oration came bleeding through the door behind him, followed by another shower of snaps. “What do they want?” I had a good idea what it was, but I wanted to hear his interpretation. I started walking toward the bathroom and motioned Johnny to follow, not wanting him to be out of the room too long.

“They want a good grade,” Johnny said a little louder as we moved away from the classroom. “Don’t you want a good grade too?” I asked with more curiosity than I’d mustered behind any question in a long time. He paused for

at least five steps as we continued down the hallway toward the bathroom. “Sure,” he paused again, as if he wasn’t sure about sharing the next part. “you can tell me the truth, I won’t hold it against you,” I said trying my best to coax it out of him. His posture straightened up at the word “truth,” and he stopped abruptly. I stopped one step after and turned to look at him face to face.

“I do want a good grade, but I want...I want to look for the truth instead of the answer the teacher wants.” He lit up with passion as he said these words. “I understand,” I said as I nodded sympathetically, “you want to be challenged with logic and evidence instead of pathos and ethos.” He smiled at my understanding but only for a moment before returning to reality. I continued with a knowing tone: “you want to come out of the cave, but it’s hard to see the light while in the shadow of Mr. Down.” After a powerful pause, we went our separate ways, as nothing more could be said or done.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joseph Arthur Mann, Ph.D. is an independent scholar and teacher of music and humane letters for Great Hearts America, a liberal arts charter school network. His research focuses on music as ethical instruction in writings and music collections by Thomas Morley and John Dowland, the political power of praising music in early modern England, and the use of music as political propaganda, which he discusses in his monograph, *Printed Musical Propaganda in Early Modern England*, available through a trans-Atlantic partnership with Clemson, Liverpool, and Oxford University Presses. His work has also appeared in *Musica Disciplina*, *The Musical Times*, and *Elizabethan and Jacobean Praises of Music*.