

Appropriating Auerbach: From Said to Postcolonialism

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Some months after the publication of his now-famous book *Orientalism*, Edward Said presented a lecture at my university that opened with a long eulogy to Auerbach's *Mimesis*. A number of listeners were surprised to hear the author of an iconoclastic and still quite controversial book express his debt to one of the classics of European criticism, but Said quickly moved to his major argument—namely that the time had come for literary scholars to widen their inquiry from what was called the West to the rest of the world.

With over a quarter century retrospect we now see Said's book as a turning point in anglophone critical inquiry, what has in fact been called the originating moment of postcolonial studies. My task in this article is to explore the ways that Auerbach's work has been appropriated by Said and others whose affinities to Auerbach would not be readily apparent to those of us familiar with his writings since the time of their publication.

In an earlier essay presented at a conference honoring the centennial of Auerbach's birth, I traced the reception of *Mimesis* from its earliest reviews. Despite the high praise that was generally meted out to this book since its appearance in 1946, its early reception history was notable for the narrowness of the perspectives through which it was viewed. Specialists in Classics, for example, would dispute Auerbach's approach to ancient texts while at the same time admiring what he had accomplished in fields outside their own (Lindenberger 196). Or those espousing the then reigning critical model of textual close reading would praise the book as an exemplar of their own orientation while ignoring the larger historicist argument within which Auerbach's analyses of individual passages are embedded (201-02).

The present article is not so much concerned with the actual reception of Auerbach's work as with the way he has been interpreted and appropriated in recent decades to defend and sustain particular intellectual agendas. Take, for example, a book of 1993 that bears the title *The Rise of Eurocentrism*, in which Auerbach's *Mimesis* serves as a central text to illustrate what the author, Vassilis Lambropoulos, views as the unfortunate triumph of Hebraism over Hellenism in Western thought. Auerbach's privileging, in his opening chapter, of the Biblical over the Homeric text, and his subsequent championing of a mixture of styles over the classical tradition here serve as examples of the drive that leads to the triumph of Hebraic interpretation over Hellenic simplicity. Indeed,

as Lambropoulos puts it at one point, "Auerbach composes the history of Western literature as a theodicy, vindicating the justice of God in respect to Greek evil pleasures" (88).

To move to a more significant example, Paul Bové devotes more than a third of his lengthy book *Intellectuals in Power* to the work of Auerbach. Bové's study is an argument for the power of public intellectuals to establish what Bové refers to as a "politically progressive critical humanism" (xi). The figures who most clearly embody this humanism for Bové are Michel Foucault and Edward Said. Yet his book is far less concerned with them than it is with Auerbach, whom he presents as their forebear in two ways—first through the perspectivism of *Mimesis*, which he calls "a discontinuous history as engaged history of present," and, second, for "bringing the skills of rational, scholarly inquiry to bear on the present social and political conditions out of which all cultural and intellectual discourse emerges" (208).

For me at least it is a bit difficult to see Auerbach in any public role, whether in the scholarly isolation of his Marburg years, his period of exile, or his American years. Certainly he was never engaged in the polemics of the two figures that Bové names as his successors, nor did he ever enjoy anything of their fame and notoriety during his lifetime. Yet through an analysis of his work, above all *Mimesis*, as well as the essays on Pascal and on *Weltliteratur*, Bové presents a compelling argument for Auerbach as a role model for a new way of writing history, which he accomplished, according to Bové, "out of the unique intellectual and existential experience of the individual scholar, but also, in so doing," by "relegitimizing culturally a certain image of the responsible and responsive authoritative critical voice" (81). Throughout his long discussion Bové insists on Auerbach's ability to use the methods of humanistic inquiry as a means of transcending professional specialization to achieve cultural authority.

As a writer of history, Auerbach is here contrasted with the representatives of German historicism of the preceding generation, above all Meinecke, and it is Vico's impact on Auerbach, as Bové tells his story, that allowed the latter the freedom to move beyond his German contemporaries. As he puts it, "Auerbach finds in Vico's work reasons for moving toward a research method better able to deal with modernity's characteristic political appropriation of discourse by various states, parties, and ideologies" (139). Whether or not one is wholly convinced by the political meanings that Bové finds in Auerbach, it is significant that by the 1980's, when Bové's book was written, Auerbach had become a sufficiently legendary figure in the anglophone academic world to elicit the kind of attention that would establish his place in the genealogy of modern critical thought.

The most fruitful appropriation of Auerbach occurs in the work of Said, and much of this article will seek to describe and account for the impact that Auerbach's work and life exercised on Said and, in effect, upon postcolonial

critics who followed in the wake of *Orientalism*. Said's use of Auerbach covers the full course of his career—from his co-translation of "Philologie der Weltliteratur" in 1969 to the introduction he wrote for an edition of *Mimesis* published in 2003 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the book's English translation. This also, as it turned out, was the year of Said's own death.

Even before his translation of "Philologie der Weltliteratur" Said displayed a particular interest in figures whose lives were marked by exile and displacement. His doctoral dissertation, which he published in 1966, was on Joseph Conrad, who, like Said, was unable for political reasons to remain in his native land and who wrote in a language to which he was not native. Auerbach's quotation, at the end of "Philologie der Weltliteratur," of Hugh of St. Victor's lines about the pains of exile is cited by Said on a number of later occasions, and quite appropriately so, for it is their common lot as exiles that bring both Auerbach and Said together by means of the similar experience expressed by their medieval predecessor.

The brief introductory note to this translation of Auerbach's essay seeks not only to place Auerbach into an intellectual tradition, namely, as the translators put it, the tradition "deriving from Herder, Grimm, the Schlegels and, especially in Auerbach's case, Giambattista Vico" ("Philologie der Weltliteratur" 1), but it also defines *Weltliteratur* as "literature which expresses *Humanität*, humanity, and this expression is literature's ultimate purpose." I bring this up here because the term "humanism," which Said always associates with Auerbach, was to remain a key term in all of Said's work down to his recent, posthumous volume entitled *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*.

The significance of Auerbach's late essay for Said lies not only in its affirmation of humanism but above all in its central methodological contribution, namely, the concept of the *Ansatzpunkt* (point of departure), that handle by means of which the modern scholar can attempt to make sense out of phenomena at a time in which objects of knowledge have become too widespread and diverse to be treated convincingly according to the modes of historical writing that had prevailed in the preceding two centuries. Indeed, Auerbach's concept is central to Said's book *Beginnings*, published in 1975 between his study of Conrad and *Orientalism*, which followed three years later.

Whereas Auerbach developed the idea of the *Ansatzpunkt* as a means of writing history, above all literary history at a time that the specialist feels overwhelmed with the wealth of data at his disposal, Said expands the idea to describe the composition of a wide variety of texts, especially novels, from the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Said's title is clearly an adaptation of Auerbach's term, and it is subject to a series of ongoing definitions in the course of the book. "A beginning is a problem to be studied, as well as a position taken by a writer," he tells us near the beginning (Said, *Beginnings* 13), or "beginning is a creature with its own special life" (18); or "a beginning

is often that which is left behind" (29). Or note his questions, "Is the beginning simply an artifice, a disguise that defies the perpetual trap of forced continuity? Or does it admit of a meaning and a possibility that are genuinely capable of realization?" (43).

For Said the very process of writing his own book on a theory of beginnings foregrounds the problem that is his central topic. And just as the texts he discusses in detail, notably Conrad's *Nostramo* (100-37) and T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (153-56), display the arbitrariness and uncertainties of their beginnings, so Said's own book bearing this title manifests these same characteristics in a thoroughly selfconscious way throughout. Whereas Auerbach waits until the final chapter to reveal this selfconsciousness, Said in effect makes the *Ansatzpunkt* his central concern.

Yet the seeming arbitrariness of the method need not be an excuse for lack of rigor. At one point Said writes, "Auerbach calls his *Ansatzpunkt* a handle by which to grasp literary history: we find it for a purpose and at a time that is crucial to us. . . . A beginning is a formal appetite imposing a severe discipline on the mind that wants to think every turn of its thoughts from the start" (*Beginnings* 76). For Said it is important to distinguish between the apparent triviality of the *Ansatzpunkt* and the powerful results that can turn up in the course of what he calls "a critic's journey" (72). "[Auerbach's] *Ansatzpunkt*," he writes,

is a sentence or phrase, once spoken or written in a distance we call the past but now mute: *la cour et la ville*, for instance. Yet the recognition of its wanting-to-speak, its importance in the present, transforms the *Ansatzpunkt* from an uninteresting recurring motto into an instrument for the critic's work; like Aeneas's moly, it guides the critic through previously unnegotiable pathways. (72)

Again, one can apply Said's description at once to Auerbach's term and to Said's own text.

Among Said's major writings, only *Orientalism* would, at least on the surface, seem unrelated to Auerbach's concerns. We think of this book as written primarily under the influence of Foucault, whose notions about language Said develops to describe the peculiar discourse created in the West to apprehend the culture of the Arab world. Yet however Foucaultian we may judge this book to be—and I might add that Said, unlike Foucault, never abandons the role of the author in the creation of discourse—Auerbach hovers over this book in at least one fundamental way. Indeed, the clichés about the Arab world that Said examines—the East as "feminized," as "exotic," as sinister—serve as an *Ansatzpunkt* by means of which Said creates a whole history of how the West has apprehended and exerted its power over the East. One may remember the concrete example that Auerbach provided in

“Philologie der Weltliteratur” to illustrate how a larger history can be developed out of an *Ansatzpunkt*. Auerbach describes Ernst Robert Curtius’s *Lateinisches Mittelalter* as “proceeding from a clearly prescribed, almost narrow, single phenomenon,” namely “the rhetorical tradition, and especially the *topoi*” (“Philology and Weltliteratur” 13). Similarly, the whole larger view of how the West has apprehended the East derives, in Said’s hands, from a limited number of linguistic forms.

I might add at this point that, while writing *Orientalism*, Said, as far as I can tell from my conversations with him at the time, was unaware of the enormous impact that this book would have on subsequent scholarship for at least a generation, and not only in literature but in many other fields as well. He characteristically referred to *Orientalism* as his “polemical” book and seemed to place a greater importance on *Beginnings*, which was published while he was working on *Orientalism*.

After *Orientalism* Auerbach comes to play still another role in Said’s work. For his essay collection *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, published in 1983, Said wrote an introductory essay entitled “Secular Criticism,” establishing a critical stance that was to remain central to his work for the remainder of his career. He calls this stance “oppositional criticism,” which he refuses to identify with any particular ideology such as Marxism. Rather, what distinguishes this stance is the critical distance it is able to maintain from the objects of its inquiry. In the course of defining this mode of criticism, Said makes it clear that it may emanate from persons with widely divergent political positions. At one extreme he mentions Noam Chomsky and at the other Erich Auerbach, whose work, he tells us, “derives from a profoundly conservative outlook” (Said, *World* 29). This work, moreover, “teaches us how to be critical, rather than how to be good members of a school” (29).

Earlier in this essay Said had made clear how Auerbach achieved the distance that, despite his own supposedly conservative outlook, helped him provide a model for oppositional criticism. It was the fact of his writing his major book in Istanbul, which forced him to look at his own European tradition from a position that, as Said puts it, was “out of place, exiled, alienated” (8). One might note that Said’s phrase “out of place” was, many years later, to become the title of his own memoir of his childhood and youth. As a result of the place from which the book was written, *Mimesis*, according to Said,

. . . is not, as it has so frequently been taken to be, only a massive reaffirmation of the Western cultural tradition, but also a work whose conditions and circumstances . . . are not immediately derived from the culture it describes with such extraordinary insight and brilliance but built rather on an agonizing distance from it. (8)

Shortly before writing these lines Said had again quoted the passage on exile

by Hugh of St. Victor with which Auerbach had concluded "Philologie der Weltliteratur" (7).

The book that Said considered his own most important work, *Culture and Imperialism*, published in 1993, can be seen as an attempt to emulate and rethink *Mimesis* from the point of view of a critic who was writing exactly half a century after Auerbach and who, though also in exile, found himself situated in entirely different circumstances. In my earlier essay on the reception of *Mimesis*, I treated Said's book as a selfconsciously conceived successor to Auerbach's (Lindenberg 207-10). To be sure, as a book focussing on texts from only the past two centuries, *Culture and Imperialism* does not exhibit the temporal breadth of its predecessor; Said, in fact, stresses the fact that scholars of his generation do not possess the depth of training that Auerbach and his fellow Romance scholars commanded.

Yet *Culture and Imperialism* exhibits another type of breadth, namely geographical, for its mission is to uncover the often unconscious imperialist context within which a variety of texts, both literary and "non-literary," from a wide range of cultures is embedded. Thus, he can relate the building of the Suez Canal to the creation of Verdi's *Aida* (*Culture* 111-32), or look at slavery within the British West Indies as a subtext to Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (80-97), or treat the conflict between settlers and Arabs in Algeria as central to Camus's novels (169-85). In the course of this book, Said suggests a method of reading that he calls "contrapuntal" (*Culture* 32, 51, 66-67, 111-12, 114, 125, 178-79, 194, 259, 318), whereby the reader learns to distinguish between the surface elements of a text and the political unconscious to which the text, whether or not through its author's conscious intentions, gives voice. Like *Mimesis*, whose writing Said here refers to as an "act of civilizational survival" (47), *Culture and Imperialism* was composed with a driving sense of cultural mission. Like its predecessor, it is written with an amplitude and a commitment that tempt one to describe it as a work in the sublime style—though I say this in full knowledge that Auerbach, with his extraordinary sensitivity to stylistic levels, would likely have scoffed at this designation for either his or Said's work.

Said's final confrontation with Auerbach came in the essay on *Mimesis* written for the book's anniversary edition. He also included this essay as a chapter in his posthumous volume *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, and it is in this context that I shall take it up. Said's task in this book, as he puts it near the beginning, is "to reconsider, reexamine, and reformulate the relevance of humanism" (*Humanism* 6). The present-day context that motivates his writing includes a variety of challenges for humanism as he seeks to define it: the antihumanistic strain within much post-structuralist thought; the irrelevance to which the modern, corporatized university has assigned the humanistic disciplines; and what he sees as the wrong-headed defense of traditional humanism emanating from certain conservative thinkers, above all

the two Blooms, Allan and Harold, who have succeeded in engaging with a larger middle-brow public.

Auerbach's role in this picture is to provide a counterbalance for a redefinition of humanism, for *Mimesis*, according to Said, is "the greatest book of general humanistic practice since World War II" and thus "provides an enduring example for us today" (6). What draws Said to Auerbach, as well as to Spitzer, whose method he also discusses in this book, is his faith in the ability of close reading to lead beyond the individual text to the larger worlds in which the text is embedded and with which a great interpreter is able to connect it.

The affinities that Said feels with Auerbach can be underlined as well through the powerful impact that Vico exercised on both of them. As Said puts it in reference both to Auerbach and Vico,

. . . the 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 intelligences trying to understand each other from the other's perspective. (92)

Yet the affinity with Vico goes even further. Just as Vico, according to Said, "had flirted with the idea that the human mind creates the divine" (109), so Auerbach, both in his early book on Dante and in the Dante chapter of *Mimesis*, presents us with a Dante far more concerned with the earthly than with the divine world.

Finally, it is Auerbach's perspectivism that Said affirms as an emblem of Auerbach's essential humanism:

. . . 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 any author does, from the limited perspective of one's own time and one's own work. (117)

Perspectives, in other words, both limit one's view and help create the critical distance by means of which a text can be seen in a new and often startling way.

Yet the ability to achieve critical distance that Said praises in Auerbach does not make the latter a postcolonialist in the contemporary sense. Being in Istanbul gave him a special perspective on Europe, but not on anything outside Europe. "There was no discernible connection between Auerbach and Istanbul at all," Said declared in an interview; "his entire attitude while there seems to have been one of nostalgia for the West, which gave him the spirit to sit down and write this great saving work of Western humanism, *Mimesis*" (*Power*

127). Indeed, in this same interview Said makes clear that he saw nothing affirmative in Auerbach's attitude toward the non-European literatures whose future role in literary study is central to the argument of "Philologie der Weltliteratur": Auerbach, according to Said, was "so pessimistic about the onset of all these 'new' languages and cultures, most of them non-European, that he had nothing to say about [them], except that they seemed to frighten him in some way" (127).

To judge from Auerbach's description of life in Istanbul in a letter to Walter Benjamin, the city attracted him neither for its Oriental exoticism nor for any Western intellectual amenities; indeed, the letter stresses Auerbach's disdain for the political repressiveness of the Atatürk regime, which he compares to the German and Italian governments that he knew from earlier experience (Barck 691-92). Emily Apter, who interviewed one of Spitzer's now-aged Turkish seminar students, contends that intellectual life in Istanbul during the 1930s was far livelier than Auerbach has implied in his writings, that in fact, a literary journal under Auerbach's editorship was published there and that a number of significant European intellectuals and artists—for example, Hans Reichenbach, Paul Hindemith, and Steven Runciman—worked in the city during his years of residence ("Global *Translatio*").

Apter's essay is symptomatic of a fascination with Auerbach and his contemporaries among a new generation of scholars associated with postcolonial theory and criticism. In an earlier essay she had argued for certain parallels between the scholars of Auerbach and Spitzer's generation and postcolonial critics—"resemblances," as she puts it, such as

. . . echoes of melancholia, *Heimatlosigkeit*, cultural ambivalence, consciousness of linguistic loss, confusion induced by 'worlding' or global transference, amnesia of origins, fractured subjectivity, border trauma, the desire to belong to 'narration' as a substitute 'nation,' the experience of a politics of linguistic and cultural usurpation. (Apter, "Comparative Exile" 90)

Aamir R. Mufti has sought to account for the central role that Auerbach assumed within Said's work. "The point of Said's reading," Mufti writes, "is that Auerbach's relationship to 'the Western cultural tradition' is *already* one of exile, a condition tragically dramatized by the literal displacement to Istanbul—the preeminent site of non-Europe" (103, author's emphasis). Mufti goes on to speculate that "Said reads Auerbach in a rigorous sense as a Jewish figure, as a member of a minority, of *the* minority par excellence" (103, author's emphasis).

This fascination with Auerbach and, above all, the role of Istanbul in his life and work is manifested as well in a recent work of fiction by David Damrosch, *Meetings of the Mind*, in which an imaginary Turkish academic named Hymit Bathtöi asserts,

Auerbach was exaggerating his exile in Istanbul—and poorly requiring my own institution’s hospitality during the war. . . . He was not trapped in some tent on the edge of a desert, after all. He had a chair at a major university, located in an ancient and cosmopolitan world city. . . . How ironic it is that even as we sheltered him from the Nazis, Auerbach reinforced an ideal of European ethnic purity whose absurdity should have been visible every time he walked from his home to his office. (57)

However any of us may choose to interpret Auerbach’s relationship to Istanbul or his supposed Eurocentrism, it is clear from these recent accounts that he is fast becoming the stuff of legend—to the point that one would not be surprised to see him become the protagonist of a drama or an opera, similar to the way that his contemporary Walter Benjamin appears as the hero of a recently produced opera, *Shadowtime*, by two prominent avant-garde figures in music and poetry, Brian Ferneyhough and Charles Bernstein respectively. Just as *Shadowtime* begins with Benjamin’s suicide and then stages imaginary encounters between the hero and figures such as Gershom Scholem and Friedrich Hölderlin, so an Auerbach opera might show its hero in Istanbul mentally staging the great scenes obsessing him—for example, the sacrifice of Isaac, the denial of Peter, Augustine and Alypius at the Roman games, Rabelais inside Pantagruel’s mouth. Indeed, it might also stage dialogues between Auerbach and Said.

Auerbach has also proved a most convenient ancestor for contemporary postcolonial scholars to use to establish a genealogy for their own endeavors. One such scholar, Vilashini Cooppan, gives Auerbach a central role in two recent essays on world literature and globalization, “Ghosts in the Disciplinary Machine: The Uncanny Life of World Literature” and “World Literature and Global Theory: Comparative Literature for the New Millenium.” Cooppan is postcolonial both in her personal background and in the focus of her work, which includes studies of Latin American writers, African cinema, and Frantz Fanon; she is herself of East Indian ancestry, born in South Africa, raised in Canada and trained in the United States, where she now teaches.

As Cooppan outlines her genealogy in “Ghosts in the Interdisciplinary Machine,”

The foundational aspirations to a broadly imagined, incipiently global knowledge of literature were first voiced for comparative literature by Goethe, subsequently reiterated in the middle of the twentieth century by Ernst Robert Curtius and Leo Spitzer in the forms of a Latinate Europe’s common tradition, and found perhaps their most haunting expression the work of Erich Auerbach, the other patron saint of the discipline. (16)

Auerbach's special place in this genealogy is expressed by what Cooppan sees as the largeness of his vision: "Think big, Auerbach says, and think long if you wish to grasp the minute particulars of an increasingly globalized world. If *Mimesis* is in some sense a preliminary casebook for the construction of world literature," she goes on, "the dictum with which 'Philologie der Weltliteratur' closes may well serve as its credo" (Cooppan, "Ghosts" 17).

By way of Said, postcolonial critics like Cooppan can look back to Auerbach as the father of what might be termed the historicist strain within postcolonial studies; another major strain within this field derives from deconstruction by way of Homi K. Bhabha. The intellectual genealogies we make at a particular historical moment serve at once to honor the heirs as descendants of an old and venerable tradition and to honor their ancestors for their foresight in anticipating all that seems new and exciting. We may or may not feel comfortable viewing Auerbach as a postcolonialist *avant la lettre*. Yet Cooppan's move to create a line from Goethe to globalization, with Auerbach a key player at a crucial moment along the way, is itself a thoroughly traditional activity within the history of criticism.

As I read through these recent treatments of Auerbach in order to map out this article, I tried to recapture my own first reading of *Mimesis* some fifty-four years ago. As a graduate student in Comparative Literature at the University of Washington, I had volunteered to give a report on Spitzer, Curtius, and Auerbach in a seminar in literary criticism. The students, and I suspect the professor as well, were all unfamiliar with the work of the last two, who had not yet been translated into English, though Spitzer had already published a volume of essays in English. I remember that one of the points I made about Auerbach was the fact that although he could rival any of the then-reigning New Critics in interpreting individual texts, he could also demonstrate how texts were embedded in history in a way that none of the critics we were reading in those days was able to do. Indeed, I found the reading of *Mimesis* a thoroughly exhilarating experience, but might I have predicted the uses to which it would be put more than half a century later? By no means, but such is the cunning of history.

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