# *Sekundiere der Welt*

## Remarks on *Modernism and Mimesis*

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»Im Kampf zwischen Dir und der Welt sekundiere der Welt.« *In the struggle between yourself and the world, second the world*. Franz Kafka's aphorism could have been the epigraph of Stephen D. Dowden's *Modernism and Mimesis*. The book is an extended unfolding of the Kafkan imperative to »second,« or give priority to, the world – not the virtual world, but the real and true world – when we look for the meaning of modernist art. I associate the notion of seconding, as in the phrase »I second the motion,« with faculty meetings. But Kafka's »sekundieren« evokes the duels fought in turn-of-the-century Europe, where life and honor were at stake.

What does such seconding entail? Are we to set aside the first principles of modernism as we know it – as the overcoming of realism and naturalism; the inward turn; »Nervenkunst«; *l'art pour l'art;* he temple of dream; and above all, the creation of art in the service of the psyche, the unconscious, the inner life? Not exactly. But the emphasis shifts, with the new stress placed on how the much-acclaimed modern subject inhabits the world, and at the same time shapes the world, as it is lived in the here and now, in space and in time.

This view of modernism as shaping and teaching us about the world hinges on a distinction between mimesis and representation. In both cases, form, and form-giving, are the priorities. But mimesis is closer to mimicry and child's play. It is the quality of art that sheds light on an elusive slice of life through language that is at once ordinary and enigmatic. Art may zoom-in, or it may provide a wide-angle illumination of an entire world. The inner life is a constant theme, and the artistic challenge is to give it external form in language, color, image, and shape.

I think of the first paragraph of »Die Verwandlung.« The description of Gregor's new body is too precise and detailed to be read allegorically, but at the same time, too bizarre and enigmatic to be read realistically. Similarly, in *Der Prozess*, the trial is clearly absurd and irrational, but it is at the same time a »real« trial, with an arrest, guards, coercion, attorneys, and a courtroom. Dowden's explanation is the one I have been waiting for. The trial is Joseph K.'s conscience, his guilt and shame, made visible; it has nothing to do with representation. A humorous scenario within the novel captures the difference. Joseph K. goes to the court painter to »have his por-

trait painted.« The artist provides only word-portraits: three scenarios, all of which lead to the same grim outcome. Joseph's takeaway is three landscape paintings which the artist hastily presses into his hands. The artist insists they are similar, but Joseph K., in a fleeting moment of self-knowledge, sees them as identical.

I have always loved modernism for its inexhaustible spirit of experimentation, for creatively distorting so many traditions and received forms, and for mocking my expectations, time and again. Each poem, each painting, each composition, is stranger than the next, and no single work can prepare me for the next one; that's the beauty of it. The student of modernism is like K., as Dowden writes, who »finds himself in a new world in which the rules are all unknown to him« (186). What unifies these patently different works other than their innovative and iconoclastic character? Unity can be seen if one pares things down to their essential elements; »the elemental is-ness of things« »only what is shines forth, because all excess has been trimmed away« (190). I have always felt that modernism's apotheosis is found in its most simple, spare instances: a Bauhaus structure, an Expressionist painting, the psalms of Trakl and Lasker-Schüler; and the white space framing the pages of Buber and Rosenzweig's *Verdeutschung*. Mimesis names the logic of that simplicity.

The insights of Dowden's book go beyond literary history and aesthetic theory. A key text here is Kafka's parable »Der Kreisel,« which stages a contest between a philosopher and a group of children over the right way to experience a spinning top. The philosopher, who wants to understand the totality of life, thinks that grabbing hold of the spinning top and examining it would be an »economical« approach. But his efforts lead to nausea. The children simply play the game, as children do.

> In order truly to understand, though, [the philosopher] would have to give up detached cerebration from outside the sphere of observation – a subjective standpoint that pretends to objectivity – and join in the game as a participant. He would not necessarily have to spin tops with little boys but simply engage in the spirit that a spectator at a tennis match or baseball game might. He must allow the game to take him.
> While involved in play, the subjective self dissolves into the spirit of the game. […] In this way, in being beside one's self, art unfolds not as an object (as stupid chunk of wood) but as an event: the transitory, the contingent, the fugitive – the other half of life, as Baudelaire put it. (…) In Kafka's parable the children playing at spinning a top together embody the experience of art as festive. It is an enchanted space not limited to art but that also includes art: reading a novel, joining a Passover seder, watching a football game, looking at a painting, attending a musical performance, a dance, a funeral. (Dowden 81f.)

Dowden's study returns again and again to these ideas and motifs in connection with weighty novels by Thomas Mann, poems by Celan and Hölderlin, Beckettian minimalism, the Tower of Babel, music by Mahler and Schoenberg, the philoso-

phy of Gadamer and Heidegger, a nude by Schiele and Franz Marc's glorious blue horses. Works are introduced and revisited in new juxtapositions; and readers are addressed as interlocutors in a conversation. In effect, the spinning top seems to have given Dowden a method, and the philosopher's »detached cerebration« is thankfully avoided. By writing in this way, Dowden further advances his case that modernist art creates occasions for festive ritual, empathy, and ethical engagement.