Una Conversazione

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Sometimes the Italian word *conversazione* is used in English to denote a meeting in which art and literature are being discussed. »Response« is probably the more common heading for a piece such as this one, but the word has a defensive edge, an implied rebuttal. I do not intend to rebut anything. Having read the illuminating, intellectually generous, sometimes challenging commentaries in this forum, I feel not defensive but privileged to be able to converse with people whose writings I have admired long before this occasion. I would like to thank them for sharing their insights and thoughts by engaging with them in a conversation about mimesis and modernism. And I would also like to thank the editors of *andererseits*, in particular the organizer of this forum, William Collins Donahue, whose idea it was to hold this conversazione in the first place.

After his crisp summary of my claims about modernism, Ritchie Robertson registers some doubts. It seems odd that a novel as important as *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, he suggests, does not find a place in my argument. It certainly is an important book, but it would not have helped clarify my contentions. It is absent for the same reason that Broch's novels are absent. As Robertson notes, Broch's role in my rethinking of modernism is that of a theoretician. His own novels did not live up to his aspirations for a new kind of fiction that he himself envisioned. His most radical attempt, *Der Tod des Vergil*, admirable as it is, is also almost unreadably tedious. I reluctantly concede that Broch can be dull. In that sense *Vergil* fails as a novel. Still, dull or not, I'd argue that it is a very great failure – much as *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* is both a failure as a novel (who apart from professors of German literature ever reads it?) yet is a great work of fiction in a »late style« that rewards close study. So Robertson is right: Broch's fiction does not fully embody the transformation in art that I am seeking to identify. His progressive novels (like those of Joyce, Woolf, Proust, and Döblin) lack the points of orientation that I propose might help redefine and clarify the metamorphosis in art that took place in the twentieth century.

The place of language is one such point of orientation. I draw a line between Joyce and Kafka. Broch and Döblin would both fall on the Joycean side of the division. Like Joyce, they have one foot planted in nineteenth-century mimesis. It is interesting to note, too, that Broch began as an admirer and imitator of Joyce's *Ulysses* but later

pitted Joyce against Kafka, preferring Kafka. Yet Broch's own fiction lacks the strange naïveté of Kafka's writing: Broch kept composing fictionalized allegories of his own theories while Kafka was indifferent to such theorizing. He wrote in a direct way untrammeled by the urge to make discursive statements. He was like an intuitive chess player who does not even see bad moves. That kind of simplicity was beyond Broch's reach.

Robertson also kindly worries that I may have shot myself in the foot by using the term »mimesis« in an unconventional way. No doubt he is right, but I took on that burden knowingly. In the study of literature, the term is generally associated with Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, a book that I read as an undergraduate. It has lastingly shaped my understanding of literature and criticism over these many years. What troubled me about it, though, was that after the first chapter that divides the narrative mode of the *Odyssey* from the biblical Binding of Isaac – both of them forms of mimesis but radically different from one another – Auerbach drops the biblical alternative. Homeric mimesis is, so to speak, positive whereas biblical mimesis is »fraught with background,« as Trask translates Auerbach's memorable phrase, meaning that its mimesis proceeds by way of omissions and obscurities. It worried me that Auerbach, as he continued his book, pursued only the positive, Homeric »representation of reality,« leaving the biblical, non-representational counter-tradition aside. It always seemed to me that both sides of the coin are properly spoken of in terms of mimesis. My division between Joyce and Kafka coincides with and seeks to advance Auerbach's division between Homer and the Bible in »The Scar of Odysseus.« Homer and Joyce tell us everything there is to tell. But Kafka's fiction is powerfully fraught with something we sense but that is very hard to pin down in discursive prose. I am in no sense writing against Auerbach. Rather, I am trying to follow his lead.

I say that Robertson's critique of my terminology is »kindly« because he also suggests I may be »onto something« (the allusion to Walker Percy delights me, as Percy is an unspoken presence in much of my thinking and writing). Robertson's comments sharpen my own understanding of what I was getting at. The one-sidedness of a positive, »realist« aspect to narrative representation is not conclusive proof for or against anything. Great fiction can be written in a representational mode (let's say *Pride and Prejudice*) or it can be written in a largely non-representational mode (let's say *Ein Landarzt*). Representation is usually present to one degree or another. Robertson points out that my emphasis is actually on the cognitive force of pleasure and play. I do not want to leave the impression that I prefer to Kafka to Jane Austen: they are both very great writers. Modernism's exploration of the expressive possibilities of nonrepresentational mimesis does not undermine Jane Austen in the least, but it does redirect our attention toward the unspoken, which is also at work in classically representational works.

William Collins Donahue embraces my redefinition of mimesis, but he too wonders if the way I distinguish between realism and modernism needs a more differentiated approach. In addition, he argues that Romanticism gets shortchanged. If I had the benefit of these essays when I was writing the book (in 2016) there are a number of such improvements I could make. So I am especially grateful to be able to address some of these matters here.

Describing my argument that nineteenth-century realism »is in cahoots with objectifying science« (as he memorably phrases it), is plainly true. However, if I were to have a do-over, I'd take pains to not imply that romanticism and realism, as opposed to modernism, are second-class ways of knowing. They have limitations that the modernists recognized, but that does not reduce their intrinsic value. My point is that the modernists wanted to go places that neither realism nor romanticism could take them. They sought to make discoveries that earlier art passed over. Still, all three have something crucial in common. What makes realist art, for example, great (Flaubert or whomever you'd care to name) is that the element of play remains central. My aim was and is not to dismiss representation but to review and revise its position in our greater understanding of literature, painting, and music. Realism is not the only game in town. The same goes for romanticism and its characteristic emphasis on subjectivity (still with us in the »hegemonic constructivism« that Donohue mentions). Certain figures of the romantic era, for example Hölderlin, wanted to rethink and undo the overemphasis on subjectivity. Another example would be Keats, when he discusses Shakespeare's »negative capability« vis-à-vis Coleridge's inability to escape his own subjectivity. At some point, modernism will seem in need of revision – though I think that paradigm shift has not happened yet. So-called postmodernism, now little more than an embarrassing hangover for its exponents, was really only the mannered exaggeration of certain features of modernism. We remain caught up in the modernist framework.

As Donahue points out, what I hoped to get across in this book is that modernism – in its extremity and *because* of its extremity – reveals a lot about the nature of all art, whether realist, romantic, classical or any other. Nietzsche argued that tragic drama emerged from song and dance. That means that nonrepresentational elements are more fundamental than story is. Story is a part of a greater whole. Literary criticism is very good at analyzing what literature is about, the story, but we still need a fuller grasp of what it *is* (as Beckett claimed), what the whole of it does to and for us, how that happens and why it is important.

If I am onto something, it is that the play and pleasure we get from making music and dancing is at bottom not so different than the pleasure we get from reading novels. We overintellectualize narrative, or at least intellectualize it in a one-sided way. Story, character, ideology, social critique and the like are easier to talk about. But there is more. Nabokov used to urge his students to read Shakespeare not with the brain but with the spine. All art addresses the real and the true in one way or an-

other. Modernism created something of a fuss over getting truth right, even if only to conclude that it is ineffable. That's why it remains for us to think through and understand the cognitive and ethical force of sensuous pleasure as experienced in music, dance, architecture, fiction, and poetry: »a modernist ethic of respect for alterity and a refusal of objectification,« as Donahue puts it. This is where the cognitive and the ethical coincide.

In a related, bracing observation, Donahue also thinks I ought to own up to my mysticism. He is right, and I will do so here. Similarly, Robertson senses the presence of *Wittgenstein's Vienna* in the background of my argument. In that book, Toulmin and Janik demonstrate the way in which Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* was a matter of specifying the limits of rationality and language in order to stake out a respectable space for *the mystical* – by which I understand the unique facets of living experience (especially what is unique or momentary) that cannot be caught and held fast in the nets of language or logic. They slip through its mesh. Like Auerbach's *Mimesis*, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* is a book I read as an undergraduate. Both works lastingly electrified my imagination. *Modernism and Mimesis* is my way of thinking through these two books that arrested my thinking early on. Sontag's *Against Interpretation* belongs alongside both of these books as foundational to my line of inquiry, and so does Pound's *How to Read*. I have not stopped pondering and trying to extend each of these four works into the present by way of agreement and disagreement. *Modernism and Mimesis* is the result.

But what can art do that discursive reason and language cannot? Abigail Gillman puts her finger on the nub of the matter. Kafka's fable about the philosopher and the top contains the entire book in a nutshell. What is the relation between art and criticism? Is art to be regarded as the object of study? What is the role of »theory« in the understanding of art? Hölderlin offers a clue: »Es giebt zwar einen Hospital,« he wrote to Neuffer on November 12, 1798, »wohin sich jeder auf meine Art verunglükte Poët mit Ehren flüchten kann – die Philosophie.« Plainly Hölderlin was no enemy of philosophy or theory, and neither should we be. But he understood that poetry can take us places that discursive, theoretical, philosophical concepts cannot. They are not two paths to the same goal. Poetry goes further than philosophy can. This is true not only for the composer of poetry but for those of us who listen to it. So, as Gillman's observations suggest, if Kafka says we should *second* the world, then the philosopher in his anecdote needs to figure out a way to »second« the play of the game rather than arrest its flow and analytically break it down into its constituent parts. The game is much more than the sum of those parts, just as any building is more than its cornerstone. Our task as critics is to be philosophically responsive insofar as theory sharpens, heightens, and enhances the sense of play, pleasure, and joy. Even the thematically darkest art is joyous, insofar as it *is* art, regardless of its subject-matter. But theory can also blunt or even block understanding when it becomes an asylum from the risks that attend autonomous spontaneity.

Much as Gillman focuses on the place of Kafka in my revised understanding of modernism, Tim Lörke zeroes in on my reading of Thomas Mann's darkest novel. My understanding of *Doktor Faustus*, he suggests, is insufficiently attuned to the novelist's politics. »Moderne Literatur,« writes Lörke, »erfüllt für Mann eine politische Funktion, sie ist eine Stimme im Konzert der Meinungsbildung. Der Roman wird für ihn zum Ort gesellschaftlicher Selbstverständigung.« Mann was willing to put his fiction in the service of politics and »Meinungsbildung« to a certain extent. His historical circumstances demanded it. But I doubt that any art can be reduced to its political instrumentalization.

Mann's greatness as a writer cannot reasonably be predicated on his wobbly political stances. If *Doktor Faustus* is meant to offer Germans a space for social *Selbstverständigung*, you'd expect him to find a place in it for the Holocaust. Yet there is none. Lörke suggests that the absence of the Shoah in *Doktor Faustus* can be put down to the obtuseness of its narrator, Serenus Zeitblom, and not to Thomas Mann himself. Presumably the same could be said of the various anti-Semitic tropes scattered throughout the book. I would argue that this is instead a case of Thomas Mann's own political limitations and inner contradictions. This is the same Thomas Mann who beginning in 1940 was making BBC radio broadcasts into Germany, informing his fellow Germans of what its leaders were really doing. He was composing *Doktor Faustus* at the same time, beginning in 1942. The texts of these broadcasts reveal his detailed knowledge of Nazi crimes against the Jews: deportations, starvation, gassings, the Warsaw ghetto. Yet in *Doktor Faustus*, this crucial piece of Nazi Germany finds no place. If the political, opinion-shaping function of this novel, widely supposed to be Mann's reckoning with Nazism, is key to its modernism or the novel's greatness, then we must regard the book as an ethical and political failure that ought not be attributed to Zeitblom alone.

To be direct about Mann's political virtues and shortcomings is necessary. He had many of each. In the German world, successful novelists are ineluctably thrust into the role of political sage, and Mann – though an important such figure because of his prestige – was not successful or compelling as a political thinker. However, *Doktor Faustus* does not stand or fall on the keenness of his or its political judgment any more than an agreeable political message is the key to Kafka or Beckett or Proust or Joyce. The novel's brilliance, and its ethical power, are a function not of political insight but of artistic intuition, by which might be understood Mann's uncanny power to make life vivid and bright by storytelling – even in a tale as dark as this one.

I agree with Tim Lörke that Leverkühn disdains German bourgeois tradition of art, but I disagree that Leverkühn's music embodies a democratic political program. Instead, the idea that music can or should embody a political program is itself part of the German bourgeois tradition that Leverkühn overturns. A literature »auf du and du« is not a propaganda machine. If, as Hölderlin put it, philosophy is an honorable sanctuary for the failed poet, then politics and social criticism are likewise an

honorable refuge for the critic – but a refuge all the same. The vital force of art lies elsewhere. Even Socrates eventually came to the conclusion that he had sold poetry short. He began composing in his prison cell shortly before his execution.

Lörke and I come closer on what he calls Thomas Mann's romanticism: »›the true,‹ ›the real‹: Das sind Kategorien, die es für Thomas Mann nicht gibt – oder besser: die sich menschlich nicht gestalten und erkennen lassen.« Exactly so, except the modernists promise and deliver epiphanies into evanescent truths and realities, not the fixed, officially sanctioned ones that we usually ask our novelists to endorse (Gustav von Aschenbach, for example, as an intellectual model for schoolboys). This finding points in the direction of *Die Bekenntnisse des Hochstaplers Felix Krull*. That language and fiction can never capture truth has been my claim throughout, even if the underlying urge toward art is always to come as close to the true as possible. This is why Mann's last word on art, the comic novel *Felix Krull*, ought to be taken as seriously as the tragic novel *Doktor Faustus*.

In Krull, art is a con game that cannot be won. Krull was to have ended up in jail for his fictions much as Leverkühn is ultimately taken by paralysis, or as Aschenbach (a modernized stand-in for the aged, love-smitten Goethe) dies slumped over in a deck chair on a littered beach while in hopeless pursuit of the true and the beautiful rather than continuing to pose as Wilhelmine Germany's official great writer. In Mann's world things do not turn out well for genuine artists. However, the playing of the game while it lasts can deepen, intensify, and enrich life without saying that it has to be this or that way. That refusal is both a truth claim and an ethical claim that fiction makes. The best tales – from *Gilgamesh* and the *Iliad* to Rabelais and Cervantes then onward – are wildly extravagant, subversive, usually unwholesome stories by which we inquire into and perhaps discover in what way one might best relate to the more primordial truth of our lives, *i.e.* the bitterness of suffering (our own and that of others, including animals), which is to say: how we might relate to the condition of our full creatureliness (in particular our mortality) – which may or may not include happiness and conventionally good behavior or the political arrangements this or that group thinks advisable.

»Wonderment« would be a good word to describe the effect of reading Thomas Mann's extraordinary prose. It would be a likely example of what Rishona Zimring calls »the power of modernist artworks to captivate their readers, viewers, and listeners.« Enchantment, wonderment, captivation are possible effects of both art and nature. Her own entrancing prose is not so much a comment on as it is an imaginatively rich counterpoint to my reflections: attending closely to what I wrote, and then moving beyond. She complements, reconsiders, and expands on my views.

In particular, she calls attention to what Max Weber says in »Science as Vocation« about »the intimate« in art. Monumental art is done for, he thought, which might make us think of the belatedness of Joyce or Mann. Zimring shrewdly likens Mann's monumental *Magic Mountain* to the commodified romance of Mount Everest. The

tourist-trekkers of our own time, embodiments of subjectivist romanticism, have littered its once-austere cols with the stuff they carry up with them on an adventure of conquest that is sentimental in Schiller's sense. Romanticization, Reification, & Commodification might be a good name for an Everest outfitting company. Or maybe a literature department.

Even under modern circumstances, according to Weber, there yet remains in our more intimate art something that pulsates, something akin to ancient *pneuma*, something we can still feel thrumming in prehistoric cave art (wisely protected from self-absorbed romantics). If Weber's vocation lecture casts *enchantment* into outer darkness, Zimring points out that the great sociologist of religion is nevertheless allowing *pneuma*, its soulmate, in through the back door of intimate art. I am reminded of Eden's back door, foretold in Kleist's piece on the marionette theater.

Zimring's insight strikes me as valuable. She offers by way of example »the *pianissimo* artifact of a miniature story like Woolf's snail tale ›Kew Gardens,‹ meticulously typeset by hand and decorated with woodcut illustrations by Vanessa Bell.« I see this as a variation on Baudelaire's injunction to attend more to the ephemeral and less to the eternal (another name for the monumental). Sometimes critics can't keep from sentimentalizing, *i.e.*, reifying the intimate and thus turning it into the monumental, but I still think Zimring is exactly right. It is an interesting problem: how might criticism simultaneously admire, celebrate, and understand a work, yet at the same time shield it from litter?

Zimring's example will also do nicely as a specimen of what Leverkühn had in mind when proposing a literature »auf du und du.« A deeply conflicted novel by a deeply conflicted novelist, *Doktor Faustus* is a monumental work that prophesies the advent, or at least the possibility, of a more intimate, more humane, less romantic kind of art. Zimring's discussion of Nan Shepherd's *Living Mountain* suggests how non-invasive criticism might be carried out, »writing, which does not so much climb a mountain as it does fold into it.« Or, as we might say with Gillman, writing that *seconds* the work in a critically differentiated way rather than turning it into a stone monument. We do not yet understand how to let art be.

In a felicitous turn of phrase, James McFarland speaks of my »congress with literature.« It suggests that we should approach literature as a lover rather than detached scientist. The idea of literature or art in general being a sensuous pleasure to which we are responsible remains a largely unexplored thought. It collapses all too easily into mere aestheticism, which is only another reification and »use« of literature. A lover does not use the beloved.

If the sensuous dimension of art has cognitive and ethical force, how might the amorist best come to grips with it? The massive turn to »theory« that began in the 1970s and has since then come to dominate the academic study of literature arose as a flight from subjective judgment. Theory promised »rigor,« as we liked to say, meaning an impartial structure of argumentation that liberates us from mere per-

sonal prejudice. If philosophy was a refuge for Hölderlin as a poet, »theory« has been a refuge for contemporary professors of poetry in flight from their own direct experience of art. Tough-minded »theory« will likely dismiss the amorist as mere amateur.

I put the word »theory« in quotation marks because most of what passes for theory is actually only doctrine. Consider how theory is usually taught in a course for graduate students. Each week a new theory: this week deconstruction, next week New Historicism, then Postcolonialism, and so forth. At the end of the trek, students are typically expected to choose one theory or another and »apply« its method or doctrine to this or that work. Such a procedure implies that the task of the professional academic is to pick a congenial »theory« and milk it. Usually the doctrine will foreclose on the findings in advance, because the findings are always already built into the doctrine. Paul Feyerabend has called attention to the vicious circularity of this *Methodenzwang*. A pre-established conceptual framework is a bed of Procrustes that lops off whatever doesn't fit the program, *i.e.* the unique, the ephemeral, the particular.

Gadamer's thought is attractive for a variety of reasons, but one of the most important is his resistance to method and his repeated insistence that we must learn to »listen« to what poetry has to say. It is hard to know how to do that. There is no method for it. Still, it is wise counsel insofar as it means, at the very least, entering the hermeneutic circle on the side of art and not on the side of doctrine. Not surprisingly, Gadamer was a close student of Socratic thought. It is probably worth bearing in mind that Socrates, in the *Phaedrus* (245a–245b), singles out possession by the Muses for comment. The Muses are seductive Nymphs trained by Apollo in the arts. Possession by them overlaps with possession by Eros. According to Socrates, each is a divine gift and cause of our greatest goods (266b). Both eros and art are seductions that may lead to a beneficial madness, even if both can also lead to grief. Like love, poetry and criticism are a risk worth taking. Too often, theory is just an insurance policy against risk, a banister to hold onto.

James McFarland's thoughts on Arendt's Socrates put him on the same page as Gadamer. Socrates, an exponent of theoretical thinking as *conversazione*, was not afraid to say »I.« It got him killed, which may be why Plato founded the Academy. Philosophizing in agora had become too dangerous. Socrates' thinking proceeded by way of question and answer. He *listened* carefully to his interlocutor and then thought for himself and said what he thought. »Hannah Arendt points to the Socratic *dokei moi*, the ›it seems to me‹ that is implicit, if rarely acknowledged, in all of our philosophical judgments,« notes McFarland. Theory is often used as an excuse to avoid thinking. Mastering a theory and then joining a school of thought is like joining a club. You can let the doctrine do your thinking for you and follow the paint-by-numbers grid it lays out. Your fellow club members will congratulate you. This is why some of our greatest critics have been unclubbable essayists – Benjamin

for example, or Sontag or Gass. Adorno championed the essay as form because the essay follows no doctrine. It thrives on the risky *dokei moi*.

To be clear: I am not »against theory.« I am for it. It's just that in the professionalized, career-pressured world of academic writing and teaching there is too much doctrine and not enough theory, not enough actual thinking.

Uncannily, McFarland is also onto how *Modernism and Mimesis* got written: »it is very much a book by someone who has read and discussed great art with students.« Its genesis was not the usual procedure of positioning one's views over against up-to-the-minute secondary literature. Instead, this book did stem, as McFarland correctly guesses, directly from my conversations with students. Since the mid-1990s I have been teaching an annual undergraduate seminar called »European Modernism.« What I've grasped about the modernists has often come from the *conversazioni* that occur in that seminar. It is the fruit of listening to and talking with the undergraduates, then thinking through their responses to Kafka and Woolf, Schoenberg and Stravinsky, Artaud and Beckett, Matisse and Beuys and so on. In a certain sense I – a journal-reading, theory-saturated professor of literature who came of age in thrall to the hermeneutics of suspicion – am over-informed. The welter of competing theories and doctrines can have a paralyzing effect. The barely mediated directness and spontaneity of undergraduate responses to such works have exerted a salutary, grounding influence on my reflections. The aim was to write a book that would appeal to them – or at least I had them in mind while I was writing. Too bad the book is so outlandishly expensive.

A major problem with such a project is that so much must fall by the wayside. In no case is my conscience worse on this count than it is about the exclusion of Rilke from consideration (though Céline would be a close second). The problem was not lack of space. The problem was that I could not see clearly how Rilke might relate to the portrait of modernism I was painting. I am grateful to poet-critic-philosopher Jennifer Gosetti-Ferencei for showing a way in. She notes the fundamentally modernist impulse of Malte's »learning to see« through art as linked to Rilke's understanding of Cezanne: while Rilke »returned again and again to a retrospective of Cezanne, Malte sees Paris through encounters with the paintings of Manet and Impressionism and the poetry of Baudelaire.« Modernism shows that and how we can break free of our entrenched cognitive and aesthetic prejudices and see things afresh. It may not change the world itself (art does not alter the misery and suffering on display in modern Paris) but it can change how we inhabit the world and so redeem it: »In Rilke's late cycle *Sonnets to Orpheus*, poetic song is to achieve nothing less than a metamorphosis of the fallen world of modernity.«

Gosetti-Ferencei's piece sparkles with illuminating and challenging nuggets of thought. It is hard to select from among them. One that I want to call special attention to is her point about art (and science) that »the truth of the flux eludes any grasp from within the flux.« We will never be able to nail down a final truth in art or sci-

ence because the world keeps changing and we are in that change too. She returns to the point later: »by revealing reality we also augment it, which poses the difficulty of achieving any true, at least any exclusively true, rendering …« Then by way of Wallace Stevens she concisely shows how world and poetry interpenetrate one another. They oscillate and keep swapping places.

It is a compelling viewpoint that I'll try to reframe in terms of mimesis in philosophy and poetry as I understand it. In Plato's philosophy, mimesis means the production of copies that mimic a truer reality that is unchanging: fixed, perfect, and beyond our finite here and now. Thus the finite, mortal, imperfect world we live and love in is just a disposable rendering of what's really real in the higher, abstracted world. Plato's philosophy devalues the here and now (as Nietzsche never tired of pointing out). Homer's poetry, by contrast, celebrates the finite here and now. To name only the most obvious examples: Achilles and Helen are one of a kind. They are not copies of anything. They are imperfect originals and, like the rest of us, they too have to die. In Homer, the really real cannot last. Evidently that thought was intolerable for Plato. He invented a never-never land of conceptual purity where it was not so. Homer accepted that imperfection and flux (and love and death) are the truth of the world. His poetry conveys the truth of unfixity that Plato's philosophy refuses. That's why Plato excludes poets from his republic. He says the poets lie too much, but maybe the real problem was that they tell a truth he could not accept. Hegel's view of art and artists (from within the hospital of philosophy) is not much different from Plato's.

It may follow, then, that mimesis in poetry is above all a matter of flux and transformation rather than the static »representation of reality.« Certainly Baudelaire and the modernists thought transformations to be the underlying truth of the world. In a presentation of 1976, known as the »Munich Lecture,« Elias Canetti said that novelists should be understood as »Hüter der Verwandlungen.« He meant, as it seems to me, that the modern world is always in danger of a conformist hardening, its living flow getting stuck fast in the concrete of past truths (and doctrines) that no longer correspond to how things are now. Poets and novelists, painters and composers, artists of all sorts – critics and scientists too – are necessarily caught up in the flux they portray. Their task is not to petrify, Medusa-like, a given feature in the granite of philosophical concept and call it *the* truth, but to catch hold of the transformation and ride it. Mimesis is not copying, it is metamorphosis, transforming one thing into another.

When Gregor Samsa turns into an insect, Kafka is not writing an allegory of a social or political concepts. Instead, he is attending to the truth of transformation, the truth of mimesis. We are captivated, enchanted, horrified by the change that has taken place. Has Gregor been saved from his awful family, or has he been revealed as the parasite he really was all along? Or is it we, as Stevens might suggest, who have been relieved of the pressure of our current lives by witnessing the miraculous

transformation that occurs in Kafka's story, that *is* Kafka's story? I like the last option most. It is ecstatic: Gregor has been taken out of himself, and the story takes us out of ourselves. Mimesis takes you out of yourself and lets you see things from an alien perspective. I take the experience to be what Gosetti-Ferencei has called the »ecstatic quotidian.« As lovers of literature, critics should be the impassioned, ecstatic keepers of such metamorphoses rather than the abstemious gatekeepers of specialized academic doctrines.

One final point. »If for Baudelaire the eternal can be distilled from the ephemeral,« writes Gosetti-Ferencei, »for Rilke the ephemeral must be salvaged from irretrievable loss.« Salvaged? She makes me think of his poem »Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes« (the odd punctuation is Rilke's – the god is infinite). Orpheus fails to save his beloved, but the poem still salvages something: the impermanence and sweetness of both love and life. To salvage is much different than to save or redeem. It is more modest. It's what happens to wrecked cars. Even so, we still have to wonder: how can *anything* be salvaged from »irretrievable loss«? Is this not a contradiction in terms? It is, but I think Gosetti-Ferencei is onto something – because the ephemeral is more real than the everlasting. It is why Homer will always be more compelling than Plato.

Let me give a more immediate example than Homer or Rilke. In an exchange of emails reflecting on the recent death of Cormac McCarthy, an old friend and I were talking over his novel *The Road*. It concerns the post-apocalyptic world, a horrifying landscape of irretrievable loss. My friend quoted this passage to me, which comes at the end of the book:

> Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculite patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.

The »message« of this novel would appear to be that we are all doomed – which is a fact. Sooner or later we will all die, and maybe in a catastrophe such as that which *The Road* describes. But the reticulate beauty of this passage runs against the grain of any nihilism. It celebrates the ephemeral of our here and now, and it intensifies that beauty by making it retrospective. It makes us see afresh what we have now. McCarthy's language (or Thomas Mann's, for that matter) complicates, deepens, enriches and qualifies the book's superficial message. You might say it salvages the world by looking at it from the perspective of death, in this case from the extremity of mass annihilation. One reads this passage with wonderment. It jolts us out of

ourselves for a moment, even as it tells of a loss that is totally irredeemable. It also tells of transformation, our own and that of world into word. McCarthy doesn't know details of future particularities any more than anyone else does. What he *does* know is that the mystery hums in things. You can hear it if you know how to listen. McCarthy has no message, but the novel's real truth is an embodied love of the world, a love that accepts that world in all its transience.