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## INTRODUCTION

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*James I. Porter*

What we are we have become in the course of our history, and it is only  
in history that we can remain what we are, and develop.

—Auerbach, “The Philology of World Literature”

Frequently credited with having shaped the modern study of comparative literature, and famous above all for his daring study, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (German original 1946; English translation 1953), Erich Auerbach has been the beneficiary of a surge of attention from literary and cultural critics in the humanities over the past two decades, above all in Germany and in the United States.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore an opportune moment to produce a new selection of his essays, many of which have never been available in English, and so continue to go unappreciated even by those who are most concerned to reassess Auerbach’s life and circumstances.

Quite apart from their obvious evidentiary value (they span the full length of his career), the essays in this collection have an indisputable immediate value. All of them are gems. None is very long or forbiddingly learned, apart from two (“*Figura*,” here Chapter 7, and “*Passio* as *Passion*,” here Chapter 14). And taken as an ensemble, they permit us to observe Auerbach responding to a variety of occasions in a wide range of venues, from a feuilleton piece commemorating the six-hundredth anniversary of Dante’s death in 1921 to his inaugural postdoctoral lecture at Marburg (July 1929) to a talk recorded after the War (March 1948) at the Pennsylvania State College (now Pennsylvania State University) to the obligatory run of articles produced for academic journals and edited volumes—though Auerbach always wears his

<sup>1</sup>Four major edited collections chart this trend: Seth Lerer, ed., *Literary History and the Challenge of Philology: The Legacy of Erich Auerbach* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Walter Busch and Gerhart Pickerodt, eds. (with the assistance of Markus Bauer), *Wahrnehmen Lesen Deuten: Erich Auerbachs Lektüre der Moderne* (Klostermann: Frankfurt am Main, 1998); Aamir R. Mufti, ed., *Critical Secularism*. Special issue of *boundary 2: an international journal of literature and culture* 31.2 (2004); and Karlheinz Barck and Martin Treml, eds., *Erich Auerbach: Geschichte und Aktualität eines europäischen Philologen* (Berlin: Kulterverlag Kadmos, 2007). The bibliography is extensive and growing. For a selection, see the readings listed in the bibliographical overview at the end of this book.

learning lightly and is never dry or pedantic: he tends to use footnotes, the weapon of choice for German scholars, in a sparing fashion, and even quotations from originals are kept to a minimum. On the other hand, what Auerbach forgoes in academic niceties he makes up for in radical impulses: he is constantly challenging his colleagues in Romance philology and in nearby fields to press their disciplines towards ever broader and more searching limits. Finally, underlying all of his writings is a deep intellectual coherence that is as admirable as it is rare. Auerbach has the potential to inspire readers even today. Students in the humanities would do well to emulate his example.

### Auerbach's Life and Afterlife

Erich Auerbach (1892–1957) was caught in the crosshairs of history. A German-Jewish intellectual who fought for his country in the First World War and was decorated with an Iron Cross (2nd class), Auerbach was removed from his teaching post in Marburg and effectively forced into exile by the Nazis in 1935 in the wake of the racially discriminatory Nuremberg Laws of that same year. The laws, which banned Jews from public employment on the basis of bloodlines while imposing a host of further stigmas and restrictions, effectively annulled the rather fragile immunity Auerbach had enjoyed since 1933. At that time, an earlier law was passed that spared Jewish and some non-Jewish but politically suspect veterans from being removed from their posts in the civil service (others were less fortunate—for example, Auerbach's colleague, Leo Spitzer [1887–1960]).<sup>2</sup> Unsafe in Germany, he sat out the Second World War in Istanbul and later emigrated to the States in 1947 to live out the last decade of his life as an *éminence grise* in the American academy—first at the Pennsylvania State College, then briefly at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton (1949–50), and finally at Yale where he held a professorship and then a chair in Romance philology until his death. Some half a century on, Erich Auerbach is now being reexamined and celebrated, whether as a founder of comparative literature, an example of the exilic intellectual, or as a prophet of global literary studies.

Despite all this attention, the Auerbach who has been received to date and made into a canonical figure that looms larger than life remains a somewhat filtered version of himself. The Auerbach who is most familiar today is defined by a certain time period: he is the scholar who fled Germany and who wrote under duress in impoverished conditions (most memorably, but

<sup>2</sup>That Auerbach's situation was anything but safe in 1933 and earlier is clear from the retrospective account of his former student and assistant, Werner Krauss ("Marburg unter dem Naziregime, *Sinn und Form* 35.5 [1983] 941–45; here 942), and from Auerbach's letter to Ludwig Binswanger from October 28, 1932 (n. 54 below).

least significantly, without a research library) and then later reflected on this tumultuous era, the Auerbach of “Figura” (1938), *Mimesis* (1946), and “The Philology of World Literature” (1952). Celebrated are the literary comparatist who can deftly juxtapose the Bible, Homer, and James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in a sentence, the ecumenical and global thinker, and the lonely exilic victim—a romantic image, to be sure. Rarely is Auerbach viewed as a Romance philologist who went about making his mark in the university system of Weimar Germany, a system that produced a long line of distinguished critics like himself (among them, Karl Vossler [1872–1949] and Werner Krauss [1900–76]). Neither is he viewed as the supreme Dantist of his generation (and Auerbach’s 1929 book on Dante is arguably his finest single achievement), as a student of the Christian Church and its intricate theological and philosophical debates (accessible to him in both Latin and the vernaculars), or as an expert on courtly life and culture from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, and into the early modern era, subjects that occupied him in the years before he was forced into exile and that continued to preoccupy him down to his final, posthumous publication.

The tacit assumption behind the popular and dominant image of Auerbach is that just as his world changed on October 16, 1935 when he received word of his official termination at the University of Marburg, so did his view of the world. Therefore, his earlier writings are of little relevance to the later writings, or at any rate they must be of lesser moment, given the historical circumstances that interrupted his *curriculum vitae* and caused him to flee German soil. But this is merely to beg the question, for *Mimesis*, after all, is the fruit of a lifetime of learning: what is to be made of the man and his work before his expulsion to Istanbul at the mature age of forty-three? Are there no deeper continuities running through his thought? And did the world really take a turn for the worse only starting in 1935?

The earliest years of Auerbach’s life may be quickly sketched. Born in Berlin to an upper-middle-class family of assimilated Jews, Auerbach studied law and received a doctoral degree in jurisprudence from Heidelberg in 1913. After serving in the army during the war (and a subsequent wounding and convalescence), he changed fields to Romance philology, earning his doctorate in 1921 from Greifswald. Unable to land a teaching post and while researching his postdoctoral thesis on Dante under Leo Spitzer from Marburg, he found temporary employment at the Prussian State Library in Berlin from 1923 to 1929 as a field librarian in law. Upon the publication of his thesis, and with the backing of Spitzer and Vossler (at Munich), the two main powerhouses in his field, he assumed a professorship at the University of Marburg in Romance philology, which he held from October 1930 until he was forced out by the Nazis in October 1935. It is at this point that the life of the Auerbach who is revered among scholars and aspiring students of literature alike begins.

A closer look at his writings from before 1935—both his books and his essays, nine of which are reproduced in this volume (nearly half the sum total)—will rapidly dispel any notion of a radical break, as will a deeper grasp of Auerbach's thought before and after this date. What stands out clearly at all points in his development are three distinguishing features: first, his complex relationship to the Judaeo-Christian tradition; next, his underlying philosophy of time and history, which he owes largely to Vico but also to Hegel; and lastly, his unique theory of ethics and responsible action, which emerges as a deeply committed stance toward human history and human reality, but also as an original and provocative view about the rise of modern, post-Christian subjectivity and individuality. Together, these form the bedrock of Auerbach's more familiar theory of literary mimesis, without which that theory cannot be truly fathomed.

Behind everything lies an additional, subtly determinative factor, which becomes evident once it is named: the fact that for the greater part of his career Auerbach was a Jew writing in an increasingly hostile environment, one that would eventually be dominated by the National Socialists under Hitler. While all of these threads run through Auerbach's writings from start to finish, some are more pronounced in certain parts of his corpus than in others. The essays presented here have been selected with the aim of foregrounding each of these elements of Auerbach's profile as a thinker and a writer in all their complexity, in order to contribute not only to a broader and more informed reception of his work but also to a more engaged reading of his intellectual "project"—if the phrase may be permitted, as it surely must be. For one of the most admirable hallmarks of Auerbach's writings is the profound consistency that quietly informs them. Behind them all one can sense a searching mind and a vision that are bent on comprehending a seemingly endless variety of historical phenomena, personalities, and forms within a single framework, one that continually circles back to a series of carefully chosen and richly productive questions, almost as if this program for inquiry had been planned years in advance of its final execution.

By training a Romance philologist and by inclination a literary comparatist, in reality Auerbach transcended both labels. This is only to be expected of a thinker who continues to exert so powerful a fascination over both general readers and professional scholars a half-century after his death. Auerbach's signature insights are not primarily stylistic in the way that his nearest contemporaries tended to read texts, for example Ernst Robert Curtius (1886–1956) or Leo Spitzer, both of whom viewed style as a window onto transcendent and transhistorical aesthetic forms (be these impersonal classical *topoi* or tokens of a romanticized expressionism) and whose positions, viewed from today, resemble a kind of New Criticism *avant la lettre*. His interests lay elsewhere. Provisionally, we can say that he sought to derive something like a history of mentalities under the guise of Romance philology. And he carried out this project with a formidable degree of philosophical rigor

and sophistication that is partially concealed by his elegant literary sensibilities and his astonishing depth of cultural knowledge.

Taking literature as his starting point (often under the rubric of a concrete *Ansatzpunkt*, be this a phrase, an isolated feature of style, or a self-contained logical sequence), Auerbach restlessly sought to establish nothing less than an intellectual—or better yet, spiritual (he often calls it “inner”)—history of the Western European mind as it lunged into contemporary modernity. As we read in the foreword to his *Four Studies in the History of French Thought and Culture*,<sup>3</sup> literary forms were for Auerbach a gateway to forms of thought, feeling, and expression. Such was the premise already of his 1921 dissertation on the early Renaissance novella in Italy and France (on which more below). And while it would take more than a brief introduction to unfold Auerbach’s insights in the way they deserve, it will be possible to name and explicate some of them briefly, in the hope that readers will then recognize these themes as they appear, like so many musical motifs, at different moments and in different configurations in the essays that follow.

## Key Concepts

A number of key words in Auerbach’s vocabulary stand out as utterly characteristic of his thought: *life, feeling, sensuousness, concreteness, history, (tragic) realism, historical perspectivism and relativism, unconscious (habits), historical consciousness, earthly (matters), (horizontal) secularization, de-Christianization, (vertical) ethics, autonomy, and (lay) public*. What these terms begin to suggest are the outlines of a series of developments in the West as it passed from the classical era into late antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, early modernity, the nineteenth century, and finally into Auerbach’s present. And while Auerbach marks each of these eras with symbolically charged canonical literary figures (Homer, sundry classical authors from Plato to Tacitus, St. Paul, Augustine and other early Christian writers, Dante, Montaigne, Pascal, Racine, Vico, Rousseau, Stendhal, Balzac, Proust, and Virginia Woolf), his narrative charts much more than a progression in literary history. What he is capturing is the evolution of Western historical consciousness as it moves out of a universe filled with myths into one that is saturated with history, while the intervening ground is colored by the spiritual beckonings of Judaism and then Christianity. In a word, Auerbach’s writings effectively chart and then explore the difficult discovery of the sensuous, the earthly, and the human and social worlds.

More schematically, the passage Auerbach traces is from an era in which human meaning is sought out in some transcendental sphere above to an era in which it is discovered and consciously made here on earth. Auerbach

<sup>3</sup> *Vier Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der französischen Bildung* (Bern: A. Francke, 1951) 8.

applauds this conquest of historical awareness as a process that allows individuals and societies to realize the nature of their ever-changing and ever-adapting humanity, even as he acknowledges the enormous risks and the terrifying lack of guarantees that such a venture entails, and even as he at times appears—but *only* appears—to lament the passing of the more stable moral frameworks of religion.<sup>4</sup> In point of fact, in the passage from religion to secularism one kind of uncertainty is traded for another. As he writes in his book on Dante, in an intensely beautiful passage that gives a taste of that work and of Auerbach's writings at their best, what Dante describes in the *Divine Comedy* is not the promise of eternal salvation, but rather

the narrow cleft of *earthly human history*, the span of *man's life on earth*, in which the great and dramatic decision [of a person's destiny] must fall. The cleft is truly open, the span of life is short, uncertain, and decisive for all eternity; it is the magnificent and terrible gift of potential freedom which creates the urgent, restless, *no less human than Christian-European* atmosphere of the ir retrievable, fleeting moment that must be made the most of.<sup>5</sup>

If uncertainties continue to linger even during the secular era on this view of history, that is because the process of self-realization in time is for Auerbach ongoing, and the work of historical awareness is never complete. Human possibilities are no less compellingly intense in later periods than in the Christian poem of Dante. It is the experience of these possibilities, not their realization *per se*, that Auerbach seeks to capture with his rubric, which he did not coin but merely made his own, “tragic realism.”

## Earthly Philology

Auerbach's perspective on history is avowedly indebted to Giambattista Vico, the great Neapolitan thinker of the early eighteenth century who may well have inaugurated modern historicism. Auerbach certainly believed this to be the case. In fact, it is in his essays on Vico that we find some of Auerbach's

<sup>4</sup>An example is *Das französische Publikum des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Max Hueber Verlag, 1933) 52–53, where classical French tragedy is said to supplant Christianity through a radical process of “de-Christianization” by heralding a “new ideal world of value,” one that celebrates the autonomy of human passions and the “triumph” of the newly discovered “moral person.” Tellingly, what Auerbach laments here is less the passing of religion than the reduction of historicity and worldliness to “a bare minimum.” In return, a new moral world comes to light with values of its own, one that eventually will take root again in this world. Differently, Jane O. Newman, “Force and Justice: Auerbach's Pascal,” in *Political Theology and Early Modernity*, Julia Reinhard Lupton and Graham Hammill, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012) 159–80.

<sup>5</sup>*Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, Ralph Manheim, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961; German original 1929) 132; trans. adapted, emphasis added.

own philosophy of history set forth at its clearest, for instance in “Vico and Herder” (1932; here Chapter 2).<sup>6</sup> The text of a lecture, the essay has added point, as it showcases the literary critic instructing his fellow humanists in what he takes to be their actual activity and mission: “The majority of you, as students of the humanities, are pursuing history, be this the study of change in political and economic spheres or the history of language, writing, or art.”

This formulation must have come as quite a shock to the members of the German-Italian Research Institute assembled in Cologne in 1931 and headed at the time by Leo Spitzer. Auerbach’s choice of theme was admittedly somewhat brazen. Spitzer’s deep reservations about historical method were, and are, well known. Auerbach, moreover, was just a year into his first teaching post at Marburg, and Spitzer had left almost as soon as Auerbach arrived (a turn of events that would repeat itself in 1936 in Istanbul, when Spitzer, having helped appoint Auerbach as his own successor, left for Johns Hopkins before Auerbach could even arrive). Was Auerbach being deliberately provocative?<sup>7</sup> And anyway, how could history possibly provide a foundation for the humanities, and specifically for literary study?

Undaunted, Auerbach goes on to outline the role of the modern researcher in relation to the mission he has just proclaimed: because history is not a fortuitous sequence of events, historians in the fullest sense of the word must seek to unravel the logic inherent in those events; and doing so is premised on the belief, which must not only be premised but also deeply cherished, that “the wealth of events in human life which unfold in earthly time constitutes a totality, a coherent development or meaningful whole, in which each individual event is embedded in a variety of ways and through which it can be interpreted.” The language is taken almost verbatim from Auerbach’s dissertation, *On the Technique of the Early Renaissance Novella in Italy and France*, which further emphasizes the “infinite” character of these events in all their “wealth” and the “sensuousness of life.”<sup>8</sup> Alas, a perfect grasp of any such totality is forbidden, and so one is thrown back upon some less than perfect means of intuiting the logic of events—call this feeling, intuition, or speculation. The inquirer proceeds by such means; she interprets, but “often

<sup>6</sup>See also “Vico’s Contribution to Literary Criticism” (here Chapter 1), a brief and accessible statement, and its expansion in Auerbach’s introduction to *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, Ralph Manheim, trans. (New York: Pantheon, 1965; rpt. Princeton University Press, 1993; German original 1958) 6–24.

<sup>7</sup>Their tensions were publically visible. See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Vom Leben und Sterben der großen Romanisten: Karl Vossler, Ernst Robert Curtius, Leo Spitzer, Erich Auerbach, Werner Krauss* (Munich: Hanser, 2002) 164.

<sup>8</sup>*Zur Technik der Frührenaissancenovelle in Italien und Frankreich* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1921) 38. Similarly, *Dante* (n. 5 above) 144: “wealth of experiences” (trans. adapted); and *Literary Language and Its Public* (n. 6 above) 21, on the historical method which compels us “to set forth our consciousness of ourselves here and now, in all its wealth and limitations.”



unconsciously”; and when she does, she is driven as much by “practical and ethical needs” as by scholarly ones.

*Philology* is the name that Auerbach, following Vico, gives to all such interpretive activity.<sup>9</sup> It was in redirecting the thrust of his field that Auerbach’s originality lay, not in his characterization of historical inquiry *per se*, which if anything was a fairly well developed (if not universally accepted) view in much of the German academy at the time, in the wake of Hegel, Dilthey, Croce, and Troeltsch, though not in Romance philology. On the contrary, Auerbach’s mentors and peers—Karl Vossler, Victor Klemperer, Ernst Robert Curtius, Leo Spitzer, and Eugen Lerch—sought to understand the meaning of culture through language and literature, often treating these latter as self-standing aesthetic phenomena that were best grasped through immediate intuition—an enterprise that tended to sunder art from reality, and both from history.<sup>10</sup> Where they pressed philology in the direction of stylistics and aesthetics in reaction to the dry positivism of nineteenth-century Romance philology, Auerbach at times appeared to be conducting something more akin to historical sociology, which rendered his nomenclature all the more idiosyncratic.

What he has in mind with “philology” is an endeavor that goes well beyond the conventional meaning of the term, which had roughly the same

<sup>9</sup>See Auerbach’s “Vorrede” [Preface] to Giambattista Vico, *Die neue Wissenschaft über die gemeinschaftliche Natur der Völker*. Abridged and translated with an introduction by Erich Auerbach (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1924) 9–39; here 29: “Vico understands by *philology* everything that we label as the human sciences today: all of history in the narrower sense: sociology, national economy, history of religion, language, law, and art; and he demands that these empirical sciences should become one with philosophy.” He is paraphrasing Vico, *Scienza Nuova* 1744, “Spiegazione della dipintura” and “Degli elementi” X (Vico, *Opere*, 3rd ed. [A. Battistini, ed. Milan: Arnaldo Mondadori, 2001] 1: 419, 498. See further, “Giambattista Vico and the Idea of Philology” (here Chapter 3) and “Vico’s Contribution to Literary Criticism” (here Chapter 1).

<sup>10</sup>Compare Vossler, *Sprache als Schöpfung und Entwicklung: Eine theoretische Untersuchung mit praktischen Beispielen* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1905): “Pure intuition is art” (emphasis in original). Hence, “the elaborations of art cannot be measured against reality” (15). Nothing could be more alien to Auerbach than a view like this. Leaning on Bergson, the younger Curtius arrived at parallel views (*Die literarischen Wegbereiter des neuen Frankreich* [Potsdam: G. Kiepenheuer, 1920] 31–38). Curtius eventually abandoned his infatuation with Bergsonian vitalism, only to retreat into another form of ahistoricism. See his *Deutscher Geist in Gefahr* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1932) 13, 33; further, Karlheinz Barck, “Flucht in die Tradition: Erfahrungshintergründe Erich Auerbachs zwischen Exil und Emigration,” in Aleida Assmann and Anselm Haverkamp, eds., *Stimme, Figur: Kritik und Restitution in der Literaturwissenschaft* (Stuttgart and Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 1994) 47–60; here 58–60; Gumbrecht, *Vom Leben und Sterben der großen Romanisten* (n. 7 above) 9–71. Curtius clung to his stance to the bitter end. See Robert Fitzgerald, *Enlarging the Change: The Princeton Seminars in Literary Criticism, 1949–1951* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985) 22, summarizing the rather heated exchange of views at Auerbach’s 1949 Gauss lectures at Princeton (“Curtius replied flatly that words make shapes of beauty, not states of consciousness but artistic states”); *ibid.* 36–37 (a sample). Auerbach’s reply was characteristically indirect and deeply felt (*ibid.* 26, repeated in “Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du Mal* und das Erhabene” [1951], in Erich Auerbach, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur romanischen Philologie* [Bern and Munich: A. Francke, 1967] 290).



set of connotations in the 1930s as it does today—namely, the love of words and literature manifested through the study of texts, their language, meaning, transmission, classification, translation, and so on. Not that Auerbach was uninterested in philology in the narrow sense, or that he was unequipped to handle its steepest challenges. “*Figura*,” his classic essay on the meaning of a single term and its vicissitudes from classical antiquity to Dante, shows Auerbach coming as close as he ever does to putting on display, in a magisterial fashion, all the skills of a German philologist, while ranging over a millennium and a half of recondite grammatical, literary, rhetorical, and theological learning. But, in the end, not even “*Figura*” can be shelved alongside philological scholarship, because it too is an exercise in deep intellectual history, not lexicography. There is something faintly paradoxical, or else subtly polemical, about the essay, tracking as it does the relentlessly linear history of a phenomenon that, Auerbach claims, insists on locating events in concrete historical time from within a tradition whose *telos* and ultimate meaning ought to lie outside time altogether: Christianity. But more on this in a moment. We must first return to Auerbach’s understanding of history, which he owed in no small part to his encounters with Vico, Herder, and Hegel.

History for Auerbach is a rich concept. In the essay on Vico and Herder we begin to understand why. The first element that stands out in his definition of history is the word “earthly”—*irdisch* in German, which can also mean “secular” or “(this-)worldly.” History is plainly—even militantly—a secular concept in Auerbach’s mind. But it is this because it designates the full scope of human and humane activity: it maps out life in all its vital richness. Further, history is made up of specific, individual elements (events in life), not abstract universals, and these are multiply related to one another and to the whole that meaningfully contains them. Discerning their meaning is an essential, if not *the* essential, human activity for Auerbach. It involves what he calls a “horizontal reading of history’s unfolding,” because history works itself out across time in a linear, developmental fashion, in contrast to a “vertical” assignment of meaning from above. To read along the former axis of meaning is to grasp history as a process that is immanent to the world. To read “vertically” is to grasp history as providential, transcendent, and divinely ordained. “Earthly” carries this mark of difference wherever it occurs in Auerbach’s writings, as it does with astonishing frequency—which is not to say that earthly history is altogether devoid of vertical meaning. At its richest, human history reveals vertical significance, not of the sort that descends from above, but the kind of meaning that resides in the very depths of the (worldly) surfaces of life, which is to say human history as it is “re-evok[ed] . . . from the depth of our own consciousness” (“Vico and Aesthetic Historism,” here Chapter 4; cf. *Mimesis*, 43–44, 444, 552).

All of these notions combined—history as secular, vital, and concrete, as human and humane—are the singular object of Auerbach’s philology, which

is what makes it in the end an earthly, this-worldly philology, a true philology of world history.<sup>11</sup> In “The Philology of World Literature” (1952, here Chapter 20), Auerbach goes so far as to count himself among “the philologists of the world,” virtually coining a new label for his discipline: *Weltphilologie*. *Weltphilologie* is not, in fact, a new coinage, because the term had enjoyed a limited circulation since the late eighteenth century as a marker of progressive and radical thought. Whether or not Auerbach knew these precedents, he was nevertheless pressing ahead in the same spirit of conceptual and practical reform. In this light, contemporary extrapolations of “world philology” in the direction of “global literature” are probably over-readings of Auerbach’s more limited intentions. By “world” Auerbach understands either “this world” of the here and now or else the world of the European West, much along the lines of the theologian and philosopher of history Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923), with whom Auerbach studied while he was at Heidelberg and Berlin and whom he acknowledges for having awakened his interest in Vico (“Vorrede” 39).<sup>12</sup>

“Earthly” occurs as a virtual leitmotif in Auerbach’s writings. The word features conspicuously in the title of the first book he published after his 1921 dissertation, *Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt* (1929), which appeared under the English title of *Dante: Poet of the Secular World* (1961). The rendering is unfortunate, as it gets the accent wrong. Of concern to Auerbach in this study is not the world as a secular entity, but the earthly character of the world in its experiential particularity, vividness, and proximity to life. The word “earthly” continues to resonate in all of Auerbach’s writings, down to his posthumously published *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages* (German edition 1958; English translation 1965), for instance on the penultimate page, where Auerbach describes “the strange moral dialectic of Christianity,” which is his way of glossing “the scandal of [Christianity’s] corruption” from the previous page:

God’s realm is not of this world; *but how can the living remain aloof from the earthly realm?* And are they justified in doing so, seeing that Christ himself entered into earthly affairs? Their duty as Christians is not to remain stoically aloof from earthly concerns but to submit to suffering. And

<sup>11</sup>Cf. *Literary Language and Its Public* (n. 6 above) 16: “The systematic context of all human history . . . is Vico’s subject, which, in line with Vico’s own terminology, we may equally well call philology or philosophy.” Such study “is concerned with only one thing—mankind.”

<sup>12</sup>Troeltsch actually equates Europeanism with world history: “For us there is only a world history of Europe” (*Der Historismus und seine Probleme* 1: *Das logische Problem der Geschichtsphilosophie* [Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1922] 708). Elsewhere, too, Troeltsch sounds uncannily like Auerbach (or rather, vice versa). See his pages on “Europeanism,” *ibid.* 703–30, esp. 704–5. And see the translation of Auerbach’s 1941–42 lecture, “Realism in Europe in the Nineteenth Century,” reproduced in Kader Konuk, *East West Mimesis: Auerbach in Turkey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010) 182.

how can one tolerate the fact that the Church itself, the Pope, the bishops, and the monasteries sink into the depths of earthly corruption, with the result that souls are led astray and fall victim to eternal damnation?<sup>13</sup> Is this to be endured? And if not, how can it be averted if not by energetic counteractivity in the earthly world, *where on the other hand the activity of the living can never be anything but biased in favor of earthly existence?* (337; trans. adapted; emphasis added)

Auerbach's analysis is rather astonishing. Is it the work of a philologist? Surely it is not the work of a Romance philologist, though perhaps it is that of an earthly, worldly philologist. Here, he is taking as his object a dilemma—indeed, a “paradox” (338)—that lies at the heart of the Christian faith and practice, and diagnosing this as a form of spiritual and psychological “anxiety,” which he goes on, a page later, to describe as the “eschatological disquiet of the Christian.” Auerbach then proceeds to make two further remarkable points: first, this anxiety is as fundamental to the Christian faith as is its belief in salvation itself; and second, this same anxiety has been an essential catalyst of moral, political, and philosophical change in the *secular* world in the West. As Auerbach sees things, Christianity posited an ineradicable paradox for mankind—namely, the problem of reconciling an eternal ideal with earthly temporality, and above all the riddle of God's Incarnation, which is to say his engagement with history (Christ's own historicity). Moreover, Christ's messianic project crucially *failed*. In Auerbach's words, Christianity was “a movement which by its very nature could not remain fully spiritual” and was “never fully actualized . . . in the world”—“all that was a lamentable failure” (*Dante* 12, 13).<sup>14</sup> And yet, it was by means of this very paradox that Christianity helped to propel the world forward into time and history, by serving as a (gradually) vanishing mediator and “creating the conditions for its own suppression and withering away.”<sup>15</sup>

While there is much to ponder in this judgment from Auerbach's posthumous work, of equal note is its longevity in his thought. The same theme happens to structure one of his most compelling essays, “On Rousseau's Place

<sup>13</sup>Most spectacularly as displayed in Dante's *Inferno*. See also “The Three Traits of Dante's Poetry” (here Chapter 15).

<sup>14</sup>See also *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, W.R. Trask, trans. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953; rpt. 2003) 76: “Such attempts *were bound to founder*. . . .” Further, Martin Trembl, “Auerbachs imaginäre jüdische Orte,” in Barck and Trembl, eds., *Erich Auerbach* (n. 1 above) 244.

<sup>15</sup>For this last concept, see Fredric Jameson, “The Vanishing Mediator, or, Max Weber as Storyteller,” in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays, 1971–1986* 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) 3–34; and Étienne Balibar, “Europe as Vanishing Mediator,” *Constellations* 10.3 (2003) 312–38; quotation 334. The classic example of this concept is Protestantism as analyzed by Max Weber, whose work of 1904/5 (rev. ed. 1920) was very likely familiar to Auerbach, at the very least *via* Troeltsch.

in History” (1932, here Chapter 19). A mere five pages long in the original, the essay is a brilliant cameo of this great Enlightenment thinker standing athwart the threshold of modernity, bewildered by competing allegiances, caught in a double bind between faith and reason. In a nutshell, Rousseau “was constitutionally Christian, a Christian *in potentia*”; but by the same token, “he was unable to actualize this potential Christianity.” The consequences of this dilemma are devastating for Rousseau. Auerbach describes him as a clinical disaster: he presents neurological symptoms, and a morbid insecurity in the face of life. He felt unwell, irresolute, tortured, and estranged from a world that appeared to him fundamentally wrong and corrupted—in short, he was not a pretty sight. We might call him a post-Christian neurotic. Rousseau’s pessimism toward the world and its disappointments was, Auerbach says, as much a natural consequence of his loss of faith in Christianity itself (his “crisis of Christianity”) as it was of his lingering attachment to the Christian schema of values and attitudes despite his adoption of Enlightenment principles. It was not so much that the world had lost value as it was that religion could no longer redeem the world. Formally and “dispositionally” speaking, Rousseau remained a Christian (this was apparent in the very *habitus* by which he grasped the world and his place in it), but not confessionally speaking, and in no other respect either. Caught between conflicting stances, Rousseau vacillated uncomfortably in between, with no refuge in sight.

As plausible as all this may sound as a psychological portrait of a complex figure on the cusp of our own modernity (even though Auerbach insists that his account is historically and not clinically motivated), the truly interesting point is that Rousseau’s condition betrays something symptomatic about Christians generally, and not only in their “critical epochs,” such as the one through which Rousseau exemplarily lived: namely, that “*uncertainty*”—or “*insecurity*”—“*in the earthly world is a Christian motif*.” This last observation is found elsewhere in Auerbach’s writings, for instance in his 1941 essay “On Pascal’s Political Theory” (Chapter 17, this volume).<sup>16</sup> There, Auerbach exposes in Pascal’s ultra-Christian thinking the germs of an un-Christian and even anti-Christian logic—a logic that, in the essay on Rousseau, he had described as a form of Christian ambivalence and which he also found em-

<sup>16</sup>The essay has a complex publication history. It first appeared in 1946 in a Turkish journal, *Felsefe Arkivi* [Archives of Philosophy], under the title, “Der Triumph des Bösen: Versuch über Pascals polische [sic] Theorie” [The Triumph of Evil: An Essay on Pascal’s Political Theory], though the essay was completed in 1941, as Auerbach indicates on the last page of the article. A revised and expanded version appeared as a chapter of *Vier Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der französischen Bildung* (1951), under the title, “Über Pascals politische Theorie” [On Pascal’s Political Theory] (rpt. *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, 1967). In the same year, an English version, presumably produced by Auerbach himself, was published in the *Hudson Review* (“The Triumph of Evil in Pascal”). Chapter 17 below is based on the 1967 version. But because the core of all four versions goes back to 1941, this is the reference date being adopted in the present volume.

bedded in Dante's peculiar form of realism (to be discussed momentarily). The irony of the essay from 1941 is that Pascal, the devout and grimly ascetic believer, paves the way for the atheistic Enlightenment and its "polemic against Christianity," a polemic that ironically originated from *within* Christianity itself. One need look no further, Auerbach reasons, than to the precarious logic of Christian self-hatred (of which asceticism is but a species), to the Christian duty to submit to worldly suffering, or to "God's sacrifice of Himself"—literally, his "submission"—"to earthly reality," which in turn is the source of all subsequent religious pathos and "tragic realism" ("all of European tragic realism depends on this"<sup>17</sup>), in order to find an explanation for this kind of "de-Christianization" from within. "De-Christianization" is another rubric-like theme that runs through Auerbach's writings from start to finish as one of their more insistent, if subterranean, motifs.

### Dante's *Summa Vitae Humanae*

Finally, in order to tie together some of the major strands of thinking that weave in and out of Auerbach's writings over the course of his career, it will be necessary to go back to his 1929 masterpiece on Dante. There we see how the shrewd diagnosis of Christianity's dilemmas found in Auerbach's 1932 essay on Rousseau had already taken form in his mind three years earlier—indeed, it actually lay at the center of his view of Dante's great work. In *Dante as Poet of the Earthly World*,<sup>18</sup> we read how Christianity is in fact founded upon the same lack of quiet that tormented Rousseau—indeed, how "Christ himself lived in continuous conflict" about his own calling, thereby creating the prototype of Christian ambivalence (14). All such ambivalence goes beyond the awkward balancing act of a subject who is caught with one foot in this world and another in the Beyond, because it marks an antinomy that is rooted within the Christian faith itself and is part of its defining DNA (Auerbach will later call this its inner "antagonism"). Consequently, in his work on Dante, Auerbach offers nothing less than a reassessment of Christianity in its psychological and phenomenological core, which he locates in sheer paradox and tension, starting with its "historical kernel," which consists of a man, Christ, who embodies godhood, and the terrible clash between these

<sup>17</sup> *Introduction aux études de philologie romane* (Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann, 1949) 57; see "Romanticism and Realism" (here Chapter 12).

<sup>18</sup> This is also how Auerbach renders the title in the English version of his *curriculum vitae* that he submitted to the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars in February 1941 when he petitioned, unsuccessfully, for asylum (a process he had initiated starting at least in September 1935, and then reactivated virtually every year thereafter until May/June 1943). I am grateful to Martin Vialon for making these documents available to me in advance of his own publication of this extraordinary find.

two poles (11; trans. adapted; see also 178: “that entirely Christian tension and intensity, which was Dante’s gift to posterity”; trans. adapted).

Auerbach is keen to compare this phenomenon to its classical precedents, and just as in *Mimesis* it is the biblical tradition that stands out as superior in richness, complexity, and compelling power:

The historical core of Christianity . . . offers a more radical paradox, a wider range of contradiction, than anything known to the ancient world, either in its history or in its mythical tradition. . . . This entire episode [sc., of God’s Incarnation and Passion] was to provoke the greatest of all transformations in the inner and outward history of our civilized world. (*Dante* 11)

Nor is this all. One might have imagined that Christianity entailed a disparagement of this earth and a pining for the Beyond, but Auerbach introduces an unexpected wrinkle: it was the classical traditions of wisdom (Auerbach names Epicureanism and Stoicism) that had detached themselves from the here and now, while Christianity by contrast *intensified* the sensibility for, and attachment to, earthly existence, a fact that its core “myth” both advertises and embodies symptomatically (12–13). That is, Christianity intensified the potential for a subjective embrace of human reality, which (as we saw) can only occur through the convergence of three factors: history, lived experience in the present, and a (tragic, i.e., fleeting) sense of meaning and depth, which is to say, of potentials that exceed the surfaces of life.

This reversal of the accustomed roles of the pagan and Christian worlds is highly provocative, to say the least. Attachment to this world in Christianity, however, comes not in the form of an unequivocal embracing of the mundane (a yearning for the Hereafter remains potent), but in the form of an utter submission to earthly destiny—an acceptance of one’s mortal lot, of one’s humility and humanity, of historical time, and (not least) of the historicity of Christ—“of the appearance of Christ as a *concrete* event, as a central fact of *world history*” (16; trans. adapted; emphasis added). Hence the significance, which Auerbach repeatedly underscores, of Christ’s Incarnation and his Passion, as opposed to his Resurrection and Ascension. Auerbach is not drawing a fine theological distinction. On the contrary, he is making a critical and historical point, very much in line with the writings of his teacher Troeltsch, who sought to bracket, through historical analysis, the *mysterium* of Christ.<sup>19</sup> Like Auerbach, Troeltsch viewed the story of Christ as a “decisive”

<sup>19</sup> See esp. Ernst Troeltsch, *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte*, 2nd rev. ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1912). Troeltsch’s influence on Auerbach’s view of history is well recognized. See, most recently, Graf’s introduction to Ernst Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, 1: *Das logische Problem der Geschichtsphilosophie*, Friedrich Wilhelm Graf and Matthias Schlossberger, eds. (Berlin: W. De Gruyter, 2008) 1–157. But in the areas of theology and religion the impact of Troeltsch’s critical historicism on Auerbach has been neglected. Troeltsch’s views are

step forward in the historical awareness of mankind; unlike Troeltsch, Auerbach adds the crucial twist of existential agony. Approaching the foundational fact of Christianity in this way, as residing in Christ's Incarnation and Passion ("the true heart of the Christian doctrine," *Mimesis* 72) and not in his Ascension to a Beyond, allows Auerbach to treat Christian faith as an encounter with a "story" or "narrative," but above all as a "history" (*Geschichte*), which is to say as an event in time, and an emotionally fraught one at that, because it was rooted in deeply unsettling paradox. Christianity thus shows itself to be the incarnation less of Spirit than of conflicting aspirations.<sup>20</sup>

Dante's achievement was to capture this unsettled frame of mind through the compelling mimetic character that he gave to his souls: though they are mere wraiths, nominally dead and transported to another world, they talk, have consciousness, memories, passions, and seem to us (and even to themselves) very much as if they were still alive in the here and now. In fact, "the souls of Dante's otherworld are not dead men," Auerbach insists, almost counterintuitively, though he is merely rephrasing the logic of Dante's poem: "No, . . . they are the truly living," more real than dead, more *earthly* and *concrete* than they seem spirited away into a Beyond (134). This is the triumph of Dante's "naturalism" (146),<sup>21</sup> which is more than a triumph of mimetic realism in the narrow literary sense: it wrests from the afterlife the vitality of living creatures conditioned by time and presents them in all their "contingent and particular" glory (150; trans. adapted). Auerbach dubs them for this reason *Zeitmenschen* (creatures of time), a term used in German philosophy and theology from the middle of the eighteenth century onward to distinguish the temporal aspect of humanity from its eternal and spiritual quality, but which in Auerbach's hands takes on a somewhat stronger meaning: for he is insisting, along with Dante, that temporal beings are to be found in the

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laid out in a number of his writings, above all in *Die Bedeutung der Geschichtlichkeit Jesu für den Glauben* [The Significance of the Historicity of Jesus for the Christian Faith] (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1911); *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (n. 12 above) 14–16; *Glaubenslehre: Nach Heidelberger Vorlesungen aus den Jahren 1911 und 1912* (Munich: Duncker & Humblot, 1925); and in *Die Abso-lutheit des Christentums*. That the paradoxes of Incarnation were in the air at the time is shown by Lothar Helbing's *Der dritte Humanismus* (Berlin: Verlag Die Runde, 1932) 42.

<sup>20</sup> Auerbach repeats part of his argument from *Dante* in his later essay on Baudelaire ([n. 10 above] 285), noting the relevance of Christ's Incarnation and Passion to "every Christian interpretation of *life*" (emphasis added). See further *Literary Language and Its Public* (n. 6 above) 40–47, 52, 315–16. Cf. also Auerbach's telling letter to Croce about Vico, dating from March 1936: "On the other hand, even those who are Christians among today's scholars will no longer claim that Genesis is an exact and scientific description of physical creation. . . . And I believe that a philosopher who was more liberal in his interpretation of faith [such as Vico] would not be compelled to regard the birth of Christ as a fact of material [viz., "embodied"] transcendence" (Ottavio Besomi, ed., *Il carteggio Croce-Auerbach* [Bellinzona: Archivio Storico Ticinese, 1977] 29).

<sup>21</sup> See Max Dvořák's *Idealismus und Naturalismus in der gotischen Skulptur und Malerei* (Berlin: R. Oldenbourg, 1918), which is referred to by Auerbach for this very concept (*Dante* [n. 5 above] 20).



eternal afterlife, and that this temporality captures an essential aspect of their being (“man requires a temporal process, history or destiny, in order to fulfill himself,” 85). Though superficially in line with Thomist psychology, Auerbach’s reading in fact points elsewhere.<sup>22</sup>

Dante, Auerbach believes, made two significant innovations over his predecessors, and these were linked: he “discovered” the individual *living* person, and he achieved a novel “vision of reality.”

With the discovery of individual destiny, modern mimesis discovered the person. It lifted him out of the two-dimensional irreality of a remoteness that was only constructed or imagined and placed him in *the realm of history, which is his true home*. . . . The immanent realism and historicism that are found in the eschatology of the *Divine Comedy* flowed back into actual history and filled it with the lifeblood of authentic truth. . . . Radiating out from here, history as such—the life of the human being as this is given and in its earthly character—underwent a vitalization and acquired a new value. Even the *Divine Comedy* barely manages to subdue the wild spirits of life within the framework of its eschatology, and one senses how quickly and forcefully these spirits will soon prise themselves loose from their constraints. With Petrarch and Boccaccio the historical realm becomes a fully earthly and autonomous entity, and from there the fecundating stream of sensuous and historical evidence [*Evidenz*: a principle of empirical discernibility and proof] spills forth over Europe—to all appearances utterly removed from its eschatological origins, and yet secretly connected to these by the bonds that hold man fast to his concrete and historical destiny. (217; my translation; emphasis added; Engl. trans. 178)

Dante’s poem documents a turning point in history that was all the harder to track because it was history itself that was coming to life. Against all odds, Auerbach’s counterintuitive interpretation is unflinching and radical: “Thus, even though the *Divine Comedy* describes the state of souls after death, *its subject, in the last analysis, remains earthly life in all its complexity*; everything that happens below or in the heavens above relates to *human drama here on earth*” (132; trans. adapted; emphasis added). Auerbach’s subsequent readings of Dante, whether in “The Discovery of Dante by Romanticism”

<sup>22</sup>For the Thomist theory of self-realization in the afterlife, see Étienne Gilson, *Le thomisme: Introduction au système de Saint Thomas D’Aquin*, revised and expanded ed. (Paris: J. Vrin, 1922; 1st ed. 1920) esp. 138–151 and 208–12. Acknowledging this influence, Auerbach also notes the poet’s various licenses and divergences from Catholic orthodoxy (e.g., *Dante* [n. 5 above]) 71–73, 81, 87, 116; cf. 27–28). See further Helmut Kuhn, “Literaturgeschichte als Geschichtsphilosophie,” *Philosophische Rundschau* 11.3–4 (1964) 222–248, esp. 248 (quoted n. 43 below), which in this and several other respects remains unsurpassed as a study of Auerbach’s thought—with one stunning exception (see n. 24 below).

(1929, here Chapter 11), “Dante and Vergil” (1931, here Chapter 10), *Mimesis* (1946), “The Three Traits of Dante’s Poetry” (1948, here Chapter 15), or “Typological Symbolism in Medieval Literature” (1952, here Chapter 8), are all embellishments on this single interpretive premise, which is adumbrated already in “On the Anniversary Celebration of Dante” (1921, here Chapter 9).

In reading the poem in this way, Auerbach could not have taken a line more unlike his mentor’s had he wished to do so. In his several works on Dante, Vossler held that the poet was an unwavering dogmatic, steeped in Thomist theology and psychology, whose poem could nevertheless be finally understood only as a work of art: it bore no relation to reality—not even a figural one—because Dante had so stylized his poem’s contents with his imagination as to cut them off entirely from all “earthly existence,” and virtually from all other forms of cultural expression as well.<sup>23</sup> The *Divine Comedy* for Vossler was not a document of the historical world of the *trecento*, but merely an instance of one man’s religious belief transposed into an idiosyncratic aesthetic form.

By contrast, Dante’s vision was for Auerbach an agent of profound cultural change. The logic of his poetry led not to an embrace of transcendence but to “something new,” an unprecedented sense of historical immediacy and a rich capacity for grasping human experience in its most vital if vulnerable aspects. As a result, Dante was realizing a potential within the Christian theological worldview that led to the dissolution of that worldview altogether. In Dante, “the indestructibility of the whole historical and individual man turns *against* [the divine] order . . . and obscures it. The image of man eclipses the image of God. Dante’s work realized the Christian-figural essence of man, and destroyed it in the very process of realizing it” (*Mimesis* 202; trans. adapted).<sup>24</sup> The general picture of secularization starting in the latter half of the twelfth century and eventuating in “the autonomous value of earthly things” was widely accepted at the time.<sup>25</sup> Auerbach complicates this narrative through a series of dark and riveting readings, in the present case by locating the secular turn, *volens nolens*, within the impeccably devout mind of Dante—a

<sup>23</sup>Karl Vossler, *Die philosophischen Grundlagen zum “süssen neuen Stil” des Guido Guinicelli, Guido Cavalcanti und Dante Alighieri* (Heidelberg: C. Winter’s Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1904); *Dante als religiöser Dichter* (Bern: Seldwyla, 1921) esp. 9–10; *Die göttliche Komödie*, 2nd rev. ed., 2 vols. (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1925) esp. 1:124–26 and 2:625.

<sup>24</sup>Kuhn (“Literaturgeschichte als Geschichtsphilosophie” [n. 22 above] 242) misses the boat here: “How can consummation be destructive?” But to ask this is to misapprehend the fundamental logic that governs cultural and historical change according to Auerbach, both here and everywhere else (cf. “Rousseau”: “in historical occurrences, culminating moments and the first signs of crisis coincide”; “The Philology of World Literature”: if the number of languages in the world were to be reduced to a few or even to one, as they appear to be headed, “the idea of world literature would simultaneously be realized and destroyed”).

<sup>25</sup>See Dvořák’s art-historical work, *Idealismus und Naturalismus* (n. 21 above; the quotation is from p. 91); Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (n. 12 above).

rather heretical stance.<sup>26</sup> As it happens, the kernel of this idea was already in place in Auerbach's dissertation of 1921: "The passionate contemplation of earthly life [which emerges with the early Renaissance novella in Italy and France] derives from him" (*Zur Technik* 3)—that is, from Dante, who after all was for Auerbach a poet not of the other world, but of the *earthly* world.

### Vico, History, and the Ethics of the Real

Dante was without a doubt Auerbach's most adored literary author long before he learned to identify with him as a fellow political exile (see "On the Anniversary Celebration of Dante" and "Three Traits"). The kindred sympathy that he felt with the poet was very likely based on a deeper form of exilic experience that Auerbach knew in his own person and that he leaves all but unstated.<sup>27</sup> And yet, as original, powerful, and convincing as Auerbach's reading of Dante may be, in some ways he is merely retracing Hegel's own reading of the *Divine Comedy* (he names this debt explicitly in "The Discovery of Dante by the Romantics" and in *Mimesis*), and in other respects he is freely transposing a Hegelian template onto the great medieval poet. Also palpable in Auerbach's revisioning of Dante is the philosophical imagination of Vico, to whom Auerbach owed his sense of the particular, the concrete, and the contingent. Vico's critical empiricism and realism, possibly filtered through Auerbach's reading of Croce,<sup>28</sup> serve as a healthy antidote to Hegelian speculativeness and universalism for Auerbach. On the other hand, both Hegel and Vico believed in history as a providential force. Not so Auerbach, whose overarching vision of history knows no redemptive safeguards and no supervising providential instance.<sup>29</sup> On the contrary, history for Auerbach is riddled with uncertainties, and historical awareness means nothing less than

<sup>26</sup> Vossler certainly thought so, and criticized Auerbach on these very grounds in his mixed review of the book (*Deutsche Literaturzeitung* 50.2 [1929] 69–72). Vossler's verdict was only to be expected. Auerbach had anticipated it himself (letter to Vossler, 9 January 1929, in *Und wirst erfahren wie das Brot der Fremde so salzig schmeckt: Erich Auerbachs Briefe an Karl Vossler 1926–1948*, Vialon, ed. [Warmbronn: Ulrich Keicher, 2007] 6).

<sup>27</sup> See Vialon, ed., *Und wirst erfahren wie das Brot der Fremde so salzig schmeckt* (n. 26 above) 30–38, and the end of this introduction.

<sup>28</sup> And possibly also filtered through Troeltsch's brilliant analysis of Croce in the light of both Vico and Hegel in *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (n. 12 above) 617–32.

<sup>29</sup> Vico, he claims, was the last person on earth who succeeded in achieving such a vision of faith ("Giambattista Vico," in *Der neue Merkur* 6 (1922) 249–52; here 249. He later qualifies this view, calling Vico's system "godless" ("Vorrede" [n. 9 above] 35). And in a 1935 letter to Croce he goes further still, doubting that Vico's work is redemptive at all, and concluding that it cannot be considered Christian at its core—while referring back to his "Vorrede" of 1924 for supporting arguments (Besomi, *Il carteggio Croce-Auerbach* [n. 20 above] 29). The same premise is articulated in the 1932 essay, "Montaigne the Writer" (here Chapter 16): "[T]here is practically no trace of hope or salvation in the *Essays*," which is why he finds them "un-Christian."

the acceptance of this difficult fact over time, and the wisdom that comes with it.

The largest historical pattern that Auerbach's writings chart is carefully designed to exemplify this vision. History for Auerbach is marked by two major ruptures, each constituting moments when vertical, transcendental meaning is shattered in the course of the horizontal, forward propulsion of history, while history is etched in turn with the scars of these traumatic unfoldings, and so acquires a depth of its own. First there is the devaluation (*Entwertung*) of Judaism through Christianity, then there is the de-Christianization (*Entchristung*) of Christianity (from both within and without). Occupying the two extremes are pagan antiquity, which is essentially depthless (despite some exceptions, Sophoclean tragedy above all), and post-Enlightenment modernity, the fate of which has yet to be determined. Auerbach has more than a historian's investment in documenting what today would be called this "historical turn," by which the religious insecurity witnessed above is overcome and the sensuous, earthly, and secular world is ushered in. It is the this-worldly elements of reality, its human, earthly side, that constitute the source of every value that matters to Auerbach in the end, be it historical or ethical or, as is most often the case, both of these combined. "The realm of history," after all, is mankind's "true home."

In Auerbach's dynamic scheme, history entails sure gains and certain losses. Thus, Christianity absorbed the Jewish tradition of reinterpretation, "now applied with incomparably greater boldness" to the Jewish Scriptures themselves, with a consequential "devaluation" of the Jewish religion (*Mimesis* 48; cf. 15–16). This is the famous origin of figural revision. Christianity could not, however, have succeeded without the lessons it learned from Judaism's capacity first to conceive and interpret the world historically (based on its notion of universal, "world-historical" events) and then to organize this history into a single coherent transcendental order (*ibid.* 17). In doing so, Christianity inherited not merely a religious sensibility, but an ineluctable *antagonism*: "the antagonism between sensory appearance and meaning, an antagonism which permeates the early, and indeed the whole, Christian view of reality" (*ibid.* 49). Christianity rose and fell on the rock of this antagonism, which troubled the very heart of its figural recuperation of history, of Judaism, and of earthly life itself, while this last ingredient remained both a reservoir of dynamic energy and an indigestible element:

The figural interpretation of history emerged unqualifiedly victorious. Yet it was no fully adequate substitute for the lost comprehension of rational, continuous, earthly connections between things, and it could not be applied to any random occurrence, although of course there was no dearth of attempts to submit everything that happened to an interpretation directly from above. Such attempts were bound to founder on the

multiplicity of events and the unfathomableness of the divine councils. *And so vast regions of events remained without any principle by which they might be classified and comprehended*—especially after the fall of the Roman Empire. . . . It was a very long time before the germs contained in Christian thought (the mixture of styles, a deep insight into the processes of becoming), sustained by the sensuality of peoples who were not yet exhausted,<sup>30</sup> could take root in all their vigor. (*Mimesis* 75–76; trans. adapted; emphasis added)

In Auerbach's eyes, gaps existed in the Christian theory of the world, which were in fact more than mere gaps because they represented systematic flaws in that theory, being symptoms of its manifold inheritances but also of its innermost inconsistency, which not even invoking the divine mystery could paper over, and which eventually would lead to the collapse of Christianity as a dominant worldview altogether. When it finally arrived, the new world of secular, historicized reality proved to be infinitely “richer, deeper, and more dangerous than pagan antiquity's culture of the person, *for it inherited from the Christian religion* out of which it sprang and which it finally overcame *a sense of disquiet and a drive towards excessiveness*” (*Dante* 215; my translation; emphasis added; Engl. trans. 176).

This is a striking diagnosis. Christianity may be a source of psychological disquiet, but can it actually be labeled a source of excessive tendencies? For Auerbach this is most unambiguously the case. Christianity dwells in a permanent state of crisis and insecurity, as we saw, and now we can add that it does so *out of a fundamental lack*. Its restless impulse—its being driven not simply by a need for more, but by a need for “too much,” for excess (*das Zuviel*), as illustrated by a promised Beyond, Last Judgment, and final salvation—is *compensatory* (in relation to a felt deficiency), but also forever inadequate given the structural role of this impulse within the larger edifice of Christian metaphysics. Once again, history is seen to be the transmission of gains and losses, but also of transformative effects. Only now it becomes apparent that secular modernity inherits one more feature from Christianity—a dangerous set of impulses.

<sup>30</sup> “Exhausted,” which is to say, by the process of Christianization, which in turn drew upon their as yet untapped reservoirs of sensuality. None of this is apparent from the rendering by Trask (“reinforced by the sensuality of new peoples”), though Auerbach's formulation is admittedly rather compressed and somewhat brutal (*unterstützt von der Sinnlichkeit noch unzermürbter Völker*). Contrast the Jewish interpretive dynamic described earlier: “Doctrine and the search for enlightenment are inextricably connected with the sensuous aspect of the narrative (*mit der Sinnlichkeit der Erzählung*),” which Christianity threatened to banish altogether (ibid. 15; trans. adapted). The same idea appears in *Dante* (n. 5 above) 13: the “innermost sensory ground” of world views held by various peoples and races, to which “the apparatus of Christian dogma could be adapted more easily,” etc.

Caught between competing cultural forces, mankind also appears to be caught between competing instincts—for instance, between the powerful pull of sensuality, immediacy, and lived experience on the one hand, and the need for deeper significance on the other. Can these ever be reconciled? The question leads to another: whether historical experience and deeper meaning can ever take on an immediately sensuous form, and thus become a transformative experience in its own right. As it happens, the satisfying union of these two needs represents the ideal trajectory of the human condition in Auerbach's view of it. Each of the moments that he singles out for description in his writings either approaches or briefly touches or else falls tragically short of this correlation between self and reality, what he sometimes describes as the revealed coincidence of man with his or her "fate" (the course of life one has led or will be seen to have led, insofar as this is dialectically informative of one's character; see, for example, "On the Anniversary Celebration of Dante"), but what he also recognized can take the form of profound *self-consistency* (the unwavering commitment to one's character in the face of circumstances; see *Dante*, ch. 1 and *passim*, and the theme of *sibi constare*, which is announced there and which appears throughout his writings). In those rare moments when this coincidence of self and reality is either intimated or made concrete, be this in the Old Testament or in the Passion of Christ or in such writers as Dante, Proust, or Virginia Woolf, the result is what Auerbach calls "tragic realism."

"Tragic realism" is Auerbach's way of naming the troubling juncture between the surfaces of life and language, which one can both know and feel, and the plunging vertical aspect of some other dimension altogether, which one can only sense. It is at such moments that mimesis is achieved—the representation of the essential unity of a character with its fate in all their blinding reality and luminous "evidence," as revealed in a singular act of the self.<sup>31</sup> Anticipating Foucault by half a century, Auerbach calls such moments "problematizations" of the ordinary—though what he is designating is in fact the substratum of reality that underlies all ordinary experience (e.g., *Dante* 13; *Mimesis* 18–19, 22, 27, 72, 311, 563, etc.). Auerbach also knows, however, that much of the time such abrupt communications with the real do not occur at all: we live in reality but rarely commune with it. And that is most likely why when such moments do occur they warrant the name *tragic*—for they signal their own self-consuming fragility, and their own passing.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> *Dante* (n. 5 above) 2, 156 (*sinnlich evident*) and 178 (sensuous and historical evidence [*Evidenz*]); "Montaigne the Writer": "It is luminously obvious in his writing" (*Es strahlt von Evidenz*); "Romanticism and Realism." *Evidenz* has a strong empirical flavor, and is not far removed from the idea of visible or tangible proof.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. also the end of "Frate Alberto" in *Mimesis* (n. 14 above) on the tragic realism of Dante and its ephemerality (231).

This is where Auerbach's most famous but possibly least understood contribution to the history of style comes into play. For such moments of communication with the real are also marked by a convergence of high and low styles (*Stilmischung*), which is not simply the formal rupture of the classical separation of styles (*Stiltrennung*),<sup>33</sup> but the shattering of style as a meaningful criterion of anything at all: sublimity is unearthed in the depths that suddenly open up in the realm of the everyday, as the expressions of a passionate subject who is firmly located in space and time here on earth, be this in a saint like Paul or a realist like Balzac.<sup>34</sup> Such moments are "tragic," because tragedy is what results whenever the "forces of individualism, historicism, and lyricism" "r[i]se up against the past as with a common will to embrace the world in all its concrete immanence and to experience the world's spirit through its living body" ("Romanticism and Realism").

Where the secularized self leaves us today, in Auerbach's present, is utterly unclear. But it is only in the face of such uncertainty that the ethical substance of human action can ever be located—a point that tellingly arises out of his interpretation of Dante.<sup>35</sup> Ethics thereby replaces religious morality for Auerbach, even as it remains informed by the deepest urges—and hence, too, the "tragic paradoxes"—of a "dwindling faith."<sup>36</sup> Loss, yearning, despair, and horror are the darker hues of reality so viewed; clear-sightedness and a reassuring sense of life's impregnable value are its brighter aspects. On balance, Auerbach's temperament is one of understated optimism. Uncertain though the progress of history may be, change over time is not random but has a logic. History progresses, not inexorably forward, but recuperatively, whereby each successive step becomes possible only thanks to what came before it, like a glacier that collects and clears rubble as it edges forward. In this way, history *redeems itself*, not providentially, but through its own momentum. (Such moments are often signaled by Auerbach with the phrase, "Y

<sup>33</sup>On the classical schema, there exist three styles (high, middle, low), each assigned its own proper domain and often genre of application.

<sup>34</sup>Though Auerbach does not mention it, a good metaphor for this experience of sublimity in the everyday is given by Lucretius in *On the Nature of Things* 4.414–19, where he describes a puddle of water spanning the cracks in the pavement of a street, into which is cast the reflection of the heavens above, "so that you seem to look down on the clouds and the heavens, and you discern bodies hidden in the sky beneath the earth, miraculously (*mirande*)."

<sup>35</sup>See his essay on the occasion of the 1921 Dante jubilee, though the same idea underlies the whole of his interpretation of Dante: "Particularity is all-decisive. Character and fate are one, and the fate of the autonomous self lies in its freedom of choice. The self was created by God in all of its particularity, but the freedom to decide is left entirely up to the self" ("On the Anniversary Celebration of Dante," here Chapter 9). See, too, Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013) 201, on Auerbach's "ethical realism."

<sup>36</sup>The process is organic: the one attitude grows out of the other. Cf. *Das französische Publikum* (n. 4 above) 50–53. For the phrase "the tragic paradoxes of a dwindling faith," see Fitzgerald, *Enlarging the Change* (n. 10 above) 17.



would be unthinkable without its predecessor X.”) And as humanity accumulates lessons from its own historical struggles, it learns pragmatically—in its habits, its body, its thought, and its culture—what the meaning of history is (see, e.g., “Dante and Vergil”).<sup>37</sup> It also learns to take responsibility for its own outcomes. Indeed, it is through this awareness of history, or rather of the course of events that reach into the present, that the nature of experience acquires a depth and meaning of its own, even if such coordinates continue to be measured, whether out of ingrained habit, wistfulness, or instinctual need, against the idea of transcendental meaning. In tracing the rise of historical consciousness, Auerbach is at the same time tracing something like the historical grounding of autonomous—in Vico’s sense, man-made—ethical consciousness and human agency.

From Vico,<sup>38</sup> Auerbach learned all this, and he learned something else too, something that he could never have divined from Hegel alone. He learned that history is fraught with danger, and that coming to grips with history means more than simply being alive to one’s own historical place and circumstances—being located in a particular place and in a particular time, as he repeatedly puts this in his writings—but also knowing how to confront the potential for violence that history inevitably reveals. A potential of this kind followed like a structural law from Vico’s view of historical evolution, at the root of which he posited a natural, primitive creature, the *Urmensch*, as Auerbach calls him, who lived in a radically divided state—in a state of immediate sensuous contact with the world, but also surrounded with the offspring of his own fantastic imaginings. Everything known to subsequent civilization—from law, religion, and government to familial relations and poetry—was first established in this wild initial state of humanity, “which is marked by *incomparable cruelty*” and by an absence of “human tenderness” (“Vico and Herder”). Auerbach lavishes page after page on Vico’s retrojected fantasy of a quasi-Golden Age, both in this same essay and in others. What

<sup>37</sup>Thus, that most “un-Christian” of thinkers, Michel de Montaigne, whose personal reality is rooted in his own immediate body, derives this very premise from the religion he repudiates conceptually and pragmatically: “Montaigne’s unity of mind and body has its roots in Christian-creatural anthropology. . . . It is the basis of his realistic introspection; without it, the latter [sc., his realism] would be inconceivable” (*Mimesis* [n. 14 above] 306; later reiterated on p. 310). Similarly, *Gesammelte Aufsätze* (n. 10 above) 290 (regarding Baudelaire); “The Philology of World Literature.” In this way, history comes to consist in a chain of conceptual dependencies for Auerbach. These same dependencies are also what render Auerbach’s literary histories so unique, and so uniquely coherent.

<sup>38</sup>And probably also from Troeltsch. See *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (n. 12 above) 15 and 79–81 (and *passim*), insisting that history must move forward into the area of ethics, the first step being a critical and self-critical philosophy of history. At the end of the day, history in its evolved form amounts to a blend of “historical realism” (ibid. 464–649) and ethical inquiry (*passim*) combined into one.

was the attraction? The answer lies in Auerbach's largest understanding of Vico's historical project, beginning with Vico's own attraction to this era.

Vico's obsessive interest in prehistory had to do, Auerbach claims, with his need to construct an alter ego to modern history out of which he could build up his concept of the civilizing process and the historical superstructure to come. There is a certain intellectual probity to this kind of foundationalism, which Auerbach openly admires. Vico's bold willingness to confront a true "other" to the enlightened present further distinguished him from the German Romantics, and from Herder in particular, who was at most prepared to contemplate some idyllic creature that represented an earlier and nobler version of the modern self (ibid.; see also "Vico's Contribution to Literary Criticism" and "Vico and Aesthetic Historism," here Chapters 1 and 4).

Vico's opening gambit—his postulate of poetic primitive creatures—did more than merely wipe the slate of culture clean. It cast culture in a very particular light. It meant, first of all, that for Vico civilization arose out of primitive fantasy, sheer imaginings, and poetic fabrications, which were at the same time a basic response to fear and which preserved a strong element of brutality. Divinity was the most potent poetic construct of early mankind, and its most immediate response to a fearful world: "Their fantastical sense of divinity, which is completely bound up with sensible ideas, creates a god for every act of existence, which is to say a personified institution, the concept of an imagined person, the *universale fantastico* [imaginative universal]" ("Vico and Herder"). Civilization, by contrast, is the history of the gradual stripping away of these earliest attributes: once the enlightened age is reached, nature is no longer alive, mankind has lost its poetic connection to reality, and the imaginary has faded into conceptual abstraction. A problem not dealt with by Vico is how he can cling to his faith in a providential god, as he manifestly wishes to do, if his god could turn out to have been no more than a residue of the earliest *universale fantastico* that Vico's own theory brings to light—in other words, a man-made product like every other element of human history. Auerbach noticed this and other tensions in Vico's theological historicism, and we will come back to these issues below.

As for the question why Auerbach dwells so insistently on the earliest moments of Vico's world history, the answer must be in part that he is drawn to the historical trajectory that Vico maps out (and which Auerbach retraces in his own way), and in part because he found the role that Vico assigned to the poetic imagination immensely attractive: history works through the poetic imagination as much for Auerbach as it did for Vico. But there are also differences. Auerbach does not "speculate in a fantastical way" as Vico did about mythical prehistory. And Auerbach's view of the imagination is more refined, and more compatible with modern impulses: Montaigne, Baudelaire, and Woolf are as involved as any of Vico's primitive creatures in imagining and in this way creating their respective realities and the kinds of subjectivities that

could inhabit them, whether their own or those of the readers they render possible through their writings. Indeed, Vico's own history is the product of an overactive imagination, as Auerbach is the first to acknowledge (just as Vico would be the last to do so).

And so, while Auerbach stood at several removes from Vico's fantastical "drama of history" and could be critical of its various mistakes (which he found "often enough quite grotesque"), he also learned to extract certain virtues from it, even from its most fantastical core. A number of the attributes of Vico's primitive creatures were too precious to abandon to prehistory. Auerbach extended their reach into modernity: the primacy of the sensuous, the concrete, the immediate, intuition, vitalism, and so on. Similarly, the role that the inventive mind enjoyed for Vico must for Auerbach lie at the center of any conception of the human, as must the mechanisms that set this same imagination in motion: its fears, its shames, its most primitive urges, its capacity for untold violence, all of which form an essential part of Vico's historical drama. Which brings us to the third and final attraction that Vico's fantasy of prehistory held for Auerbach: its incontestable psychological realism, which Auerbach shrewdly reads out of Vico's *own* imagination. Vico's view of primitive mankind exposes deep vulnerabilities in his own thinking, some of which he may have been unaware of, and others of which he knowingly shared with his primitive forbears.

As proof of this last point, we might compare the final lines of "Giambattista Vico und the Idea of Philology" (1936, here Chapter 3), which are exemplary in setting Auerbach's vision of history apart from the mere grasp of historical facts, but also from some harmless and pretty form of secular humanism:

It bears remembering that Vico did not understand what he took to be common to all people as in any way a matter of education or progressive enlightenment. Rather, what all human beings hold in common is the entirety of historical reality, *in all its greatness and its horror*. Not only did he see historical individuals in their totality; he also saw that he was himself a human being and that it made him human to understand them. But Vico did not create the human race in his own likeness; he did not see himself in the other. Rather, he saw the other in himself. He discovered himself, as a human, in history, and the long buried forces of our common nature stood revealed to him. This was Vico's humanity, something *far more profound—and far more perilous*—than what we normally associate with the word. Nevertheless—or, perhaps, precisely for this reason—it was Vico who discovered our common humanity, and held it fast. (emphasis added)

Vico's brutish *Urmenschen*, in other words, lay at the root of his, and our, civilization, as its deepest and ever-present substratum, and in all its terrible

potential for creation and destruction. Written as they were in 1936, these lines cannot help but resonate with the particular horrors that surrounded Auerbach at the time. He may have embraced humanism (*das Allgemeinen-schliche*, “the common elements uniting humans”) as a key to grasping the problems of mankind, but he was never deluded by its promises.

### Why Romance Philology, and Why the Christian Tradition?

One of the abiding puzzles in Auerbach’s life is the question why he was drawn to Romance philology at all, and not, say, to German, never mind classical, philology. The essay “Vico and Herder” from which we set out contains the germ of an answer. In it, Auerbach seeks to differentiate the two roots of modern historical inquiry: the one northern, Romantic, idyllic, and founded on “the pantheism of nature,” the other southern, at once systematic and intuitive, relativizing and particularizing, and humanistic; the one cherishing national consciousness (*Volksgeist*), national sentiments (*das Völkische*), and questions of race (*die Rassen- und Bodenfrage*, as he put it in 1924 [“Vorrede” 36]), the other indifferent to such impulses, to the pulls of essentialism of all kinds, to the abstract and the vaporous; the one German, the other Mediterranean and Italian.<sup>39</sup> The “and” of the title (“Vico and Herder”) veils an unbridgeable contrast, and indeed the historical perspective the essay assumes is itself Vichian.

Other essays on similar themes (“Giambattista Vico and the Idea of Philology” [1936, here Chapter 3], “Vico and the National Spirit” [1955, here Chapter 5], “The Idea of the National Spirit as the Source of the Modern Humanities” [ca. 1955, here Chapter 6]), and “Vico’s Contribution to Literary Criticism” [1958, here Chapter 1]) attest to Auerbach’s enduring affinities with Vico, whose *New Science* (1744) he translated into German in the early part of his career, but also to his guarded views about German Romanticism. In fact, in the preface to his 1924 abridged translation, Auerbach already sounds many of these same themes, and at times he paints Vico in intriguingly Zarathustran hues,<sup>40</sup> even as he recognizes Vico’s several contradictions and limits, including one monumental peculiarity. For all his providential-

<sup>39</sup>In the same spirit, Auerbach abruptly dismisses accounts of literary history based on “racial theory” in his dissertation from 1921 (*Zur Technik* [n. 8 above] 50).

<sup>40</sup>Thus, Vico towers over history like a “giant,” given the “capaciousness and reach” of his vision and the “incomprehensible” and “inhuman” nature of his god, who is “not a product of methodology, not dreamt up, not a postulate, but a living myth. . . . More fiercely ardent than all the others [viz., his “domestically tame” successors, from Herder and the German Romantics to Hegel], Vico stands alone in the icy air of a glacier, while over him arches the immense baroque, vault-shaped horizon of the heavens” (“Vorrede” [n. 9 above] 30–31, repeating verbatim his first brief foray into Vico (“Giambattista Vico” [n. 29 above] 252).

ism, Vico's thought had one "astounding, practically incomprehensible" gaping "hole"—it both failed to locate Christ's Incarnation at the fulcrum of history, and it lacked a crowning moment of fulfillment, a final Judgment Day that could serve as a self-benediction to the historical processes that his *New Science* so laboriously mapped out. Instead, after reaching a zenith of enlightened rationality, it ended on a sour note of barbarism and degeneration, and then lapsed into eternal recurrence: the cycle of world history started all over again. This was perhaps the one loophole Auerbach needed in order to adapt Vico's methods to his own theory of historical processes and historical understanding. Vico's history showed itself to be un-Christian (not governed by the Christian dispensation), and ultimately to be (all too) human.<sup>41</sup>

So why, then, did Auerbach champion Vico over Romance philology? And why did he opt for Mediterranean subject matter to the exclusion of any other? The answer is all but standing before us. Romance philology as it was practiced in Germany, and indeed in Europe as a whole, was deeply imprinted by German Romanticism. And Auerbach was constitutionally unsuited to this kind of disciplinary straitjacket and its underlying assumptions. Vico offered him a methodological alternative and a philosophy he found it expedient to incorporate selectively, not wholesale, into his own evolving ways of construing the world. And yet for all his admiration of the Neapolitan thinker, Auerbach nevertheless remained steeped in German habits of thought, as he was the first to admit (most memorably, in his "Epilegomena to *Mimesis*"). As it happens, there was a radical strain that ran through German intellectual life from at least the eighteenth century onward. And while it may not always be apparent, Auerbach was at bottom a staunch adherent of this tradition, as the Nietzschean overtones audible in his 1924 preface ("Vorrede") to Vico and elsewhere remind us. Many of these elements in Auerbach's thought have yet to be untangled and evaluated for what they are.

So much for Auerbach's disciplinary style. As for why he preferred the subject matter of Romance philology to, say, classical or German philology, the answer is to be found partly in a certain resistance to things German, a resistance that had figured in the shaping, if not the founding, of Romance philology in Germany (Vossler, Curtius, and Spitzer were overt Francophiles and critics of German parochialism)—which is not to deny that the classics and Romance philology had common disciplinary and methodological roots, or that either field was by any means innocent of German chauvinism,

<sup>41</sup>"Vorrede" (n. 9 above) 37–38; and see n. 29 above. David L. Marshall (*Vico and the Transformation of Rhetoric in Early Modern Europe* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010] 64) takes Vico's idea of *provvidenza* in the *New Science* to be "not so much a structure outside of time as a part of the structure of time itself," and even "an imaginative capacity." So did Auerbach, eventually: "provvidenza come fatto storico," in Besomi, *Il carteggio Croce-Auerbach* (n. 20 above) 29.

nationalism, or racism.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, Auerbach chose the path of neither a well disciplined Romance philologist nor a classical or German philologist, but rather that of a philologist in a more difficult and radical sense, a philologist who took as his object the world at large, while waging his own quiet campaign against intolerance in the highly politicized and increasingly toxic trenches of the contemporary German academy.

A similar question might be asked about Auerbach's life-long engagement with the Christian traditions of the West, and here things are a bit more complex. To begin with, his interest lay not in the Christian tradition *per se*, but in the Judaeo-Christian tradition as a whole, which was multifaceted and above all multilayered (as he kept emphatically insisting).<sup>43</sup> Second, Auerbach's interest was historical and historicizing: he was not interested in tracing the evolution of Church dogma for its own sake, but in bracketing that dogma with its historical determinants (after the fashion of Troeltsch). Indeed, his view of historical analysis was premised on "a maximum of *freedom* from preconceptions about the world and all other dogmatic commitments," as he stirringly wrote in 1951, recapping his beliefs of the last three decades (compare *Zur Technik* 46, where he declares that the mimetic objects he is tracking in that study are not "example[s] of a dogma but image[s] of the world"). "To be sure," he resumed, "such freedom is not easy to gain or to keep. . . . [It] requires self-criticism and fearlessness far more than a worldview [*Weltanschauung*]. But in historical inquiry, even the greatest and most cherished forms with which individuals have sought to express some absolute truth become a threat to one's judgment the moment one subscribes to them."<sup>44</sup> Third, the Judaeo-Christian heritage afforded Auerbach a far broader cul-

<sup>42</sup> See Frank-Rutger Hausmann, "Auch eine nationale Wissenschaft? Die Romanistik unter dem Nationalsozialismus," *Romanistische Zeitschrift für Literaturgeschichte* 22 (1998) 1–39; 261–313 for an excellent account, followed up by his massive study, *Vom Strudel der Ereignisse Verschlungen: Deutsche Romanistik im "Dritten Reich"* (Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann, 2000).

<sup>43</sup> This has misled some scholars into locating a crypto-Christian or culturally Christian tendency in Auerbach. Contrast Kuhn's closing remarks in "Literaturgeschichte als Geschichtsphilosophie" (n. 22 above) 248, which are spot on: "[Auerbach's] analysis of style, which he in no way thought of in Christian terms, is nevertheless conceived in so Christocentric a fashion that it appears to be on the verge of transforming into a Christological literary history. This, however, is an illusion."

<sup>44</sup> *Vier Untersuchungen* (n. 3 above) 10–11, emphasis added. Even here the influence of Troeltsch can be felt. See, e.g., *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (n. 12 above) 15, contrasting history and ethics on the one hand and religious dogma on the other, while the idea of absolute truth recalls Troeltsch's 1912 critique of the same in *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte*. In the same passage from *Vier Untersuchungen*, Auerbach defends relativism (perspectival interpretation) as a *sine qua non* of historical inquiry and as compatible with truth: "Obedience to truth does not mean forgetting how very susceptible to interpretation truth's commands and dictates are. Quite the contrary, [recognizing] this [susceptibility] is, I believe, the only form of obedience that is commensurate with truth" (11). "Obedience" (*Gehorsam*) has ominous overtones in the aftermath of the Second World War. See also chapter 1, "Vico's Contribution to Literary Criticism" (this volume).

tural and historical scope than either classical or German philology would have afforded him alone. His ultimate object, after all, was nothing less than the changing fate and reality of the European subject across the millennia. Finally, there is the peculiar way in which Auerbach set about exploring the history of this heritage—which is to say, through its deepest underlying paradoxes and tensions, and the ways in which these were both internalized and given literary expression.

Dante once again provides a key, as the essays reproduced in this volume repeatedly attest. In “Dante and Vergil” (1931) Auerbach examines the ambiguous attractions that a pagan figure like Vergil could exert on a Christian poet like Dante. Vergil occupies the same paradoxical place in Dante’s poetry and in the popular imagination as the peculiar “double position” held by Rome “as the traditional seat of worldly empire on the one hand, and as the seat of the Papacy on the other.” The medieval way of resolving this contradiction was to transform Vergil into “a kind of pagan prophet and crypto-Christian, or at least an inspired, if unwitting seer of God’s truth”—a *figura* betokening a future fulfillment, in other words—a reputation that Auerbach declared was unearned: it was all a “pious error.” A second essay, “The Discovery of Dante by Romanticism” (1929), reaffirms Auerbach’s reading of the *Divine Comedy* in his book of the same year, and refocuses its central paradox again: “The all-encompassing crux of the poem’s significance is this: our earthly and historical world in its true and eternal form is a manifestation of God’s judgment.” Auerbach goes on to quote Hegel, who is one of the inspirations behind this reading, and who observed, in a beautifully poetic way, how Dante in essence freezes, in eternal life, the figures of this world in their eternal life on the other side of things:

In this way the poem comprises the entirety of objective life: the eternal condition of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise; and on this indestructible foundation the figures of the real world move in their particular character, or rather they *have* moved and now in their being and action are frozen and are eternal themselves in the arms of eternal justice. While the Homeric heroes have been made permanent in *our* memories by the muse, these characters have produced their situation for *themselves*, as individuals, and are eternal in themselves, not in our ideas.

In other words, the *Divine Comedy* is an “*objective*,” because objectifying, work that “probes deeply and dispassionately into the essence of the *secular* world”—so Auerbach, rephrasing Hegel now.

Once again, Auerbach shows himself to be the consummate student, not of philosophy or philology, and not even of the history of mentalities, but of something utterly unexpected—the contortions and psychopathology of the Western soul, and above all the Christian soul. This is another way of describing Auerbach’s vision and the ultimate reach of his project. Each of



his books and essays contributes to this larger design. Each turns on a singular, irreproducible puzzle about a given author or problem that Auerbach sets out to identify, in a quietly provocative way, and then weaves into the logic of his analysis. His provocations are always understated, and so one has to listen attentively to spot them. Once one does, the depths to which Auerbach's thinking plumbs will consistently surprise a reader. At the end of the day, Auerbach will emerge with the distinction he deserves, as one of the more consistently profound and breathtaking cultural thinkers of the twentieth century. We are only now in a position to begin to appreciate what his thought has to offer.

### Passionate Subjects

As part of his self-appointed mission to diagnose the psychopathology of the modern soul, whether Christian or secular, Auerbach was particularly concerned to uncover something like a history of the passions and emotions. Indeed, legible in the very emergence of the passions as instruments of affection and self-affection (including self-communication) is a history, Auerbach believes, that says a great deal about the emergence of the person as an autonomous category, responsible for her own inner integrity and well-being, and on the basis of which she could, and still can, enter into ethical relations with others. A series of essays are devoted to tracing this emergence.

"*Passio* as Passion" (1941, here Chapter 14) offers the broadest account, one that will be familiar to readers of Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault. Auerbach's insights bear more than a passing resemblance to theirs, not least because he was so closely attuned to the formation of subjective habits and identities (*habitus*). As in "*Figura*," the 1941 essay is outwardly concerned with the vicissitudes of a single term—*passio*—as it enters into the modern lexicon under different guises (feeling, sentiment, passion, emotion). But with each stage comes a conceptual transformation and a corresponding behavioral transformation. Other essays examine more individuated cases, for instance "Racine and the Passions" (1927, here Chapter 18), "Marcel Proust and the Novel of Lost Time" (1927, here Chapter 13), and "Montaigne the Writer" (1932, here Chapter 16). Rousseau also belongs to this gallery, but he represents the special case of someone who, as we have seen, is not so much produced by the inner turmoil of social feeling as he is torn apart by it.

Tellingly, Auerbach was drawn to the riveting personality of Michel de Montaigne, both in his essay of 1932 and in a later chapter of *Mimesis* entitled "L'Humaine condition." What he found in Montaigne was the pulsating vitality of an individual who seemed in his writings to be still living and breathing, but also a glimpse into the origins of modern (or at least post-Dantean) individuality: a subject who was free, autonomous, self-dictating, rooted in the present, in himself, his circumstances, and his earthly existence—a

subject who was defiantly secular, un-Christian, mundane, and even materialistic. Montaigne is the first modern author because he was the first to write for a lay public, a reality that had no prior existence: he created it himself.<sup>45</sup> In doing so he made himself into the first lay writer of all time, and in this way invented a sociological category that would endure into Auerbach's present in the guise of the journalistic writer, the man of letters, and ultimately "the voice of the world."

The worldly character of Montaigne's writings is everywhere to be felt—in his concreteness, which can be frank if not "horrifying," in his bravery in the face of life's ills and the final prospect of death, in his awareness of his body and not only his mind, and above all in his sheer enjoyment of life. And so, Auerbach concludes in a memorable phrase, Montaigne's *Essays* are a *symptom* of his existence." Montaigne's existence consisted in what was "given" to him in at least three ways: in the phenomenological sense of the data of experience, in the historical sense of the circumstantial and the contingent, and in the ethical sense of a gift. Finally, "the spirit of the *Essays* is thoroughly un-Christian." As Montaigne writes in his essay on experience, "those transcendental humors frighten me" (a line that is quoted in *Mimesis*, not in the essay). Montaigne, after all, is identified in the very first line of the 1932 essay as "the son of a father from the region of Gascony and of a mother who was a Spanish Jew."<sup>46</sup> And if Montaigne was the first modern subject, self-scrutinizing, self-absorbed, and pitched on "the very edge of the abyss," then surely Proust is the last, at least in Auerbach's survey of literary selves: a decadent, stifling, monomaniacal writer who despite his self-imposed quarantine—his bedroom is his world, and it opens only onto the world of his memories—proves how powerful this human world truly is, and who exemplifies what Auerbach in "Marcel Proust and the Novel of Lost Time" (written in 1925 and published two years later) calls "the pathos of the earthly course of events, a real, ever-flowing, inexhaustible pathos that at once oppresses and sustains us without end." The use of "us" is worth noting. Auerbach's writings are never entirely dispassionate. They merely appear to be at times.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup>The appeal made to the broad public for the first time by Dante through his vernacular, which henceforth became the "mainstay" of the new European culture (*Dante* [n. 5 above] 77; cf. *Literary Language and Its Public* [n. 6 above] e.g., 312–14), was evidently to a different kind of readership (it was, *inter alia*, not distinctively lay). If Montaigne's achievement could not have been possible without Dante's precedent, as was noted above, Montaigne is in turn effectively *completing* Dante's project (*Mimesis* [n. 14 above] 306–308). Cf. also "Racine and the Passions": "the audience [lit., "the public"] emerged as an entirely new sociological category."

<sup>46</sup>A bold remark given the circumstances; cf. n. 54 below. For relevant background and discussion, see Frank-Rutger Hausmann, "Michel de Montaigne, Erich Auerbachs *Mimesis* und Erich Auerbachs literaturwissenschaftliche Methode," in *Wahrnehmen Lesen Deuten* (n. 1 above) 224–37.

<sup>47</sup>Compare Fitzgerald, *Enlarging the Change* (n. 10 above) 31, who notes both the passion and its truest object: "[I]t was part of Auerbach's passion: 'to make understandable the immediate human thing.'"

Racine—the subject, or rather analytical object, of “Racine and the Passions” (1927)—presents another set of symptoms that are uniquely his own. One might have thought that with Racine Auerbach had finally touched the heart of French Classicism and therefore the epicenter of his field (the French having always served as the most ambivalent of rivals to the Germans, at least since Goethe). But nothing could be further from Auerbach’s mind, who takes an unexpectedly contrarian view of this playwright. Dissenting once more from the opinion of his distinguished mentor Karl Vossler, who saw in the poet’s extreme Protestantism a rejection of “all earthly concerns in favor of the eternal world beyond,” Auerbach argues for a more complex reading, one that firmly resituates Racine in the world he inhabited. Racine’s theater *stages* the conflict between Christianity and secular art, a battle that is waged over the place, precisely, of the passions—for example, love. Does theater incite or subdue the passions? What is its role in spiritual, moral, or religious terms? This was the burning question of the day. For Racine’s answer Auerbach looks to the poet’s own dramaturgy and finds a decisive reply: there one witnesses “neither a Christian drama nor even a human one,” not even a drama in a classicizing vein, but rather “a fierce clash of instinctual forces”—no “Protestant greatness of soul,” but a “canniness” and “rashness” of decisions taken, a “violence of desires,” a madness and “autonomy” of passions, and “instincts for *life*.” The result is an enthralling tragic sublimity, intensified by a good dose of Old Testament terror, as in Racine’s masterpiece from 1691, *Athalie*:

Displaying not even a trace of the traditions of a living essence of Christianity, the play is based on a horrific chapter of the Old Testament that has been dragged out of its dark corner into the light, a chapter that becomes no more humane just because one of the parties to the struggle is in the right. In *Athalie*, God is Lord not because he is good, but because he is sovereign. *There is no redemptive moment.*

### Jewish Philology

Reading these last lines, one cannot help but be reminded of the opening chapter of *Mimesis*, with its terrifying glimpse of the Old Testament Yahweh at his most indomitable and formidable. In that essay Auerbach foregrounds the binding of Isaac episode as one of the foundational scenes of Western literary mimesis—a gesture that is both arresting and puzzling in the extreme, until one considers the realities with which Auerbach was being confronted at the time. *Mimesis* quite plainly bears the scars of the particular circumstances of its composition: it is in more ways than one a book written in the teeth of a German nation derailed by fascism, Nazism, and Lutheranism gone rabid.

The binding of Isaac was one of several Old Testament scenes that had been explicitly banished from schoolrooms across Germany by the fanatical German Christian sect of the Protestant Church.<sup>48</sup> The episode smacked all too much of another sacrifice which it had been held to prefigure at least since Tertullian (*Against Marcion* 3.18), that of Christ by the Jews (see “*Figura*” and “Typological Symbolism”). It recalled too vividly medieval blood libels. And in any case, the *whole* of the Jewish Old Testament was being discredited in many of the same quarters as a falsification of spiritual truth. Why, then, did Auerbach choose to foreground this one text?

The answer ought to be self-evident. Given this contemporary background to which several explicit allusions are made throughout *Mimesis* (some of which were muted in the English translation after the War), it is legitimate to see another side operating in Auerbach’s much enlarged view of philology, both in *Mimesis* and earlier. Well beyond a love of words, a love of history, or even an earthly, worldly philology, Auerbach is pressing philology in the direction of something utterly unheard: a new resistant, if implicit, *Jewish* philology, one that carries out its work in the name of everything that the traditions of Vico, Montaigne, the Enlightenment, historicism, and the philosophy of life on this earth had to offer.<sup>49</sup> Some, though not all, of Auerbach’s colleagues risked taking public stances against the rising tide of anti-Semitism under the Third Reich, as Vossler did in speeches and in an activist Jewish periodical during the mid-1920s (*Der Morgen*),<sup>50</sup> or as Curtius did with his strident but rather muddled pamphlet of 1932, *Deutscher Geist in Gefahr* (German Spirit in Danger).<sup>51</sup> Even Spitzer bravely published a wartime polemic, *Anti-Chamberlain: Observations of a Linguist on Houston Stewart Chamberlain’s “Kriegsaufsätze”* [War Essays (1914)] and *on the Evaluation of Language in General* (1918), which, though not specifically directed against anti-Semitism, nevertheless took direct aim at Chamberlain’s facile linking of race and language, and eviscerated it from

<sup>48</sup>See Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>49</sup>See James I. Porter, “Erich Auerbach and the Judaizing of Philology,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Autumn 2008) 115–47; and “Auerbach, Homer, and the Jews,” in *Classics and National Culture*, Susan Stephens and Phiroze Vasunia, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 235–57.

<sup>50</sup>Vossler, “Reine Sprache—reine Rasse” [Pure Language—Pure Race], *Der Morgen* 1.5 (December 1925) 574–77; “Jüdische Herkunft und Literaturwissenschaft” [Jewish Origins and Literary Study] *Der Morgen* 2.5 (December 1926) 427–30; for some of his speeches, see Vossler’s *Politik und Geistesleben: Rede zur Reichsgründungsfeier im Januar 1927 und drei weitere Ansprachen* (Munich: Hueber, 1927).

<sup>51</sup>Curtius’s pamphlet is muddled not least for its wavering stances toward the Jewish question and toward German nationalism.

the detached perspective of a trained linguist.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, simply to insist on the probity of humane and humanistic study carried a polemical charge in these sensitive times, when the mere choice of a research agenda could no longer be innocent.<sup>53</sup> As an acculturated Jew, and more of a scholar than a public intellectual, Auerbach was bound to address the turbulences of his day in less demonstrative ways than Spitzer, Vossler, and Curtius did, but he was never uninvolved.<sup>54</sup>

Once this historical background is grasped, statements like the following from “*Figura*” (here Chapter 7) fall into place: “It was in this struggle with those who despised the Old Testament and wanted to drain it of its meaning—namely, “those who wanted either to eliminate the Old Testament entirely or to interpret it in a strictly abstract and allegorical way”—that the method of historically real prophecy [i.e., the figural method] again proved itself.” Auerbach’s resistance to Christianity, or, if one prefers, his tracking of Christianity’s resistance to itself and to its own mission in the world—its de-Christianization from within—is evident wherever he discusses the Judaeo-Christian heritage (his preferred phrase in *Mimesis* is in fact “Jewish-Christian”: *jüdisch-christlich*),<sup>55</sup> which upon closer inspection presents an

<sup>52</sup> A peculiarity of Spitzer’s analysis is that in disconnecting race and language he indirectly supported arguments for Jewish assimilation (*Anti-Chamberlain: Betrachtungen eines Linguisten über Houston Stewart Chamberlains “Kriegsaufsätze” und die Sprachbewertung im allgemeinen* [Leipzig: O. R. Reisland] 31), a position he adopted in his own life in response to the stigma of Judaism he too had to endure (for biographical details, see Gumbrecht, *Vom Leben und Sterben der großen Romanisten* [n. 7 above] 72–151). A further example of resistant philology is Victor Klemperer’s *LTI* [*Lingua Tertii Imperii*]: *Notizbuch eines Philologen*, which could not appear until after the war (1947). See further Emily Apter, “Global Translatio: The ‘Invention’ of Comparative Literature, Istanbul, 1933,” *Critical Inquiry* 29 (Winter 2003) 253–81; here 273–74.

<sup>53</sup> Compare the contrasting ways in which Gothic architecture, the visual counterpart in stone of Dante’s poem (cf. *Dante* [n. 5 above] 20), was approached by German-Jewish and compromised non-Jewish German scholars during the same period, each following radically different agendas (Jaś Elsner, “A Golden Age of Gothic,” in *Architecture, Liturgy and Identity: Liber Amicorum Paul Crossley*, Zoë Opačić and Achim Timmermann, eds. [Turnhout: Brepols, 2011] 7–15).

<sup>54</sup> A case in point is a still unpublished letter of 1932, in which Auerbach resolves henceforth to boycott the prominent academic journal *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* after its editor, Erich Rothacker, had “so openly declared his allegiance to the Nazis” by affirming that Jews should be removed from their posts at German universities (letter to Ludwig Binswanger, October 28, 1932; quoted in German in Peter Jehle, *Werner Krauss und die Romanistik im NS-Staat* (Hamburg: Argument-Verlag, 1996) 237, n. 39, and in English in “Scholarship in Times of Extremes: Letters of Erich Auerbach (1933–46), on the Fiftieth Anniversary of His Death,” Martin Elsky, Martin Vialon, and Robert Stein, eds. and trans., *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 122.3 [2007] 758 n. 7). It was a painful decision, for as Auerbach adds, “I am admittedly doing more harm to myself than to him, for there is no other journal of the same caliber.” The publication of his essay on Vico, submitted a year and a half earlier, was already underway at the time, and Auerbach broke off communication with Rothacker the next year, once Rothacker’s wish came true.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. “*Fortunata*,” in *Mimesis* (n. 14 above): the mingling of styles that is found in Peter’s denial of Christ (Auerbach here follows the Gospel of Mark) “was rooted from the beginning in the

unstable hyphenation of two religious traditions. It is this, first of all because Christianity turns out to be, as it were, *inwardly* hyphenated, torn by its attachments to both the Here and the Beyond, to the flesh and the spirit, to the historical evidence of its own events and the promise of a future salvation, but above all because Christianity cannot rid itself of its Jewish origins.

Figural interpretation is a case in point: the key to this method, according to Auerbach, is the oddity of its logic—that in order to ground its fulfillment in the redemptive future it must anchor itself in the actual historical past. Figural interpretation is thus forever doomed to be self-erasing in its aspirations, because it marks everything that it touches with indelible ink, and above all what it most wishes to efface. The Old Testament was ironically *secured*, not erased, by the figural reading of it, as was earthly, worldly history itself. It is allegory, not figural interpretation, that seeks to eliminate the Old Testament through the work of abstraction and mystification. Figural reading grounds the Old Testament again in historical reality. And so, Auerbach's favoring of figural reading over allegorical interpretation has to be understood in this same light: as an insistence on the historical relevance of the Old Testament, which was being erased at the very moment that he was writing his essay.

All this is perfectly intelligible in the shadow of the catastrophes leading up to "*Figura*," which was composed in 1936–37 and published in 1938, and then *Mimesis*, composed between 1942 (the date of the first, foundational chapter on Homer and the Old Testament) and 1945. But what about an essay like that on Racine, which dates from 1927? Or Auerbach's 1921 dissertation, *On the Technique of the Early Renaissance Novella in Italy and France*? This last work displays all the themes we have witnessed so far, whether in their full or embryonic form: this-worldliness, earthliness, historicity, life lived in its rich and sensuous panoply, "passionate observation of earthly [and "secular"] life," mimesis (understood as the riveting image of the foregoing in all their throbbing actuality), and so on. Indeed, Auerbach's very choice of his dissertation theme was designed to exhibit these features in their purest form.

The operating thesis of that work, announced in its opening paragraph, is that "the subject of the novella is invariably society itself, and for that reason its object is the form that *life here on earth* [lit., this-worldliness] assumes as a whole. . . . *The novella stands unremittingly in the very midst of time and place*; it is a piece of history itself." From this premise follows, of necessity, the novella's formal realism: "it must be realistic, inasmuch as it accepts the foundations of empirical reality as a given, [and is] *not founded upon metaphysics*"—in other words, theological notions (1). Put all this together

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character of Jewish-Christian literature," etc. Auerbach in fact grounds his theory of tragic realism and stylistic fusion in the Old Testament (ibid. 18–19, 22), not in the New Testament, as is widely assumed.

with the telltale phrase “Western reality” (39) and you have Auerbach’s future masterpiece, *Mimesis*, with its thesis of realism as a symptom of *this*-worldly consciousness in the West, effectively preempted here in 1921. Moreover, the object of this early study is a world that has already undergone the work of “de-Christianization,”<sup>56</sup> arguably the most prevalent theme in Auerbach’s writings, whether it is named or merely implied. Its most explicit occurrences happen to coincide with the twilight years of Auerbach’s career as a professor at Marburg (“Rousseau” [1932] and *Das französische Publikum* [1933] 46–53), when his chair was increasingly endangered.

Is this a mere coincidence? I doubt that it is. Auerbach self-identified as a Jew throughout his career. One need only consider the *curriculum vitae* in narrative form (*Lebenslauf*) that he appended to his 1921 dissertation, in which he named the fateful paradox of his origins: “I am Prussian and of the Jewish faith.” Whenever Auerbach stepped into a department of Romance Philology, he knew exactly on which side of the religious divide anyone stood (his correspondence amply testifies to this). And religion was a matter of racial extraction, of *Herkunft* and *Abkunft*, as everyone around him was all too painfully aware at the time.<sup>57</sup> Auerbach was indeed an exilic scholar, but not only when he emigrated to Istanbul and then the States. On the contrary, he led a life of internal exile from his earliest studies onward during one of the most turbulent eras in modern history.

Auerbach was a Jewish philologist who happened to be German. But he was also a practitioner of a special kind of philology, one that could be called earthly, inner, worldly, and even Jewish: it is a philology that celebrates the richness of this-worldly life at the expense of otherworldly abstractions, history over eschatology, lived experience over what has never passed before the senses. He thought in the largest possible terms, but in a subtle and supple way, and with a modest, unassuming, and generally understated voice

<sup>56</sup> Cf. *Zur Technik* (n. 8 above) 38: “The world [together with its “wealth of sensual events” and of “life”], so long neglected, had turned away from men just as they had turned away from it”—until the Renaissance novella rediscovered this world once again. That is why the novella can be said to offer up not “dogma,” but an “image of the world” (46). Tellingly, Auerbach abruptly dismisses accounts of literary history based on “racial theory” in the same work (50).

<sup>57</sup> Compare Vossler’s monitory lecture of 1926, “Jüdische Herkunft und Literaturwissenschaft” [Jewish Origins and Literary Study], n. 50 above. For some of the relevant biographical evidence pertaining to Auerbach, including his correspondence, see Porter, “Erich Auerbach and the Judaizing of Philology” (n. 49 above), for example the following: “At Marburg [sc., the university] I am completely surrounded by people who are not of our origin (*unserer Herkunft*)” (letter to W. Benjamin of October 1935 in Karlheinz Barck, “Fünf Briefe Erich Auerbachs,” *Zeitschrift für Germanistik* 6 [1988] 689–90). To this one may now add certain details from Auerbach’s asylum papers mentioned in n. 18 above, not least his answer to a questionnaire concerning, *inter alia*, his religious affiliations, to which he replied, “Ich gehöre der jüdischen Religionsgemeinschaft an” [I belong to the Jewish religious community]. A fateful document, it is dated September 1935 (one month prior to his removal from the university) and lists his permanent address as Marburg.



(though he was also a master of the muted crescendo).<sup>58</sup> Auerbach's view of historical reality, with its plunging verticalities and relentless horizontal forward motions, is full of terror, and of beautiful potential as well. It is hoped that the essays gathered together here, brought to life in new translations and largely for the first time, will help to win readers over to the diverse charms of Auerbach's generous view of the world—to his philology not of the word but of the world—and propel future generations on to similar quests of their own.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Compare the climactic final lines of "The Idea of the National Spirit as the Source of the Modern Humanities."

<sup>59</sup> For invaluable comments on earlier drafts, I wish to thank the following: Karlheinz Barck†, Matthias Bormuth, Eric Downing, Jaś Elsner, Tony Grafton, Miriam Leonard, Jane Newman, Maria Pantelia, Stephen Nichols, Martin Trembl, Martin Vialon, and Avihu Zakhai, as well as an audience at Johns Hopkins University in September of 2012.