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ERIC AUERBACH

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Philologist, historian, critic, comparatist, literary anthropologist, Erich Auerbach (1892-1957) devoted his wide-ranging scholarly interests to many topics, from the Greek-Roman antiquity to the Latin Middle Ages, from Dante to the French classicism, from the Renaissance to the modernist novel.

As Lee Harvey Oswald states in Don DeLillo's *Libra*, «history means to merge». And in fact, Auerbach's everyday life and intellectual history merge with the great, often tragic events of the «short Twentieth Century». Born in Berlin on November 9th 1892, he served in the Prussian Army during World War I where he was heavily injured. He then worked as a librarian in the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin and was appointed professor of Romance philology at Marburg University, thanks to his first and still significant book, *Dante, Poet of the Secular World* (1929). However, Nazism and racial laws were on the way. As a Jew, Auerbach was dismissed in 1935 from university and found a way to leave Germany with his family. He moved to Istanbul, where he taught at the Turkish State University until 1947. And it was there, far from homeland, without scholarly reviews and specialized libraries, while the European civilization was tragically sinking, that he could convert the exile «into a positive mission, whose success would be a cultural act of great importance» (Said 1983: 7). This cultural act (or miracle) is his masterpiece, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, written in 1942-45 from this displaced point of view and published in 1946, «an attempt virtually to see the development of Western culture at almost the last moment when that culture still had its integrity and civilizational coherence» (Said 2003: 258).

As Auerbach writes in *Philology and Weltliteratur* (1952), «our philological home is the earth: it can no longer be the nation» (Auerbach 1969: 17). Faithful to the «exilic concerns» of his life and work (Holquist 1999: 85), he refused to get back to the split Germany. In 1947 he emigrated to the United States, teaching first at Pennsylvania State and Princeton and then at Yale, where he was Sterling Professor of Romance Languages until his death in Wallingford, Connecticut, on October 13th 1957.

THE RESISTANCE TO THEORY

It would be hard and arguably wrong to infer a systematic aesthetic theory from Auerbach's works. His methodological texts can be counted on one hand – the last pages and the Epilogue of *Mimesis*, the Preface to *Vier Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der französischen Bildung* (1951), *Philology and Weltliteratur*, the *Epilegomena to Mimesis* (1953), *Vico's Contribution to Literary Criticism* (1958), the Introduction (*Purpose and Method*) to *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (1958). Laws, thesis, general categories and definitions of art or literature are generally neglected. The very term *aesthetics* is used rarely and in a limited context, because «the aesthetic component seems self-evident and scarcely in need of explanation» (Holdheim 1981: 143). Even the «guiding ideas» (*leitende Gedanken*) that are supposed to outline the huge pattern of *Mimesis* are barely defined, and rather implicitly assumed during textual analysis and historical reconstructions. As he states in the Epilogue, «the category of “realistic works of serious style and character” has never been treated or even conceived as such. I have not seen fit to analyze it theoretically and to describe it systematically» (Auerbach 2003a: 556).

Not by chance, some reviewers of the book (notably René Wellek) blamed the lack of «a clear theoretical framework» (Wellek 1954: 305). But this overt disregard for conceptualization is not a kind of impressionism or epistemological skepticism, as he explains in the *Epilegomena to Mimesis*: «It has often been said that my conceptualization is not unambiguous and that the expressions that I use for organizational categories required a sharper definition. [...] That happened intentionally and methodically. [...] There is not in intellectual history (*Geistesgeschichte*) identity and strict conformity to laws, and abstract, reductive concepts falsify or destroy the phenomena. [...] One must beware, it seems to me, of regarding the exact sciences as our model; our precision relates to the particular» (Auerbach 2003b: 572-73).

On the one hand, Auerbach is extremely suspicious of «extrahistorical and absolute categories» (Auerbach 1993: 13) like *baroque*, *romantic*, *mythos* etc. that lead only «to pseudo-problems and to their solution by means of new hypostases» (Auerbach 1951: 10). Only in the historical forms themselves we can find «the flexible, always provisional, categories we need» (Auerbach 1993: 13). That's why general and abstract terms like *realism*, *moralism* and so on «should acquire their meaning only from the context, and in fact from the particular context» (Auerbach 2003b: 572).

On the other hand, Auerbach warns against the Hegelian «bad infinity» and analyzes every detail to find out a synthesis. When he compares his method of *explication de texte* to Leo Spitzer's, in the common ground of *Stilkritik*, he rejects any «impressionist and individualist» approach and points out the real goal of his inquiry: «I, on the contrary, am concerned with something more general [...]. My purpose is always to write history. Consequently I never approach a text as an isolated phenomenon; I address a question to it, and my question, not the text, is my primary point of departure» (Auerbach 1993: 20).

That is a central point in Auerbach's epistemology: the dialectic between particular and universal, analysis and synthesis – or *certum* and *verum*, in the terms of Giambattista Vico. His critical theory and methodological praxis originate from «the conflicting encounter between two genealogies»: on the one hand the tradition of idealism and Romantic historicism, longing for unity and wholeness; on the other

hand the paradigm of positive philology, whose only goal is to check factual data (Mazzoni 2007: 83-86). When he deals with the Goethean idea of *Weltliteratur*, he wonders how to reconcile the overview of a «scholarly and synthesizing philology» and the huge amount of materials provided by the increasing specialization in every field of research (Auerbach 1969: 8-9). The answer can be found in many essays and in every chapter of *Mimesis*: a «dialectic, dramatic process» (Auerbach 1993: 13), a circular motion between analysis and synthesis in which the single text exemplifies the main issues – the *style* – of a given historical segment (conceived, with Vico, as a consistent unity), that in turn arranges the fragments into a meaningful whole. It's the hermeneutic circle in its classical formulation, «because the universally human or poetic factor [...] can only be apprehended in its particular historical forms», but «it is impossible to interpret the particular without a living awareness of the whole» (Auerbach 1993: 13, 17; cf. Roncaglia 1956: xxv, xxxv; Uhlig, in Lerer 1996: 39; Brownlee, *ibid.*: 158-60).

In order to stay in the circle in the right way, as Heidegger warns, Auerbach develops a specific operational tool, the *Ansatzpunkt*, «a point of departure, a handle (*Handhabe*), as it were, by which the subject can be seized» (Auerbach 1969: 14). The *Ansatzpunkt* can be a simple word or formula (*figura, sermo humilis, la cour et la ville*), or a selected textual fragment – as in the first pages of every chapter of *Mimesis* – conceived as a synecdoche of the whole. But not all points are equal: «The characteristic of a good point of departure is its concreteness and its precision on the one hand, and on the other, its potential for centrifugal radiation» (*ibid.*: 15). You can learn the technical tools of linguistic, philology and bibliography, says Auerbach, but «everything else is not a method because it cannot be taught» (Auerbach 1951: 9): it requires insight, sensitivity, personal experience, a wide cultural horizon, the skill to discern what is meaningful. It has even something random and capricious like the style of the authors he acknowledges as methodological models – Montaigne, Saint-Simon, Stendhal, the modernist novelists. It's ultimately an art, not a science, the human art of understanding what is properly human.

AESTHETIC HISTORICISM

Along with two other great Romance philologists to whom he is often compared, Ernst Robert Curtius and Leo Spitzer, Auerbach belongs to the German tradition of *Geistesgeschichte*. At the very root of his work lies the firm belief that aesthetics without philology, «the set of activities that concern themselves systematically with human language» (Auerbach 1949: 9), is nothing but a sterile exercise. Here philology is conceived not as the meticulous inventory of *minutiae* practiced by the positivists, but as a synonymous, *via Vico*, of *Geistesgeschichte*, the science (or rather art) of recovering, connecting and interpreting every document of human spirit in a given historical moment to make that transpired life live again (Breslin 1961: 371-74).

In doing so, Auerbach locates himself in the tradition of German historicism, inherited from Hegel and the Romantics and renewed by scholars whose influence often resounds in his works – notably Wilhelm Dilthey, Friedrich Meinecke and Ernst Troeltsch. But this particular creation of German thought, as he often remarks, finds its «almost miraculous» anticipation in the obscure, baroque masterpiece by Vico, *La scienza nuova*, where Auerbach can find the ancient root of his method and conception of art (cf. Della

Terza 2001; Battistini, in Paccagnella-Gregori 2009: 81-94; Tiné 2013: 9-68). As a matter of fact, the «aesthetic historicism» of Vico provides Auerbach the basic framework for his sensitive exploration of literary styles and emphatic reconstruction of historical contexts. Vico is the founder of historicism and historical perspectivism, «the “Copernican discovery” in the field of historical studies» (Auerbach 1967c: 261). Thanks to him, Auerbach understands not only «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» (Auerbach 2003a: 443), «that the works of art of different peoples and periods [...] have to be judged each by its own development, not by absolute rules of beauty and ugliness» (1967a: 266). He also points out the interwoven relationship between the subject and the object of historical knowledge: «For historical relativism is relative in two respects – of the material and of those who are striving to understand it. It is a radical relativism, but that is no reason to fear it. The area in which we move in this effort at understanding is the world of men, to which we ourselves belong» (Auerbach 1993: 12). It is for this reason, at the end of the *Epilogomena*, Auerbach claims that «*Mimesis* is quite consciously a book that a particular person, in a particular situation, wrote at the beginning of the 1940s» (Auerbach 2003b: 574).

This relativism or perspectivism, in its twofold historical rooting, distinguishes Auerbach's «critical historicism» (the formula is Meinecke's) from the Hegelian metaphysics and philosophy of history: it allows him to look at Vico from the point of view of Diltheyan hermeneutics (Holquist 1993: 373-75; Castellana 2013: 116-21; Tiné 2013: 34-44). With Dilthey, an hermeneutic concept of history and existence takes place in the German tradition of historicism: *to be* means also *to interpret* (oneself and the other), through a dynamic connection between historical data and the course of a life (*Lebenslauf*) that leaves aside causal explanations, metaphysical schemata or transcendental categories like the Kantian ones. Not by chance, some Auerbach's remarks about Vico stress the role of experience and the hermeneutic nature of historical knowledge: «Finding history in our own mind is self-knowledge; it is the germ of a theory of historical understanding based on self-understanding. It is a synthetic understanding based on one's own experience (*Erfahrung*)» (Auerbach 1967b: 249); «Therefore, the interpretation of historical events [...] remains a matter of 'understanding' or 'finding within the modifications of the mind' of the interpreter» (Auerbach 1967c: 259).

That is why, coming back to *Mimesis*, Auerbach hesitates in defining the very subject of his book: «reality represented (*Dargestellte Wirklichkeit*)», as the original subtitle states? Or «representation of reality (*Wirklichkeitdarstellung*)», as he points out at the end of the first chapter (Auerbach 2003a: 23)? It is likely both of them, in their coming together, for in the circle of understanding subject and object, *Darstellung* and *Wirklichkeit* collide: mimetic art, like human knowledge, is the representation of something *through* the action of someone, a deep interpenetration implied by the Hegelian term *Darstellung* (distinguished from *Vorstellung*), in a living connection with the personal and historical experience of the interpreter. As Auerbach finally states in the Epilogue, «the subject of this book [is] the interpretation of reality through literary representation or “imitation” [*die Interpretation des Wirklichen durch literarische Darstellung oder “Nachahmung”*]» (Auerbach 2003a: 554). The final goal of *mimesis*, or *realism*, or whatever you want to call

it, is not the exact reproduction of an object but the deep comprehension of experience and human destiny in the historical world.

MIMESIS, REALISM, STILMISCHUNG, FIGURA

Within this dynamical methodological frame, Auerbach gathers and reworks some main categories of Western aesthetic tradition (*mimesis*, *realism*, *tragic*, *style* etc.), but he does not propose strict definitions nor take position in the critical debate. Even the term he chooses as the title of his masterpiece is never clearly defined, although «an aesthetic of *mimesis*», aware of Platonic and Aristotelian thought, could be assumed as an implicit core of his critical praxis (Tiné 2013: 213-52). The fact remains that we can count only few overt references to philosophical sources and to the millenary debate about the topic: some pages devoted to Plato and Aristotle in the first chapter of *Dante, Poet of the Secular World* (Auerbach 1961: 5-8), and a very short genealogy in the Epilogue of *Mimesis*, where he explains that his «original starting point was Plato's discussion in book 10 of the *Republic* – *mimesis* ranking third after truth – in conjunction with Dante's assertion that in the *Commedia* he presented true reality» (Auerbach 2003a: 554).

Not to mention his disregard in defining a term much more recent but not less ambiguous than *mimesis*: *realism*. Francesco Orlando (in Castellana 2009: 17-62) listed an inventory of 21 different meanings of *realism* that we can find in *Mimesis*. Auerbach himself uses the term in a very flexible way and typically qualifies it with changeable adjectives, related to the guiding ideas of the book (*figural*, *earnest*, *tragic*, *problematic realism*), to particular contexts (*Christian*, *courtly*, *Russian*, *modern realism*) or even to single authors (*radical realism* in Saint-Simon, *atmospheric realism* in Balzac, *impersonal* and *objective realism* in Flaubert). According to his methodological assumptions, realism is not a fixed, abstract category but an actual phenomenon embodied in singular texts and historical forms, whose status depends on the specific contexts. But most notably, Auerbach *doesn't really need* to define it. «*Mimesis* – as he states in the *Epilegomena* – is an attempt at the history of the matter itself, not of the expert opinions on it» (Auerbach 2003b: 563). And to some extent, for him, «the matter itself» is a transparent and self-evident object he can share with the ideal readers of the book, «those whose love for our western history has serenely persevered» (Auerbach 2003a: 557; cf. Bertoni 2009, 2018). As Christopher Prendergast remarks, «Auerbach's magisterial *Mimesis* is magisterial precisely because for him the concept of 'mimesis' as such was intrinsically non-problematical; [...] because the conceptual foundation-stone on which the monument is built is always assumed to be entirely intact» (Prendergast 1986: 212).

More specifically, Auerbach's grandiose overview of Western realism rests on a few insights that probably represent his most original contribution to the history of aesthetics and literary forms, drawn up in some seminal essays of the previous years: *Romanticism and Realism* (1933), *On the Serious Imitation of the Everyday* (1937), *Figura* (1938), *Sacrae scripturae sermo humilis* (1941). «Representation of reality in Western literature», for him, means something much more exact than the vagueness of the formula can suggest: it means that a full representation (and interpretation) of human life can take place only under given historical conditions, when literature emancipates itself from the classical doctrine of separation of styles (*Stiltrennung*) and can depict the everyday life of common people in an earnest, problematic, even tragic

way. The mixture of styles (*Stilmischung*) is then the necessary (even not sufficient) condition of realism, whose actual occurrence in European tradition can be relieved at two main historical crossroads: 1) The Late Antiquity and the Christian Middle Ages, when the evangelical *sermo humilis* and the figural conception of reality break the classical theory of stylistic levels and culminate in «the astounding paradox of what is called Dante's realism» (Auerbach 2003a: 191); 2) The historicist and postromantic Nineteenth Century, notably in France, when novelists like Stendhal and Balzac give rise «to modern tragic realism based on the contemporary» (*ibid.*: 458; cf. Auerbach 2010: 3-60). And in Auerbach's narrative account, these different moments of literary history are not related in a chronological nor causal way, but according to a model of «figural causation», «as a sequence of figure-fulfillment relationship» that provides «the diachronic plot of the history of Western literature» (White 1999: 88, 91).

A main assumption in Auerbach's aesthetics of *mimesis* is that literary works of art are «symbolic forms» (in the terms of Cassirer) whose stylistic features translate a worldview historically grounded, the way in which a given social group represents itself and makes experience of the world. If we can really glimpse an «aesthetic universal» (Hamon) in Auerbach's overview of Western tradition, it's not an abstract and metaphysical category but an existential, even ethical and political stance, a comprehensive interpretation of the human condition, «a kind of drama, which advances no theory but only sketches a certain pattern of human destiny» (Auerbach 1993: 21).

RECEPTION AND CRITICAL DEBATE

If *Mimesis* is a «work of truly outstanding influence and longevity» (Said, in Auerbach 2003a: ii), Auerbach left his mark also in other fields of research – Dante Studies, Latin Middle Ages literature, French literary culture from Montaigne to Proust. Nevertheless, no «school of Auerbach» has ever existed and his critical fortune in the second half of Twentieth Century has gone through Vichian *corsi e ricorsi*, especially during structuralist and poststructuralist hegemony. A turning point in the history of reception is marked by the Stanford Conference in October 1992, whose proceedings (Lerer 1996) were published in the fiftieth anniversary of *Mimesis*. From this date on, passing through the fiftieth anniversary of his death (2007), a so called «Auerbach Renaissance» begins (Castellana, Rivoletti, in Auerbach 2010: vii-viii): the «legacy» of Erich Auerbach is more and more discussed by scholarly articles (Calin 1999), academic conferences (Berlin, Paris, Istanbul, Pisa, Bressanone, Siena), proceedings or miscellaneous books (Castellana-Mazzoni 2007; Barck-Treml 2008; Tortonese 2009; Castellana 2009; Paccagnella-Gregori 2009; Colombo-Francucci-Quinto 2018).

In this general effort to historicize and reassess Auerbach's contribution to European aesthetics, some topics in particular are central to the debate: the biographical, cultural and philosophical roots of his thought; the problems of realism and representation; the concept of *figura* and figural interpretation; the crisis of modernity and the philosophy of history at the core of *Mimesis*; the humanistic utopia of comparative and world literature in front of the melancholy decline of European civilization. If the Twentieth is really «the Century of Auerbach», as proposed by a special issue of the review "Allegoria", we can recognize in his magisterial work, from our point of view, «an autumnal but unmistakably authentic

sense of humanistic mission that is both tragic and hopeful» (Said, in Auerbach 2003a: x). It's our job to collect his legacy.

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