Mimesis

The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines mimesis generally as “the verbal capturing or conveying of experience in such a way as the mental image or meaning created by the words is judged similar, analogous, or even identical to what we know about the world from sense-data directly” (p 1038). In his incomparable book *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach refines this definition by speaking about the ways art not only reproduces the world, but also symbolizes it. This permits us to consider art as both a simulacrum of reality and an antithesis to reality.

In his first chapter, Auerbach distinguishes between **foreground** and **background**. This distinction is essential to the rest of his argument. To illustrate the difference, imagine guiding someone into the DuBois library. You stand in the middle of the floor—people are milling about, friends are talking, a librarian is helping someone, a person in the corner is playing a gameboy. Even though all these things are going on, you say only, “This is where the books are.” Then you leave. You’ve just constructed a background narrative: you’ve represented the library with a single image, books. You’ve left out all the other things that happen there. If, on the other hand, you described everything you saw or experienced, you’d have made a foreground narrative. Everything would be in the foreground, up front, unhidden: “This is where people mill, where men in hats and women in shoes gaze at computer screens, sit idly and stare, where the light makes a low buzzing noise, and the odor of coffee drifts down ….” For Auerbach, Homer best illustrates foreground; Genesis best illustrates background.

Here are some other claims that arise from Auerbach’s notion of mimesis:

Claim #1. Literature is not a record of events, sensation, or emotion; at most, it is a prompt for sensation or emotion. “I was tired this morning” records an event and sensation; it does not inspire sleep in your audience.

Claim #2. Literature is not transparent to social forces or ideology. Propaganda is. And propaganda rarely rises to the level of literature.

Claim #3. Literature is an art, a craft. It is made, fabricated, and thus indirect in all its truth claims.

In short, if we would understand the function and mechanics of literature, then we must distinguish between fiction and non-fiction. Fiction is not non-fiction with the names changed. It is of an entirely different order. There are dragons in it.