

Modernism and Metamorphosis:
Karin Kiwus' *Das Chinesische Examen*

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“Später ist es, und so viel ist / noch zu tun.” ‘It is later, and there is so much / still to do.’ Thus speaks Soutine, the modernist painter, in a “Rollengedicht” at the center of Karin Kiwus’ 1992 volume *Das Chinesische Examen* (*The Chinese Examination*). The poem, “Bonjour Monsieur Soutine,” is full of transformative energy, reaching this apotheosis of the aesthetic:

und der gehäutete Ochse in meinem Atelier,
begreift ihr nicht, daß ich sein Fleisch
retten muß vor der Verwesung und eimerweise
Blut über ihn schütten, um ihn saftig
glänzend und frisch zu halten, daß ich Fliegen,
Nachbarn, Gesundheits—und Ordnungshüter
abwehren muß bis ich mich gequält habe und gewunden,
gerast und gestöhnt, bis aus dem aufgewühlten
Schmutz vor mir Stoff und Energie sich wieder
aufrichten in meinem Bild, denn, versteht
ihr nicht, Kunst ist wichtiger als Hygiene.

And the flayed ox in my studio,
don't you know that I must rescue
its flesh from decay, pouring buckets of
blood over it, to keep it
juicy, shiny and fresh, must keep away
flies, neighbors, preservers of health and orderliness,
till I have tormented myself and writhed,
raged and groaned, till from the churned-up

dirt before me matter and energy once again
renew themselves in my picture, for, don't you understand,
art is more important than hygiene. (47)

The pragmatic pouring of blood, for strictly illusionistic and non-sacramental reasons, brings the modernist paradox vividly into view: life is to be "rescued" not for its own sake, but because the artist makes visible fundamental patterns that the preoccupations of daily living (hygiene) ceaselessly obscure. The poem, typically for Kiwus, tells several "stories": one strand that enters toward the end concerns Soutine's youth, his friendship with the painter Michel Kikoine and an episode from their time of study in Minsk: "His friends recall that he staged a Jewish burial. He had Kikoine lie down and cover himself with a white drape, then encircled the shrouded figure with candles and drew the scene." (Tuchman 9). Soutine addresses Kikoine directly, wills the life of the past into new existence and, because that youthful scene was drenched in death-imagery, visualizes an aesthetic life that suspends birth and death, subject and object, individuality and ritual in a throbbing pictorial space: "Und wenn du es / nicht bist, der da liegt, werde ich glauben / müssen ich wäre es nun und mein Bild / ein jäh erbleichendes stilles Leben." 'And if you are / not the one lying there, I will have / to believe that it's me, that my picture / is a still life abruptly turning pale.' (48).

These lines compress an array of modernist projects: the painter's "image" (*Bild*) would be forever captured as his "picture" (*Bild*); and his unruly life would be immobilized as still life while not forfeiting its temporality, since the still life would exist through the suddenness of turning pale. All is fixed, eternal; all is also in motion, humanly engaged, struggling with mortality. This dream of synthesis can be glimpsed everywhere in these poems, beginning with the volume title: a Chinese examination, we are told, is one in which the candidate must sit in an empty room and write down everything he experiences and thinks within a specific stretch of time. The exam "tests" the entirety of a sentient life in an arbitrary temporal frame.

Yet the very closeness of Kiwus to Soutine's aesthetic dynamism, to his achievement of an A in the Chinese exam, highlights the predicament of a poet necessarily distanced from modernist solutions. To thematize a painter is to make the problem especially vivid: whereas modernist poems, Rilke's in particular,

could aspire to the condition of painterly objects, “still lifes” are no longer available to the poet, for whom language remains the instrument of time without imaginable closure. A key word of this volume is “später,” the very word that provokes action in Soutine. It organizes two overtly autobiographical poems, responses to the Chinese exam question, that “frame” the book’s contents. In the opening text, “Anfang, Abbild, Retrospektive” ‘Beginning, Reflection, Retrospection,’ the speaker contemplates a childhood photo of herself and her parents on a Baltic seashore. ‘“Later” the village she glimpses in the background will have a name; “later” the sea will receive a color; “later” the mother will be “lebendig erkennbar” ‘knowable in life.’ When is this “later”? Is it the ordinary knowledge of the grown person? Yes, but that knowledge is precisely what obscures the vividness of the childhood memory. What adds also subtracts. Can the later be driven backward into an earlier, can memory ally itself with the immobile “truth” of the photograph? The speaker is engaged in this very task—but cannot impose the Proustian discipline on her memory work that would assure coherence and meaning. Instead her thoughts move “into” the photograph, i.e. into the technicalities of its production, the artifices of the moment. The gaze is then propelled forward and outward, away from the personal, toward the multiple histories of the photographed scene: toward Caspar David Friedrich, Effi Briest—and of course the Nazis.

But even as the privateness of the scene drains away, the persona reconnects to the now public space-time: “angeworben / von den Lokatoren der Erinnerung habe ich / ja, Aufenthalt genommen...” ‘enlisted / by the prospecting scouts of memory I have / taken up residence . . .’ (10). After childhood photo and memory there remains the visualization of arrival, physical sensations that are immediately, involuntarily historicized:

Im Norden liegt da meine Bucht—
 wie der Sand auf den Planken knirscht,
 wenn ich lande. Schimmernder Nachmittag.
 In der Ferne auf dem Meer gleitet
 ein graues Kriegsschiff die Horizontlinie entlang.
 Spielzeuggroß. Ein Detail. Außen, innen, jetzt?
 Zu welchem Bild gehört es, in welche Zeit?
 Heute, heute bin ich hier
 allein. Ist denn Frieden?

There in the north lies my bay—
 how the sand crunches on the planks,
 when I land. A shimmering afternoon.
 In the watery distance there glides
 a grey warship, defining the horizon.
 The size of a toy. A detail. External, internal, present?
 What picture does it belong to, what era?
 Today, today I am here
 alone. Is there peace then? (11)

This closing flurry of questions certainly undoes the poem's earlier language of synchronicity or "closeness to life." Moreover the color of memory is displaced by the "grey" warship. Having dissolved the specificity of the photograph the speaker has, it might appear, lost the power to coordinate past and present. Yet one seeming symptom of this loss, the overt reference in the final lines to Theodor Storm's *Immensee*, may bring us closer to Kiwus' poetics: "Sterben, ach sterben / Soll ich allein!" 'Dying, o dying / I must do alone' is the melancholy song pervading Storm's landscape. He writes from the heart of nineteenth-century time structure: privileged moments, renunciation, enhancement through memory. It is this structure that is most clearly lost to Karin Kiwus as she traverses Storm's (and her own) Nordic landscape. Indeed Susanne Ledanff has shown how the metaphor of the "moment" (Augenblicksmetapher) was renewed in the 1960s, Kiwus' period of early prominence—but as "Irritationsmoment" (Ledanff 215), a provocative singularizing of moments in daily life (like Brinkmann's famous tango music in Cologne) that overtly rejects any claim of "privilege." Kiwus, in her first two collections, offered many examples of such "Irritationsmomente," always with an emancipatory impulse: that is, her sophisticated blend of everyday immediacy, political context and proverb-like linguistic turns was nourished by an atmosphere of "intervention," of poetry as resistance. What has vanished from the 1992 volume is not so much the politics—Kiwus was never as dependent as some others on movements and counter-movements—as the critical *distance*, the skeptical, singular voice that controls her first collections.

What one finds instead is a *metamorphic* consciousness, an immersion of the self in many varieties of non-self, including the perspectives of past poets, like Storm, embedded in contemporary landscapes. The *metamorphosis* is continuous, as in the poem's

title, "Anfang, Abbild, Restrospektive": it is impossible to separate one of these "moments" from the others, as the closing questions about the warship emphasize. To which image/picture does it belong? It does indeed belong to Kiwus' childhood (she was born in 1942), even though absent from photograph and memories; but it also evokes the commercial-conflictual history of the Baltic Sea. The warship resists closure, conditions both the concept and the sensation of "peace," dissolves all repressive clarity. The task of the poetic persona is to enter into this sensorium of instability and to find a temporal language that can give it expression.

Consciousness of being "later" (than everything important) makes this metamorphosis possible; only "lateness" pushes aside the self's anguishing about time's irreversibility and repetitions. "Selberlebensverjähung" ("Own Life Limitation") begins thus:

Die Podeste der doppelten Wendeltreppe Zeit.
Sich kreuzende Briefe. Augenpaare,
blank, starr, himmelvehängen.
Es ist später.

The landings on time's double spiral staircase.
Letters crossing. Eyes,
bare, fixed, overcast.
It is later. (71)

Whereas the first autobiographical poem opened up, fan-like, the meanings of a single childhood photograph, "Own Life Limitation" moves in the abstract, highly traditional zone of "Bildung." Its starting-point, the "late" consciousness of Bildung's impossibility / triviality, is what makes its metamorphic review viable. For the contemporary subjectivity clashing figures like Kafka and Rilke are simply *there*, fixed presences in the mental landscape. Kiwus moves easily from one to the other, beginning with a near-quotation from Kafka's "A Country Doctor": "Einmal im August der Türklingel nicht gefolgt / und eine Sturzflut von Katastrophen." 'One time in August the door-bell went unanswered / and a torrent of catastrophes followed.' (71). Catastrophes are "everyday" even in their invisibility; the poet's language is made of this category-change and its task must be to press against the "life limitation," the predictability of subjective quests that both obscure catastrophes and ensure their recurrence. Reviewing "Die alten Verstecke" ('The

old hiding places’): the South, sex, work, philosophy, Kiwus arrives at these Rilkean thoughts:

Die Einbildungskraft aber. Und der Triumph,
den wir erzwingen, unser sind die Anfänge,
unser die unbedingte, die gedeutete Welt.
Ob wir uns wahr gemacht haben, ist nicht
die Frage. Es gibt keine Beweise.
Auch gehandelt haben wir nie.
Entwürfe natürlich, jederzeit. Allein die anderen
Sind es, die sich roh und spurlos zu Ende leben.

Yet there is imagination. And the triumph
that we compel, ours are the beginnings,
ours the absolute, interpreted world.
Whether we have made ourselves true, is not
the question. There are no proofs.
Nor is any action of ours complete.
Designs for action of course, at all times. Yet others
are the ones who complete their lives, crudely, without
trace. (71-72)

Missing of course is Rilke’s sovereign artist, the controller and shaper. Even as we must claim what is “ours,” there is no stable “we” in which to center the interpreted world. The metamorphic movement of this poem begins in the repetitions of the “I,” wends its way through Culture and culminates in the repetitions of the future:

Wir müssen nicht älter werden mit uns.
Wie zur Anschauung ist man jünger geworden
in unserer Nähe. Schüler haben sich gesammelt,
Leidenlernende, die den Erfindungen
ergeben sind und uns folgen.

We do not need to grow old on our own.
As if for our contemplation people have grown younger
around us. Disciples have gathered,
neophytes in suffering, inventing
themselves and following us. (72)

The closest Kiwus comes to “wisdom” is refusal of wisdom: we cannot transcend beginnings—yet our beginnings come to be invested by others as a “life’s work,” a completion. Against such blindness the rigorous imagery of limits and cycles (the spiral staircases of time) constitutes another kind of beginning.

Kiwus *does* deploy one image of completion with some frequency in this collection: the statue. There is an analogy between our temporal displacement from our childhood and our link to statues. We are always “late” in relation to the fixity of our childhood and must engage in ceaseless, skeptical metamorphic movement in order to claim any truthful connection. Comparably, a statue fixes a past moment in the image of a celebrated figure. That moment is then irretrievably lost, yet the statue remains, sometimes with words etched upon it, in space as well as time, asserting fixity, impossible to expel. Kiwus’ audacity is to contest that fixity. Several of her statues “come to life” (of a sort), underlining their remoteness in the very impossibility of their attempt at communication: the poetics of metamorphosis are clearly at work, infringing on everyday space even as impossible bridges are projected across temporal gulfs. “Dieser eine Russe” ‘This single Russian’ does not change: but his not-changing becomes a source of wonder and strangeness. The Second World War churns into imagistic life as the Russian armies fight their battles and move westward; as the war recedes, the “single Russian” is left, the huge statue gazing “aus jungem grobem unbewegtem / Gesicht bedingungslos weiter nach Westen.” ‘from his young coarse immobile / face unconditionally onward to the West.’ (32). The soldier is both naturalistically dressed and acting allegorically, with child, sword, and defeated swastika. He gazes “unconditionally,” yet history is nothing but changing “conditions.” What can happen to such a monument as its meaning recedes? The speaker imagines, instead of the single monument, a whole army of manufactured soldiers such as were produced for the tomb of the ancient Chinese emperor. If this army were to stretch from the Baltic to the Black Sea, then perhaps its meaning would not be forgotten; for it would metamorphose into the landscape, bearing the past of all European wars, superseding the vain effort to memorialize single events, even events on the scale of the Second World War.

A contemporary war-scene, an assembling of refugees in a German city, plays out against the ancient fixed grandeur of stone lions: “eine Schar / Andersgläubige, die man am Stadion erwartet,

/ beim Tor der steinern sprungbereiten Löwen.” ‘a crowd / of people with different beliefs, expected at the stadium / at the gate of the stone lions poised to leap.’ (18). These lions, in their attack pose, embody the unchanging folly of humans and their wars—and the perpetual grief of the uprooted. As in a Käthe Kollwitz etching, two women weep, but “auch sie / wird man zu beruhigen wissen.” ‘They too / will be duly pacified’ (18). General meanings of events remain unchanged, while specifics vanish or are metamorphosed into the language of later times.

The volume’s central section (third of five) is a prose poem entitled “Grabfigur eines mit Lorbeer bekränzten Mannes” ‘Monument of a man crowned with laurel.’ The statue is the speaker and his speech is full of anxiety. He has been living in the appropriately static mode, “das geladene Universum in meinem Kopf. So war ich einig mit mir, eine Erwartung, bitterlich schön” ‘The charged universe in my head. Thus I was at one with myself, fixed anticipation, bitterly beautiful’ (39). But the very enshrining of historical meaning in the monument-man has filled him with instability, with the longing to perpetuate his meaning, to intervene in the world. And so he does, with predictably disastrous results: Nazi-like soldiers arrest and torture him. He has no secrets but is silent anyway, since there is no linguistic bridge from his world to that of his tormentors: “Und was bliebe schon hier der Erinnerung: meine Wahrheit, die Liebe, dieser eine holde leidselige Traum, mein Zorn, meine begehrliehen Jahre in der Welt? Niemand würde sich wiederfinden darin. Nichts” ‘And what would be available for memory: my truth, love, this one sweet suffering dream, my anger, my greedy years in the world? No one would recognize himself in any of that. Nothing’ (40). The monument is broken up and simultaneously given “eine Geschichte...einen Prozeß mit allen mittelalterlichen Ehren” ‘a history...a process with all medieval honors.’ His fragments, crowned with laurel, are taken to lie by a church-door. The final stage of the metamorphosis is that his “Eingeweidebeutel” ‘pouch of entrails’ has poked out through the cracked ribs. “Und es ist darin, unter gekreuzten Händen, meine Seele noch in der Welt, das Insignium, wie man bedeutet, meiner Würde” ‘And there, under my crossed hands, my soul is contained, still in the world, the emblem, as it is said, of my dignity’ (41). And the final turn: “Es wird, wer daraus eine Prise kostet, die Zukunft spüren unter der Zunge.” ‘Whoever samples a pinch from my pouch will taste the future under his tongue’ (42).

The virtuosity of this text lies in the combination of intense story-line and ceaselessly indeterminate identity. The monument-man is stony throughout, yet organic in several senses, most importantly in his relation to time. He both must and cannot "re-enter" the world; similarly, when broken into fragments, "wer wollte sagen, ich wäre tot" 'who could really say I was dead' (41). His soul is not "eternal" but inseparable from history: it is that which survives of a past moment when that moment is comprehended in its entirety. In such comprehension there is "future." But direct access to any moment is impossible. The monument is not so remote from the childhood photograph of the volume's first poem. Both fuse space and time in a modality that is at once open, self-advertising, and inaccessible. The task of the self is to activate all the relationships to this enigmatic space-time that culture, language, and memory make possible.

For the reverse transforming movement also pervades these poems: the self, trapped in the banal miseries of the organic present, gradually frees itself—to become "monumental." Thus "Ruin" begins with the oppressive heat of a summer's day in which nothing flourishes. But, arrived home, the speaker finds the domestic objects "fordernd" 'demanding,' and duly lists them. Then, in a nightmare, metamorphosis into history occurs: "in der Stunde zwischen drei und vier, / wenn uns Alpträume drohen und Verhaftungen, / rollen unaufhaltsam Mannschaften heran" 'in the hour between three and four, / when we are threatened by nightmares and arrests, / motorized units approach incessantly' (14). It becomes a dream of liberation through partisans, a dream persisting into an uneasy morning. Dogs bark, having been silent in the dream: "Sie sind die / Erben der Geschichte / wie wir" 'They are the / heirs of history / like ourselves.' Such an apparently portentous statement gains effect as a marked moment of metamorphosis. Momentarily, the self has "become" a monument, fusing its various pasts into a truth that may withstand the inevitable return of heat and aridity. The dogs are both harmless, everyday—and a sign of emergency.

In "Blendend ersetzt" ("Dazzlingly compensated") the metamorphic sequence is different. The depressing days of "Ruin" again mark the atmosphere, decomposing the illusions of subjectivity. But here they are *preceded* by a "monumental" gesture, the ancient ritual greeting of Spring: "Auf dem Balkon bin ich / angetreten wie ein Sämann, / jubelnd die Augen in der Hand" 'On the balcony I am / positioned like a sower / rejoicing, my eyes

in my hand' (63). And she casts her eyes out into the world. The large gesture can only be presented with the faint irony generally accorded to monuments. The emotion is real but has become suspect, a mode of self-deception. It needs to be made use of. And Kiwus' persona retrieves her eyes and begins to re-train them ("Gute alte Übung immer noch." 'Good old practice still'), achieving not just clarity of vision ("Sehschärfe") but the new skills required by a modern sensorium:

Das Bewegungssehen zudem habe ich
 schätzen gelernt, das Wild nämlich,
 wie ich erfahre, reagiert auf geringste
 Regungen einer Gesellschaft von Jägern.

Seeing motion is something I have
 learned to value, as game,
 so I am told, react to the tiniest
 movements of a hunting party. (64)

The paradox of these poems is that monumentality is inseparable from vulnerability, the vivid attribute of the assaulted and crumbling statue. There can be no humanness without the drive toward the meaningful/aesthetic moment expressed in monuments; yet blindness follows, even when joyfully endorsed (the casting forth of eyes in "Blendend ersetzt"). The wariness of "seeing motion," of autonomy on the margins, is the necessary complement to the drive toward the central and monumental. The poem following "Blendend ersetzt" tells the "story" of a persona interviewed by a visiting journalist about a caricatured media concern: how often has she made love in a public place? The text is a hybrid, with overt dialogue and quasi-dramatic vignettes balanced by a highly formal presentation, beginning with two eleven-line stanzas, each opening with the distancing phrase "An einem jener Vormittage" 'On one of those mornings.' Because the speaker is engaged fully by the conversation, the perspectival shifts are intense, from the "poetic" overview to the startled, groping response to the interviewer's somewhat crass questions. To "present" the self in this way is to lose control; recovery is possible not through detachment, but through mobility itself, accepting loss ("Mein Eigengewichtssinn ist gestört" 'My sense of balance is disrupted') and grasping hold of a counter-image. Here the con-

clusion reinstates the formalism of the eleven-line stanza, again beginning "An einem jener Vormittage" but this time pausing after line six. For the first six lines the speaker is filled with the image of a woman in black leather on a motor-bike, completely encased and equipped with a metal helmet. "Eine Rüstung wie diese vielleicht" 'A suit of armour like this perhaps,' the speaker gropingly begins line seven, pulling away from the unwanted intimacy of the interview. The body needs protection not only from intrusions but from itself, from its own expressivity. The poem concludes with the image of the helmet, the visor closed.

The dream of withdrawal into a black leather casing recalls, for me, the iguana of the poem "Nebenwirkung" 'Side Effect' from Kiwus' 1979 collection. In my analysis of that text I termed the iguana an "allegorical creature of resistance" and saw the speaker on her sickbed as projecting a "metamorphosis" into a "creature equally immobile" (Rolleston 212). But metamorphosis in 1992 is a subtly different process. The politicized modernism that so energized the 1960s and 1970s is no longer available. Karin Kiwus keeps faith with modernism in several respects, notably in her deployment of imagistic density (not always, but whenever a reminder is needed of our civilizational resources) and in her sense that aesthetic form can "do something" socially; her work on the German-Japanese "collective" Renshi-text *Poetische Perlen* (1985) represents one such enterprise. Indeed her recent poetry bears out Hartung's 1985 opinion that "a new linkage between artistry and reflection, formalism and melancholy has become conceivable, a new poetry of ideas: not, to be sure, abstract and pre-formed ideas, but tangible, personal ones." (Hartung 97).

Kiwus' maintenance of a certain quasi-modernist privilege, no matter how ironized and manipulated, suggests that she does not subscribe to Friederike Mayröcker's view of poetry as "insuperable vulnerability" ("unaufhebbare Verletzlichkeit," cited in Ledanff, 217). Rather, vulnerability is one pole of an incessant dialectic; at the other pole are the twin "monumental" urges toward shaping the present moment and toward full historical understanding. Hence the vividness of the vulnerable statue: a statue "realizes" the collective present, but at the price of losing historical consciousness. Excluded from the historical flux, the statue can only re-enter it on the same terms as ephemeral mortals, crumbling toward both ruin and future. Neither balance nor closure are ultimately possible, "metamorphosis" names both the open-ended

movements of consciousness in these poems and the formalizing of their conclusions. Known for her sovereign ability to shape poetic endings, Karin Kiwus sets the several directions of her specific text in quivering fusion, like voices in a fugal coda, pointing the reader backwards to the poem's precarious variety and outwards into the forever unmastered experience of the day.

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