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Erich Auerbach: Mimesis

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INTRODUCTION TO THE FIFTIETH-ANNIVERSARY EDITION

by Edward W. Said

. . . human beings are not born once and
for all on the day their mothers give birth to them,
but that life obliges them to give birth to themselves.
—Gabriel García Márquez

THE influence and enduring reputation of books of criticism are, for the critics who write them and hope to be read for more than one season, dispiritingly short. Since World War Two the sheer volume of books appearing in English has risen to huge numbers, thus further ensuring if not ephemerality, then a relatively short life and hardly any influence at all. Books of criticism have usually come in waves associated with academic trends, most of which are quickly replaced by successive shifts in taste, fashion, or genuine intellectual discovery. Thus only a small number of books seem perennially present and, by comparison with the vast majority of their counterparts, to have an amazing staying power. Certainly this is true of Erich Auerbach's magisterial *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, published by Princeton University Press exactly fifty years ago in a satisfyingly readable English translation by Willard R. Trask.

As one can immediately judge by its subtitle, Auerbach's book is by far the largest in scope and ambition out of all the other important critical works of the past half century. Its range covers literary masterpieces from Homer and the Old Testament right through to Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust, although as Auerbach says apologetically at the end of the book, for reasons of space he had to leave out a great deal of medieval literature as well as some crucial modern writers like Pascal and Baudelaire. He was to treat the former in his last, posthumously published book, *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, the latter in various journals and a collection of his essays, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*. In all these works Auerbach preserves the same essayistic style of criticism, beginning each chapter with a long quotation from a specific work cited in the original language, followed immediately by a serviceable translation (German in the original *Mimesis*, first published in Bern in 1946; English in most of his subsequent work), out of which a detailed *explication de texte* unfolds at a leisurely and ruminative pace; this in turns

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develops into a set of memorable comments about the relationship between the rhetorical style of the passage and its socio-political context, a feat that Auerbach manages with a minimum of fuss and with virtually no learned references. He explains in the concluding chapter of *Mimesis* that, even had he wanted to, he could not have made use of the available scholarly resources, first of all because he was in wartime Istanbul when the book was written and no Western research libraries were accessible for him to consult, second because had he been able to use references from the extremely voluminous secondary literature, the material would have swamped him and he would never have written the book. Thus along with the primary texts that he had with him, Auerbach relied mainly on memory and what seems like an infallible interpretive skill for elucidating relationships between books and the world they belonged to.

Even in English translation, the hallmark of Auerbach's style is an unruffled, at times even lofty and supremely calm, tone conveying a combination of quiet erudition allied with an overridingly patient and loving confidence in his mission as scholar and philologist. But who was he, and what sort of background and training did he have that enabled him to produce such work of truly outstanding influence and longevity? By the time *Mimesis* appeared in English he was already sixty-one, the son of a German Jewish family residing in Berlin, the city of his birth in 1892. By all accounts he received a classic Prussian education, graduating from that city's renowned Französisches Gymnasium, an elite high school where the German and Franco-Latin traditions were brought together in a very special way. He received a doctorate in law from the University of Heidelberg in 1913, and then served in the German army during World War One, after which he abandoned law and earned a doctorate in Romance languages at the University of Greifswald. Geoffrey Green, author of an important book on Auerbach, has speculated that "the violence and horrors" of the war experience may have caused the change in career from legal to literary pursuits, from "the vast, stolid legal institutions of society . . . to [an investigation of] the distant, shifting patterns of philological studies" (*Literary Criticism and the Structures of History, Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1982, pp. 20-21).

Between 1923 and 1929, Auerbach held a position at Berlin's Prussian State Library. It was then that he strengthened his grasp of the philological vocation and produced two major pieces of work, a German translation of Giambattista Vico's *The New Science* and a seminal monograph

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on Dante entitled *Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt* (when the book appeared in English in 1961 as *Dante, Poet of the Secular World*, the crucial word *irdischen*, or “earthly,” was only partially rendered by the considerably less concrete “secular”). Auerbach’s life-long preoccupation with these two Italian authors underscores the specific and concrete character of his attention, so unlike that of contemporary critics, who prefer what is implicit to what the text actually says.

In the first place, Auerbach’s work is anchored in the tradition of Romance philology, interestingly the study of those literatures deriving from Latin but ideologically unintelligible without the Christian doctrine of Incarnation (and hence of the Roman Church) as well as its secular underpinning in the Holy Roman Empire. An additional factor was the development out of Latin of the various demotic languages, from Provençal to French, Italian, Spanish, etc. Far from being the dry-as-dust academic study of word origins, philology for Auerbach and eminent contemporaries of his, like Karl Vossler, Leo Spitzer, and Ernst Robert Curtius, was in effect immersion in all the available written documents in one or several Romance languages, from numismatics to epigraphy, from stylistics to archival research, from rhetoric and law to an all-embracing working idea of literature that included chronicles, epics, sermons, drama, stories, and essays. Inherently comparative, Romance philology in the early twentieth century derived its main procedural ideas from a principally German tradition of interpretation that begins with the Homeric criticism of Friederich August Wolf (1759-1824), continues through Herman Schleiermacher’s biblical criticism, includes some of the most important works of Nietzsche (who was a classical philologist by profession), and culminates in the often laboriously articulated philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey.

Dilthey argued that the world of written texts (of which the aesthetic masterwork was the central pillar) belonged to the realm of lived experience (*Erlebnis*), which the interpreter attempted to recover through a combination of erudition and a subjective intuition (*eingeföhlen*) of what the inner spirit (*Geist*) of the work was. His ideas about knowledge rest on an initial distinction between the world of nature (and of natural sciences) and the world of spiritual objects, the basis of whose knowledge he classified as a mixture of objective and subjective elements (*Geisteswissenschaft*), or knowledge of the products of mind or spirit. Whereas there is no real English or American equivalent for it (although the study of culture is a rough approximation), *Geisteswissenschaft* is a recognized academic sphere in German-speaking coun-

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tries. In his later essay, “Epilegomena to *Mimesis*” (1953; translated from the German for the first time in this edition), Auerbach says explicitly that his work “arose from the themes and methods of German intellectual history and philology; it would be conceivable in no other tradition than in that of German romanticism and Hegel” (571).

While it is possible to appreciate Auerbach’s *Mimesis* for its fine, absorbing explication of individual, sometimes obscure texts, one needs to disentangle its various antecedents and components, many of which are quite unfamiliar to modern readers but which Auerbach sometimes refers to in passing and always takes for granted in the course of his book. Auerbach’s life-long interest in the eighteenth-century Neapolitan professor of Latin eloquence and jurisprudence Giambattista Vico is absolutely central to his work as critic and philologist. In the posthumously published 1745 third edition of his magnum opus *The New Science*, Vico formulated a revolutionary discovery of astonishing power and brilliance. Quite on his own, and as a reaction to Cartesian abstractions about ahistorical and contextless clear and distinct ideas, Vico argues that human beings are historical creatures in that they make history, or what he called “the world of the nations.”

Understanding or interpreting history is therefore possible only because “men made it,” since we can know only what we have made (just as only God knows nature because he alone made it). Knowledge of the past that comes to us in textual form, Vico says, can only be properly understood from the point of view of the maker of that past, which, in the case of ancient writers such as Homer, is primitive, barbaric, poetic. (In Vico’s private lexicon the word “poetic” means primitive and barbaric because early human beings could not think rationally.) Examining the Homeric epics from the perspective of when and by whom they were composed, Vico refutes generations of interpreters who had assumed that because Homer was revered for his great epics he must also have been a wise sage like Plato, Socrates, or Bacon. Instead Vico demonstrates that in its wildness and willfulness Homer’s mind was poetic, and his poetry barbaric, not wise or philosophic, that is, full of illogical fantasy, gods who were anything but godlike, and men like Achilles and Patrocles, who were most uncourtly and extremely petulant.

This primitive mentality was Vico’s great discovery, whose influence on European romanticism and its cult of the imagination was profound. Vico also formulated a theory of historical coherence that showed how each period shared in its language, art, metaphysics, logic, science, law, and religion features that were common and appropriate to their ap-

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pearance: primitive times produce primitive knowledge that is a projection of the barbaric mind — fantastic images of gods based on fear, guilt, and terror — and this in turn gives rise to institutions such as marriage and the burial of the dead that preserve the human race and give it a sustained history. The poetic age of giants and barbarians is succeeded by the age of heroes, and that slowly evolves into the age of men. Thus human history and society are created through a laborious process of unfolding, development, contradiction, and, most interestingly, representation. Each age has its own method, or optic, for seeing and then articulating reality: thus Plato develops his thought *after* (and not during) the period of violently concrete poetic images through which Homer spoke. The age of poetry gives way to a time when a greater degree of abstraction and rational discursivity become dominant.

All these developments occur as a cycle that goes from primitive to advanced and degenerate epochs, then back to primitive, Vico says, according to the modifications of the human mind, which makes and then can re-examine its own history from the point of view of the maker. That is the main methodological point for Vico as well as for Auerbach. In order to be able to understand a humanistic text, one must try to do so as if one is the author of that text, living the author's reality, undergoing the kind of life experiences intrinsic to his or her life, and so forth, all by that combination of erudition and sympathy that is the hallmark of philological hermeneutics. Thus the line between actual events and the modifications of one's own reflective mind is blurred in Vico, as it is in the numerous authors who were influenced by him, like James Joyce. But this perhaps tragic shortcoming of human knowledge and history is one of the unresolved contradictions pertaining to humanism itself, in which the role of thought in reconstructing the past can neither be excluded nor squared with what is "real." Hence the phrase, "the representation of reality" in the subtitle to *Mimesis* and the vacillations in the book between learning and personal insight.

By the early part of the nineteenth century Vico's work had become tremendously influential to European historians, poets, novelists, and philologists, from Michelet and Coleridge to Marx and, later, Joyce. Auerbach's fascination with Vico's historicism (sometimes called "historism") underwrote his hermeneutical philology and allowed him thus to read texts such as those by Augustine or Dante from the point of view of the author, whose relationship to his age was an organic and integral one, a kind of self-making within the context of the specific dynamics of society at a very precise moment in its development. Moreover, the

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relationship between the reader-critic and the text is transformed from a one-way interrogation of the historical text by an altogether alien mind at a much later time, into a sympathetic dialogue of two spirits across ages and cultures who are able to communicate with each other as friendly, respectful spirits trying to understand each other.

Now it is quite obvious that such an approach requires a great deal of erudition, although it is also clear that for the German Romance philologists of the early twentieth century with their formidable training in languages, history, literature, law, theology, and general culture, mere erudition was not enough. Obviously you could not do the basic reading if you had not mastered Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Provençal, Italian, French, and Spanish in addition to German and English. Nor could you if you did not know the traditions, main canonical authors, politics, institutions, and cultures of the time, as well as, of course, all of their interconnected arts. A philologist's training had to take many years, although in Auerbach's case he gives one the attractive impression that he was in no hurry to get on with it. He landed his first academic teaching job with a chair at the University of Marburg in 1929; this was the result of his Dante book, which in some ways, I think, is his most exciting and intense work. But in addition to learning and study, the heart of the hermeneutical enterprise was, for the scholar, to develop over the years a very particular kind of sympathy toward texts from different periods and different cultures. For a German whose specialty was Romance literature this sympathy took on an almost ideological cast, given that there had been a long period of historical enmity between Prussia and France, the most powerful and competitive of its neighbors and antagonists. As a specialist in Romance languages, the German scholar had a choice either to enlist on behalf of Prussian nationalism (as Auerbach did as a soldier during the First World War) and to study "the enemy" with skill and insight as a part of the continuing war effort or, as was the case with the postwar Auerbach and some of his peers, to overcome bellicosity and what we now call "the clash of civilizations" with a welcoming, hospitable attitude of humanistic knowledge designed to realign warring cultures in a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity.

The other part of the German Romance philologist's commitment to French, Italian, and Spanish generally and to French in particular is specifically literary. The historical trajectory that is the spine of *Mimesis* is the passage from the separation of styles in classical antiquity, to their mingling in the New Testament, their first great climax in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and their ultimate apotheosis in the French realistic au-

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thors of the nineteenth century—Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, and then Proust. The representation of reality is Auerbach's theme, so he had to make a judgment as to where and in what literature it was most ably represented. In the "Epilegomena" he explains that "in most periods the Romance literatures are more representative of Europe than are, for example, the German. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries France took unquestionably the leading role; in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries Italy took it over; it fell again to France in the seventeenth, remained there also during the greater part of the eighteenth, partly still in the nineteenth, and precisely for the origin and development of modern realism (just as for painting)" (570). I think Auerbach scants the substantial English contribution in all this, perhaps a blind spot in his vision. Auerbach goes on to affirm that these judgments derive not from aversion to German culture but rather from a sense of regret that German literature "expressed . . . certain limitations of outlook in . . . the nineteenth century" (571). As we shall soon see, he does not specify what those were as he had done in the body of *Mimesis*, but adds that "for pleasure and relaxation" he still prefers reading Goethe, Stifter, and Keller rather than the French authors he studies, going once as far as saying after a remarkable analysis of Baudelaire that he did not like him at all (571).

For English readers today who associate Germany principally with horrendous crimes against humanity and with National Socialism (which Auerbach circumspectly alludes to several times in *Mimesis*), the tradition of hermeneutical philology embodied by Auerbach as a Romance specialist identifies two just as authentic aspects of classical German culture: its methodological generosity and, what might seem like a contradiction, its extraordinary attention to the minute, local detail of other cultures and languages. The great progenitor and clarifier of this extremely catholic, indeed almost altruistic, attitude is Goethe, who in the decade after 1810 became fascinated with Islam generally and with Persian poetry in particular. This was the period when he composed his finest and most intimate love poetry, the *West-Ostlicher Diwan* (1819), finding in the work of the great Persian poet Hafiz and in the verses of the Koran not only a new lyric inspiration allowing him to express a reawakened sense of physical love but, as he said in a letter to his good friend Zelter, a discovery of how, in the absolute submission to God, he felt himself to be oscillating between two worlds, his own and that of the Muslim believer who was miles, even worlds away from European Weimar. During the 1820s those earlier thoughts carried him

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toward a conviction that national literatures had been superseded by what he called *Weltliteratur*, or world literature, a universalist conception of all the literatures of the world seen together as forming a majestic symphonic whole.

For many modern scholars—including myself—Goethe’s grandly utopian vision is considered to be the foundation of what was to become the field of comparative literature, whose underlying and perhaps unrealizable rationale was this vast synthesis of the world’s literary production transcending borders and languages but not in any way effacing their individuality and historical concreteness. In 1951, Auerbach wrote an autumnal, reflective essay entitled “Philology and *Weltliteratur*” with a somewhat pessimistic tone because he felt that with the greater specialization of knowledge and expertise after the Second World War, the dissolution of the educational and professional institutions in which he had been trained, and the emergence of “new” non-European literatures and languages, the Goethean ideal might have become invalid or untenable. But for most of his working life as a Romance philologist he was a man with a mission, a European (and Eurocentric) mission it is true, but something he deeply believed in for its emphasis on the unity of human history, the possibility of understanding inimical and perhaps even hostile others despite the bellicosity of modern cultures and nationalisms, and the optimism with which one could enter into the inner life of a distant author or historical epoch even with a healthy awareness of one’s limitations of perspective and insufficiency of knowledge.

Such noble intentions were insufficient, however, to save his career after 1933. In 1935, he was forced to quit his position in Marburg, a victim of Nazi racial laws and of an atmosphere of increasingly jingoistic mass culture presided over by intolerance and hatred. A few months later he was offered a position teaching Romance literatures at the Istanbul State University, where some years before Leo Spitzer had also taught. It was while he was in Istanbul, Auerbach tells us in the concluding pages of *Mimesis*, that he wrote and finished the book, which then appeared in Switzerland one year after the war’s end. And even though the book is in many ways a calm affirmation of the unity and dignity of European literature in all its multiplicity and dynamism, it is also a book of countercurrents, ironies, and even contradictions that need to be taken into account for it to be read and understood properly. This rigorously fastidious attention to particulars, to details, to individuality is why *Mimesis* is not principally a book providing readers with usable ideas, which in the case of concepts like Renaissance, baroque,

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romanticism, and so on, are not exact but unscientific, as well as finally unusable. "Our precision [as philologists]," he says, "relates to the particular. The progress of the historical arts in the last two centuries consists above all, apart from the opening up of new material and in a great refinement of methods in individual research, in a perspectival formation of judgment, which makes it possible to accord the various epochs and cultures their own presuppositions and views, to strive to the utmost toward the discovery of those, and to dismiss as unhistorical and dilettantish every absolute assessment of the phenomena that is brought in from outside" (573).

Thus for all its redoubtable learning and authority *Mimesis* is also a personal book, disciplined yes, but not autocratic, and not pedantic. Consider, first of all, that even though *Mimesis* is the product of an extraordinarily thorough education and is steeped in an unparalleled inwardness and familiarity with European culture, it is an exile's book, written by a German cut off from his roots and his native environment. Auerbach seems not to have wavered, however, in his loyalty to his Prussian upbringing or to his feeling that he always expected to return to Germany. "I am a Prussian and of the Jewish faith," he wrote of himself in 1921, and despite his later diasporic existence he never seemed to have doubted where he really belonged. American friends and colleagues report that until his final illness and death in 1957, he was looking for some way to return to Germany. Nevertheless, after all those years in Istanbul he undertook a new postwar career in the United States, spending time at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton and as a professor at Pennsylvania State University, before he went to Yale as Sterling Professor of Romance Philology in 1956.

Auerbach's Jewishness is something one can only speculate about since, in his usually reticent way, he does not refer to it directly in *Mimesis*. One assumes, for instance, that the various intermittent and moving comments throughout the book about mass modernity and its relationship with, among others, the disruptive power of the nineteenth-century French realistic writers (the Goncourts, Balzac, and Flaubert) as well as "the tremendous crisis" it caused, are meant to suggest the menacing world and how that world affects the transformation of reality and consequently of style (the development of the *sermo humilis* due to the figure of Jesus). It is not hard to detect a combination of pride and distance as he describes the emergence of Christianity in the ancient world as the product of prodigious missionary work undertaken by the apostle Paul, a diasporic Jew converted to Christ. The parallel with his

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own situation as a non-Christian explaining Christianity's achievement is evident, but so too is the irony that, in so doing, he travels from his roots still further. Most of all, however, in Auerbach's searingly powerful and strangely intimate characterization of the great Christian Thomist poet Dante—who emerges from the pages of *Mimesis* as *the* seminal figure in Western literature—the reader is inevitably led to the paradox of a Prussian Jewish scholar in Turkish, Muslim, non-European exile handling (perhaps even juggling) charged, and in many ways irreconcilable, sets of antinomies that, though ordered more benignly than their mutual antagonism suggests, never lose their opposition to each other. Auerbach is a firm believer in the dynamic transformations as well as the deep sedimentations of history: yes, Judaism made Christianity possible through Paul, but Judaism remains, and it remains different from Christianity. So too, he says in a melancholy passage in *Mimesis*, will collective passions remain the same whether in Roman times or under National Socialism. What makes these meditations so poignant is an autumnal but unmistakably authentic sense of humanistic mission that is both tragic and hopeful. I shall return to these matters later.

I think it is quite proper to highlight some of the more personal aspects of *Mimesis* because in many ways it is, and should be read as, an unconventional book. Of course it has the manifest gravity of the Important Book, but as I noted above, it is by no means a formulaic one, despite the relative simplicity of its main theses about literary style in Western literature. In classical literature, Auerbach says, high style was used for nobles and gods who could be treated tragically; low style was principally for comic and mundane subjects, perhaps even for idyllic ones, but the idea of everyday human or worldly life as something to be represented through a style proper to it is not generally available before Christianity. Tacitus, for example, was simply not interested in talking about or representing the everyday, excellent historian though he was. If we go back to Homer, as Auerbach does in the celebrated and much-anthologized first chapter of *Mimesis*, the style is paratactic, that is, it deals with reality as a line of “externalized, uniformly illuminated phenomena, at a definite time and in a definite place, connected together without lacunae in a perpetual foreground [which technically speaking is parataxis, words and phrases added on rather than subordinated to each other]; thoughts and feelings completely expressed; events taking place in leisurely fashion and with very little of suspense” (11). So as he analyzes the return to Ithaca by Odysseus, Auerbach notes how the author simply narrates his greeting and recognition by the old nurse Eury-

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clea, who knows him by the childhood scar he bears the moment she washes his feet: past and present are on an equal footing, there is no suspense, and one has the impression that nothing is held back, despite the inherent precariousness of the episode, what with Penelope's interloping suitors hanging about, waiting to kill her returning husband.

On the other hand, Auerbach's consideration of the Abraham and Isaac story in the Old Testament beautifully demonstrates how it "is like a silent progress through the indeterminate and the contingent, a holding of the breath . . . the overwhelming suspense is present. . . . The personages speak in the Bible story too; but their speech does not serve, as does speech in Homer, to manifest, to externalize thoughts — on the contrary, it serves to indicate thoughts which remain unexpressed. . . . [There is an] externalization of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative, all else left in obscurity; the decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies beneath is nonexistent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feelings remain unexpressed, are only suggested by silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole is permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal (and to that extent far more of a unity), remains mysterious and 'fraught with background'" (11-12). Moreover these contrasts can be seen in representations of human beings, in Homer of heroes "who wake every morning as if it were the first day of their lives," whereas the Old Testament figures, including God, are heavy with the implication of extending into the depths of time, space, and consciousness, hence of character, and therefore require a much more concentrated, intense act of attention from the reader.

A great part of Auerbach's charm as a critic is that, far from seeming heavy-handed and pedantic, he exudes a sense of searching and discovery, the joys and uncertainties of which he shares unassumingly with his reader. Nelson Lowry Jr., a younger colleague of his at Yale, wrote aptly in a memorial note of the self-instructing quality of Auerbach's work: "He was his own best teacher and learner. That process goes on in one's head, and one can become publicly aware of it to the extent of reproducing some of its primeval dramatic unfolding. The point is *how* you arrive, by what dangers, mistakes, fortuitous encounters, sleeps or slips of mind, by what insights achieved through great expense of time and passion and to what hard-won formulations in the face of history. . . . Auerbach had the ability to start with a single text without being coy, to expound it with a freshness that might pass for naiveté, to avoid making

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mere thematic or arbitrary connections, and yet to begin to weave ample fabrics from a single loom" ("Erich Auerbach: Memoir of a Scholar," *Yale Review*, Vol. 69, No. 2, Winter 1980, p. 318). As the 1953 "Epilegomena" demonstrates, however, Auerbach was adamant (if not also fierce) in rebutting criticisms of his claims; there is an especially tart exchange with his polymathic Romance colleague Curtius that shows the two formidable scholars slugging it out rather belligerently.

It is not an exaggeration to say that, like Vico, Auerbach was at heart an autodidact, guided in his diverse explorations by a handful of deeply conceived and complex themes with which he wove his ample fabric, which was not seamless or effortlessly spun out. In *Mimesis*, he resolutely sticks to his practice of working from disconnected fragments: each of the book's chapters is marked not only by a new author who bears little overt relationship to earlier ones, but also by a new beginning, in terms of the author's perspective and stylistic outlook, so to speak. The "representation" of reality is taken by Auerbach to mean an active dramatic presentation of how each author actually realizes, brings characters to life, and clarifies his or her own world; this of course explains why in reading the book we are compelled by the sense of disclosure that Auerbach affords us as he in turn re-realizes and interprets and, in his unassuming way, even seems to be staging the transmutation of a coarse reality into language and new life.

One major theme turns up already in the first chapter — the notion of incarnation — a centrally Christian idea, of course, whose prehistory in Western literature Auerbach ingeniously locates in the contrast between Homer and the Old Testament. The difference between Homer's Odysseus and Abraham is that the former is immediately present and requires no interpretation, no recourse either to allegory or to complicated explanations. Diametrically opposed is the figure of Abraham, who incarnates "doctrine and promise" and is steeped in them. These are "inseparable from" him and "for that very reason they are fraught with 'background' and [are] mysterious, containing a second, concealed meaning" (15). And this second meaning can only be recovered by a very particular act of interpretation, which, in the main piece of work Auerbach produced in Istanbul before he published *Mimesis* in 1946, he described as figural interpretation. (I refer here to Auerbach's long and rather technical essay "Figura," published in 1944 and now available in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature: Six Essays* [Meridian Books, Inc., 1959; rept. Peter Smith, 1973]).

Here is another instance where Auerbach seems to be negotiating

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between the Jewish and European (hence Christian) components of his identity. Basically, figural interpretation develops as early Christian thinkers such as Tertullian and Augustine felt impelled to reconcile the Old with the New Testament. Both parts of the Bible were the word of God, but how were they related, how could they be read, as it were, together, given the quite considerable difference between the old Judaic dispensation and the new message emanating from the Christian Incarnation?

The solution arrived at, according to Auerbach, is the notion that the Old Testament prophetically prefigures the New Testament, which in turn can be read as a figural and, he adds, carnal (hence incarnate, real, worldly) realization or interpretation of the Old Testament. The first event or figure is “real and historical announcing something else that is also real and historical” (*Drama of European Literature*, 29). At last we begin to see, like interpretation itself, how history does not only move forward but also backward, in each oscillation between eras managing to accomplish a greater realism, a more substantial “thickness” (to use a term from current anthropological description), a higher degree of truth.

In Christianity, the core doctrine is that of the mysterious Logos, the Word made flesh, God made into a man, and therefore, literally, incarnation; but how much more fulfilling is the new idea that pre-Christian times can be read as a shadowy figure (*figura*) of what actually was to come? Auerbach quotes a sixth-century cleric as saying, “‘that figure [a character or episode in the Old Testament that prophesies something comparable in the New Testament], without which not a letter of the Old Testament exists, now at length endures to better purpose in the New’; and from just about the same time [Auerbach continues] a passage in the writings of Bishop Avitus of Vienne . . . in which he speaks of the Last Judgment; just as God in killing the first-born in Egypt spared the houses daubed with blood, so may He recognize and spare the faithful by the sign of the Eucharist: *tu cognosce tuam salvanda in plebe figuram* (‘recognize thine own figure in the people that are to be saved’)” (*Drama of European Literature*, 46-47).

One last and quite difficult aspect of *figura* needs pointing out here. Auerbach contends that the very concept of *figura* also functions as a middle term between the literal-historical dimension and, for the Christian author, the world of truth, *veritas*. So rather than only convey an inert meaning for an episode or character in the past, in its second and more interesting sense *figura* is the intellectual and spiritual energy that

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does the actual connecting between past and present, history and Christian truth, which is so essential to interpretation. "In this connection," Auerbach claims, "*figura* is roughly equivalent to *spiritus* or *intellectus spiritalis*, sometimes replaced by *figuralitus*" (*Drama of European Literature*, 47). Thus for all the complexity of his argument and the minuteness of the often arcane evidence he presents, Auerbach, I believe, is bringing us back to what is an essentially Christian doctrine for believers but also a crucial element of *human* intellectual power and will. In this he follows Vico, who looks at the whole of human history and says, "mind made all this," an affirmation that audaciously reaffirms but also to some degree undercuts the religious dimension that gives credit to the Divine.

Auerbach's own vacillation between, on the one hand, his extraordinarily erudite and sensitive care for the intricacies of Christian symbolism and doctrine, his resolute secularism, and perhaps also his own Jewish background and, on the other, his unwavering focus on the earthly, the historical, the worldly gives *Mimesis* a fruitful inner tension. Certainly it is the finest description we have of the millennial effects of Christianity on literary representation. But *Mimesis* also glorifies as much as it animates with singular force and individualistic genius, most overtly in the chapters on verbal virtuosity in Dante, Rabelais, and Shakespeare. As we shall see in a moment, their creativity vies with God's in setting the human in a timeless as well as temporal setting. Typically, however, Auerbach chooses to express such ideas as an integral part of his unfolding interpretive quest in the book: he therefore does not take time out to explain his ideas methodologically but lets them emerge from the very history of the representation of reality as *it* begins to gather density and scope. Remember that, as his point of departure for analysis (which in a later essay he referred to and discussed as the *Ansatzpunkt*), Auerbach always comes back to the text and to the stylistic means used by the author to represent reality. This excavation of semantic meaning is most virtuosically evident in the essay "Figura" and in such brilliant shorter studies as his fertile examination of single phrases like *la cour et la ville*, which contain a whole library of meanings that illuminate seventeenth-century French society and culture.

Three seminal moments in the trajectory of *Mimesis* should now be identified in some detail. One is to be found in the book's second chapter, "Fortunata," whose starting point is a passage by the Roman author Petronius, followed by another by Tacitus. Both men treat their subjects from a one-sided point of view, that of writers concerned with maintain-

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ing the rigid social order of high and low classes. The wealthy and the important personages get all the attention, whereas the commoners or vulgar people are relegated to the fate of the unimportant and the vulgar. After having illustrated the insufficiencies of this classical separation of styles into high and low, Auerbach develops a wonderful contrast with that agonizing nocturnal moment in the Gospel of St. Mark when, standing in the courtyard of the High Priest's palace peopled with servant girls and soldiers, Simon Peter denies his relationship to the imprisoned Jesus. One particularly eloquent passage from *Mimesis* deserves quotation:

It is apparent at first glance that the rule of differentiated styles cannot possibly apply in this case. The incident, entirely realistic both in regard to locale and *dramatis personae*—note particularly their low social station—is replete with problem and tragedy. Peter is no mere accessory figure serving as *illustratio*, like the soldiers Vibulenus and Percennius [in Tacitus], who are represented as mere scoundrels and swindlers. He is the image of man in the highest and deepest and most tragic sense. Of course this mingling of styles is not dictated by an artistic purpose. On the contrary, it was rooted from the beginning in the character of Jewish-Christian literature; it was graphically and harshly dramatized through God's incarnation in a human being of the humblest social station, through his existence on earth amid humble everyday people and conditions, and through his Passion which, judged by earthly standards, was ignominious; and it naturally came to have . . . a most decisive bearing upon man's conception of the tragic and the sublime. Peter, whose personal account may be assumed to have been the basis of the story, was a fisherman from Galilee, of humblest background and humblest education. . . . From the humdrum existence of his daily life, Peter is called to the most tremendous role. Here, like everything else to do with Jesus' arrest, his appearance on the stage—viewed in the world-historical continuity of the Roman Empire—is nothing but a provincial incident, an insignificant local occurrence, noted by none but those directly involved. Yet how tremendous it is, viewed in relation to the life a fisherman from the Sea of Galilee normally lives . . . (41-42).

Auerbach then goes on unhurriedly to detail the “pendulation” or swings in Peter's soul between sublimity and fear, faith and doubt, courage and defeat in order to show that those experiences are radically incompatible with “the sublime style of classical antique literature.” This still leaves the question of why such a passage moves us, given that

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in classical literature it would appear only as farce or comedy. "Because it portrays something which neither the poets nor the historians of antiquity ever set out to portray: the birth of a spiritual movement in the depths of the common people, from within the everyday occurrences of contemporary life, which thus assumes an importance it could never have assumed in antique literature. What we witness is the awakening of 'a new heart and a new spirit.' All this applies not only to Peter's denial but also to every other occurrence which is related in the New Testament" (42-43). What Auerbach enables us to see here is "a world which on the one hand is entirely real, average, identifiable as to place, time, and circumstances, but which on the other hand is shaken in its very foundations, is transforming and renewing itself before our eyes" (43).

Christianity shatters the classical balance between high and low styles, just as Jesus' life destroys the separation between the sublime and the everyday. What is set in motion, as a result, is the search for a new literary pact between writer and reader, a new synthesis or mingling between style and interpretation that will be adequate to the disturbing volatility of worldly events in the much grander setting opened up by Christ's historical presence. To this end, St. Augustine's enormous accomplishment, linked as he was to the classical world by education, was to have been the first to realize that classical antiquity had been superseded by a different world requiring a new *sermo humilis*, or as Auerbach puts it, "a low style, such as would properly only be applicable to comedy, but which now reaches out far beyond its original domain, and encroaches upon the deepest and the highest, the sublime and the eternal" (72). The problem then becomes how to relate the discursive, sequential events of human history to each other within the new figural dispensation that has triumphed conclusively over its predecessor, and then to find a language adequate to such a task, once, after the fall of the Roman Empire, Latin was no longer the *lingua franca* of Europe.

Auerbach's choice of Dante to represent the second seminal moment in Western literary history is made to seem breathtakingly appropriate. Read slowly and reflectively, chapter 8 of *Mimesis*, "Farinata and Cavalcante," is one of the great moments in modern critical literature, a masterly, almost vertiginous embodiment of Auerbach's own ideas about Dante: that the *Divine Comedy* synthesized the timeless and the historical because of Dante's genius, and that Dante's use of the demotic (or vulgar) Italian language in a sense enabled the creation of what we have come to call literature. I will not try to summarize Auerbach's analysis of a passage from the tenth canto of the *Inferno* in which Dante the

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pilgrim and his guide Virgil are accosted by two Florentines who knew Dante from Florence but who are now committed to the Inferno, and whose internecine squabbles between the city's Guelph and Ghibelline factions carry on into the afterworld: readers should experience this dazzling analysis for themselves. Auerbach notes that the seventy lines he focuses on are incredibly packed, containing no less than four separate scenes, as well as more varied material than any other so far discussed in *Mimesis*. What particularly compels the reader is that Dante's Italian in the poem is, as Auerbach puts it assertively, "a well-nigh incomprehensible miracle," used by the poet "to discover the world anew" (182-183).

There is, first of all, its combination of "sublimity and triviality which, measured by the standards of antiquity, is monstrous." Then there is its immense forcefulness, its "repulsive and often disgusting greatness," according to Goethe, whereby the poet uses the vernacular to represent "the antagonism of the two traditions . . . that of antiquity . . . and that of the Christian era. . . . Dante's powerful temperament, which is conscious of both because its aspiration toward the tradition of antiquity does not imply for it the possibility of abandoning the other; nowhere does mingling of styles come so close to violation of all style" (184-185). Then there is its abundance of material and styles, all of it treated in what Dante claimed was "the common everyday language of the people," (186) which allowed a realism that brought forth descriptions of the classical, the biblical, and everyday worlds "not displayed within a single action, but instead an abundance of actions in the most diverse tonalities [which] follow one another in quick succession" (189). And finally, Dante manages to achieve through his style a combination of past, present, and future, since the two Florentine men who rise out of their flaming tombs to accost Dante so peremptorily are in fact dead but seem to live on somehow in what Hegel called a "changeless existence" remarkably devoid neither of history nor of memory and facticity. Having been judged for their sins and placed inside their burning encasement inside the kingdom of the damned, Farinata and Cavalcante are seen by us at a moment when we have "left the earthly sphere behind; we are in an eternal place, and yet we encounter concrete appearance and concrete occurrence there. This differs from what appears and occurs on earth, yet it is evidently connected with it in a necessary and strictly determined relation" (191).

The result is "a tremendous concentration [in Dante's style and vision]. We behold an intensified image of the essence of their being,

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fixed for all eternity in gigantic dimensions, behold it in a purity and distinctness which could never for one moment have been possible during their lives on earth" (192). What fascinates Auerbach is the mounting tension within Dante's poem, as eternally condemned sinners press their cases and aspire to the realization of their ambitions even as they remain fixed in the place assigned to them by Divine Judgment. Hence, the sense of futility and sublimity exuded simultaneously by the Inferno's "earthly historicity," which is always pointed in the end toward the white rose of the "Paradiso." So then "the beyond is eternal and yet phenomenal. . . . [I]t is changeless and of all time and yet full of history" (197). For Auerbach, therefore, Dante's great poem exemplifies the figural approach, the past realized in the present, the present prefiguring as well as acting like a sort of eternal redemption, the whole thing witnessed by Dante the pilgrim, whose artistic genius compresses human drama into an aspect of the divine.

The refinement of Auerbach's own writing about Dante is truly exhilarating to read, not just because of his complex, paradox-filled insights, but as he nears the end of the chapter, because of their Nietzschean audacity, often venturing toward the unsayable and the inexpressible, beyond normal or for that matter even divinely set limits. Having established the systematic nature of Dante's universe (framed by Aquinas' theocratic cosmology), Auerbach offers the thought that for all of its investment in the eternal and immutable, the *Divine Comedy* is even more successful in representing reality as basically human. In that vast work of art "the image of man eclipses the image of God," and despite Dante's Christian conviction that the world is made coherent by a systematic universal order, "the indestructibility of the whole historical and individual man turns *against* that order, makes it subservient to its own purposes, and obscures it" (202). Auerbach's great predecessor Vico had flirted with the idea that the human mind creates the divine, not the other way around, but living under the Church's umbrella in eighteenth-century Naples, Vico wrapped his defiant proposition in all sorts of formulae that seemed to preserve history for Divine Providence, and not for human creativity and ingenuity. Auerbach's choice of Dante for advancing the radically humanistic thesis carefully works through the great poet's Catholic ontology as a phase transcended by the Christian epic's realism, which is shown to be "ontogenetic," that is, "we are given to see, in the realm of timeless being, the history of man's inner life and unfolding" (202).

Yet Dante's Christian and post-Christian achievement could not have

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been realized had it not been for his immersion in what he inherited from classical culture — the capacity to draw human figures clearly, dramatically, and forcefully. In Auerbach's view, Western literature after Dante draws on his example but is rarely as intensely convincing in its variety, its dramatic realism, and stark universality as he was. Successive chapters of *Mimesis* treat medieval and early Renaissance texts as departures from the Dantean norm, some of them like Montaigne in his *Essais* stressing personal experience at the expense of the symphonic whole, others such as the works of Shakespeare and Rabelais brimming over with a linguistic verve and resourcefulness that overwhelms realistic representation in the interests of language itself. Characters like Falstaff or Pantagruel are realistically drawn to a certain degree, but what is as interesting to the reader as their vividness are the unprecedented riotous effects of the author's style. It is not a contradiction to say that this could not have happened without the emergence of humanism, as well as the great geographical discoveries of the period: both have the effect of expanding the potential range of human action while also continuing to ground it in earthly situations. Auerbach says that Shakespeare's plays, for instance, adumbrate "a basic fabric of the world, perpetually weaving itself, renewing itself, and connected in all its parts, from which all this arises and which makes it impossible to isolate any one event or level of style. Dante's general, clearly delimited figurality, in which everything is resolved in the beyond, in God's ultimate kingdom, and in which all characters attain their full realization only in the beyond, is no more" (327).

From this point on, reality is completely historical, and it, rather than the Beyond, has to be read and understood according to laws that evolve slowly. Figural interpretation took for its point of origin the sacred word, or Logos, whose incarnation in the earthly world was made possible by the Christ-figure, a central point, as it were, for organizing experience and understanding history. With the eclipse of the divine that is presaged in Dante's poem, a new order slowly begins to assert itself, and so the second half of *Mimesis* painstakingly traces the growth of historicism, a multiperspectival, dynamic, and holistic way of representing history and reality. Let me quote him at length on the subject:

Basically, the way in which we view human life and society is the same whether we are concerned with things of the past or things of the present. A change in our manner of viewing history will of necessity soon be transferred to our manner of viewing current conditions. When people realize

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that epochs and societies are not to be judged in terms of a pattern concept of what is desirable absolutely speaking but rather in every case in terms of their own premises; when people reckon among such premises not only natural factors like climate and soil but also the intellectual and historical factors; when, in other words, they come to develop a sense of historical dynamics, of the incomparability of historical phenomena and of their constant inner mobility; when they come to appreciate the vital unity of individual epochs, so that each epoch appears as a whole whose character is reflected in each of its manifestations; when, finally, they accept the conviction that the meaning of events cannot be grasped in abstract and general forms of cognition and that the material needed to understand it must not be sought exclusively in the upper strata of society and in major political events but also in art, economy, material and intellectual culture, in the depths of the workaday world and its men and women, because it is only there that one can grasp what is unique, what is animated by inner forces, and what, in both a more concrete and a more profound sense, is universally valid: then it is to be expected that those insights will also be transferred to the present and that, in consequence, the present too will be seen as incomparable and unique, as animated by inner forces and in a constant state of development; in other words, as a piece of history whose everyday depths and total inner structure lay claim to our interest both in their origins and in the direction taken by their development (443-444).

Auerbach never loses sight of his original ideas about the separation and mingling of styles—how, for instance, classicism in France returned to the vogue for antique models and the high style, and late-eighteenth-century German romanticism overturned those norms by way of a hostile reaction to them in works of sentiment and passion. And yet in a rare moment of severe judgment, Auerbach shows that, far from using the advantages of historicism to represent the complexity and social change that were overtaking contemporary reality, early-nineteenth-century German culture (with the exception of Marx) turned away from it out of a fear of the future, which to Germany seemed always to be barging in at the culture from the outside in forms such as revolution, civil unrest, and the overturning of tradition.

Goethe comes in for the harshest treatment, even though we know that Auerbach loved his poetry and read him with the greatest pleasure. I do not think it is reading too much into the somewhat judgmental tone of chapter 17 of *Mimesis* (“Miller the Musician”) to recognize that

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in its stern condemnation of Goethe's dislike of upheaval and even of change itself, his interest in aristocratic culture, his deep-seated wish to be rid of the "revolutionary occurrences" taking place all over Europe, and his inability to understand the flow of popular history, Auerbach was discussing no mere failure of perception but a profound wrong turn in German culture as a whole that led to the horrors of the present. Perhaps Goethe is made to represent too much. But were it not for his withdrawal from the present and for what he otherwise might have done for bringing German culture into the dynamic present, Auerbach speculates that Germany might have been integrated "into the emerging new reality of Europe and the world might have been prepared more calmly, have been accomplished with fewer uncertainties and less violence" (451-452).

At the time these regretful and actually understated lines were being written in the early 1940s, Germany had unleashed a storm on Europe that swept all before it. Before that, the major German writers after Goethe were mired in regionalism and a marvelously traditional conception of life as a vocation. Realism, as an overall style, never emerged in Germany, and except for Fontane, there was very little in the language that had the gravity, universality, and synthetic power to represent modern reality until Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* in 1901. There is a brief acknowledgment that Nietzsche and Jacob Burckhardt were more in touch with their own time, but neither of course was "concerned with the realistic portrayal of contemporary reality" (519). As against the chaotic irrationality ultimately represented by the anachronistic ethos of National Socialism, Auerbach therefore locates an alternative in the realism of mainly French prose fiction in which writers such as Stendhal, Flaubert, and Proust sought to unify the fragmented modern world — with its unfolding class struggle, its industrialization, and its economic expansion combined with moral discomfort — in the eccentric structures of the modernist novel. And these replace the correspondence between Eternity and History that had enabled Dante's vision, and which was now completely overtaken by the disruptive and dislocating currents of historical modernity.

The last few chapters of *Mimesis* thus seem to have a different tone than what goes before them. Auerbach is now discussing the history of his own time, not that of the medieval and Renaissance past, nor that of relatively distant cultures. Evolving slowly from acute observation of events and characters in the mid-nineteenth century, realism in France (and, though he talks about it much less, England) takes on the charac-

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ter of an aesthetic style capable of rendering sordidness and beauty with unadorned directness, although in the process master-technicians like Flaubert, unwilling to intervene in the rapidly changing world of social upheaval and revolutionary change, also formulated an ethic of disinterested observation. It is enough to be able to see and represent what is going on, although the practice of realism usually concerns figures from low or, at most, bourgeois life. How this then turns into the magnificent richness of Proust's work based on memory, or into the stream-of-consciousness techniques of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, is a topic that makes for some of Auerbach's most impressive later pages, though once again we should remind ourselves that what Auerbach is also describing is how his own work as a philologist emerges from modernity and is indeed an integral part of the representation of reality. Thus the modern Romance philology exemplified by Auerbach acquires its special intellectual identity by a kind of conscious affiliation with the realistic literature of its own time: the uniquely French achievement of dealing with reality from more than a local standpoint, universally, and with a specifically European mission. *Mimesis* bears within its pages its own rich history of the analysis of evolving styles and perspectives.

To help one understand the cultural and personal significance of Auerbach's quest, I'd like to recall the laboriously complicated narrative structure of Mann's postwar novel *Dr. Faustus* (published after Auerbach's work), which, far more explicitly than *Mimesis*, is a story both of modern German catastrophe as well as the attempt to understand it. The terrible story of Adrien Leverkühn, a prodigiously endowed composer who makes a pact with the devil to explore the furthest reaches of art and mind, is narrated by his much less gifted childhood friend and companion, Serenus Zeitblom. Whereas Adrien's wordless musical domain allows him to enter the irrational and the purely symbolic on his way down into terminal madness, Zeitblom, who is a humanist and scholar, tries to keep up with him, translating Adrien's musical journey into sequential prose, struggling to make sense of what defies ordinary comprehension. Mann suggests that both men represent the two aspects of modern German culture: one as embodied in Adrien's defiant life and his pathbreaking music, which takes him beyond ordinary sense into the irrational demonic; the other as delivered in Zeitblom's sometimes bumbling and awkward narrative, that of a closely connected friend witnessing that which he is powerless to stop or prevent.

The novel's fabric is actually made up of three strands. In addition to Adrien's story and Zeitblom's attempts to grapple with it (which include

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the story of Zeitblom's own life and career as scholarly humanist and teacher), there are frequent allusions to the course of the war, concluding with Germany's final defeat in 1945. That history is not referred to in *Mimesis*, nor of course is there anything in it like the drama and the cast of characters that animate Mann's great novel. But in its allusions to the failure of German literature to confront modern reality, and Auerbach's own effort in his book to represent an alternative history for Europe (Europe perceived through the means of stylistic analysis), *Mimesis* is also an attempt to rescue sense and meanings from the fragments of modernity with which, from his Turkish exile, Auerbach saw the downfall of Europe, and Germany in particular. Like Zeitblom, he affirms the recuperative and redemptive human project for which, in its patient philological unfolding, his book is the emblem, and again resembling Zeitblom, he understands that like a novelist, the scholar must reconstruct the history of his own time as part of a personal commitment to his field. Yet Auerbach specifically forswears the linear narrative style, which, despite its numerous interruptions and parentheses, works so powerfully for Zeitblom and his readers.

Thus in comparing himself to modern novelists such as Joyce and Woolf, who re-create a whole world out of random, usually unimportant moments, Auerbach explicitly rejects a rigid scheme, a relentless sequential movement, or fixed concepts as instruments of study. "As opposed to this," he says near the end, "I see the possibility of success and profit in a method which consists in letting myself be guided by a few motifs which I have worked out gradually and without a specific purpose . . . which have become familiar and vital to me in the course of my philological activity" (548). What gives him the confidence to surrender to those motifs without a specific purpose is the realization that no one person can possibly synthesize the whole of modern life, and second, that there is an abiding "order and . . . interpretation of life which arise from life itself: that is, those which grow up in the individuals themselves, which are to be discerned in their thoughts, their consciousness, and in a more concealed form in their words and actions. For there is always going on within us a process of formulation and interpretation whose subject matter is our own self" (549).

This testimonial to self-understanding is a deeply affecting one, I think. Several recognitions and affirmations are at play and even at odds within it, so to speak. One of course is staking something as ambitious as the history of Western representations of reality neither on a pre-existing method nor a schematic time-frame, but on personal interest,

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learning, and practice alone. Second, this then suggests that interpreting literature is “a process of formulation and interpretation whose subject matter is our own self.” Third, rather than producing a totally coherent, neatly inclusive view of the subject, there is “not one order and one interpretation, but many, which may either be those of different persons or of the same person at different times; so that overlapping, complementing, and contradiction yield something that we might call a synthesized cosmic view or at least a challenge to the reader’s will to interpretive synthesis” (549).

Thus it all unmistakably comes down to a personal effort. Auerbach offers no system, no shortcut to what he puts before us as a history of the representation of reality in Western literature. From a contemporary standpoint there is something impossibly naive, if not outrageous, that hotly contested terms like “Western,” “reality,” and “representation” — each of which has recently brought forth literally acres of disputatious prose among critics and philosophers — are left to stand on their own, unadorned and unqualified. It is as if Auerbach was intent on exposing his personal explorations and, perforce, his fallibility to the perhaps scornful eye of critics who might deride his subjectivity. But the triumph of *Mimesis*, as well as its inevitable tragic flaw, is that the human mind studying literary representations of the historical world can only do so as all authors do — from the limited perspective of their own time and their own work. No more scientific a method or less subjective a gaze is possible, except that the great scholar can always buttress his vision with learning, dedication, and moral purpose. It is this combination, this mingling of styles out of which *Mimesis* emerges. And to my way of thinking, its humanistic example remains an unforgettable one, fifty years after its first appearance in English.