Susana Araújo, Marta Pacheco Pinto & Sandra Bettencourt (eds.),
Fear and Fantasy in a Global World (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2015) 303-22.

Shaft Which Ran: Chinese Whispers with Auerbach, Buck, Woolf and De Quincey

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The conclusion to Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, which anticipates "the approaching unification and simplification" of "a common life of mankind on earth" has been interpreted more than it has been read. What has rarely received attention is the sudden intrusion in its final paragraph of Pearl Buck's Chinese peasants, deflecting attention from the troubled focus on the face of Mrs Ramsay in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* that informs the final chapter of *Mimesis*. Traces of Thomas De Quincey in Woolf's novel recollect the sinophobic fetishism spelling the crisis of sympathy in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* and recover "the tyranny of the human face" as humanity's first and final challenge.

Keywords: ideology, representation, Erich Auerbach, Virginia Woolf, Pearl S. Buck, Thomas De Quincey, tragic realism, sympathy, humanity

It is finished. We are finished. Let's face it. We're fucked. "What does it mean then, what can it all mean?"[1] What does it mean to be fucked? The *OED* is characteristically cautious yet inspiring. "Fuck, *v.* [...] Probably cognate with Dutch *fokken* to mock (15th cent.), to strike (1591), to fool, gull (1623), to beget children (1637), to have sexual intercourse with (1657), to grow, cultivate (1772)".[2] 'Fokken' starts out as mocking, suggesting a form of deforming imitation, morphs into striking, testifying to a certain violence in the practice of mimesis, then turns into procreation and copulation and ends up in cultivation or breeding, where it lives to this day. One sense in which we may legitimately be said to be fucked is this: we are grown, cultivated, bred, reproduced, multiplied, copied in numbers that have been increasingly rising since the 15th century, reaching the 1 billion mark around 1800 and then soaring with increasing speed into the sublime – currently 7 billion and counting, with forecasts for mid-century of

[1] Virginia Woolf. 2006 [1927]. *To the Lighthouse* (ed. David Bradshaw). Oxford: Oxford University Press: 121.
[2] 'Fuck, v.' in *OED Online*. Online at: http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/75197?rskey=vdGI1I&result=2&isAdvanced=false (consulted 3.01.2012).

between 7.5 and 10.5 billion members of our species growing on the planet – a spectacular instance of sustained and arguably unsustainable monoculture. But counting is easy and can produce a certain resigned comfort even in the catastrophe scenarios it generates, digitising all humans into figures collectively spinning out of control while conveniently remaining human units all the same – all the same. The reduction to figures at the heart of such figurations of fear helps us to face the future by relieving us of the impossible responsibility to face these figures as so many faces resembling our own. We all look the same. It is not just the Chinese.

Here is a mythical moment from the history of late philology which prefigures these trivial thoughts. Around Easter 1945, Erich Auerbach finishes the study on the representation of reality in Western literature he set out on some three years previously to "trac[e] the combination of the everyday with tragic seriousness" that is the distinctive feature of "tragic realism".[3] What *Mimesis* seeks to record is the emergence of ordinary life as a serious cause of concern, as something that used to go without writing. A decisive turning point in this development is the "tremendous phenomenon" (*M*, 185) of the *Divina Commedia*, whose defiant vernacular "is a well-nigh incomprehensible miracle" (*M*, 182). As Auerbach's extreme qualifications suggest, the stakes are high. Mixing the monstrous and the miraculous, Dante has unleashed the human. He has driven the systems of signification of Christian figural realism to the limit and has shattered the frame: "The image of man eclipses the image of God" (*M*, 202). In previous dispensations, the representation of ordinary life receives its legitimacy from its understanding as a figural anticipation of the final fulfilment, when all shall be revealed in a dialectically conclusive repetition of the miracle of the Incarnation in the mode of Comedy. Dante essentially perverts this logic by working an apparently more mundane but ultimately far more disturbing miracle:

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[3] Erich Auerbach. 2003. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature.* Fiftieth-Anniversary Edition. With a New Introduction by Edward W. Said (tr. Willard R. Trask). Princeton: Princeton University Press: 282, 231. All subsequent references in the text are to this edition (*M*, plus page number). A modified and condensed version of my comments on Auerbach here appears in Ortwin de Graef and Pieter Vermeulen. 2013. 'Virgilian Incarnation: Hartman and the Issue of Auerbach's Jewishness' in *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 103(2): 142-144.

> [A] direct experience of life which overwhelms everything else, a comprehension of human realities which spreads as widely and variously as it goes profoundly to the very roots of our emotions, an illumination of man's impulses and passions which leads us to share in them without restraint and indeed to admire their variety and their greatness.
>
> And by virtue of this immediate and admiring sympathy with man, the principle, rooted in the divine order, of the indestructibility of the whole historical and individual man turns *against* that order, makes it subservient to its own purposes, and obscures it. (*M*, 202)

Dante's human beings constitute the auto-incarnation of the human and at once invite all to cannibal thanksgiving, urging the human to partake of the human without restraint. Not yet half way through the dark wood of Western writing *Mimesis* explores, the lurid fervour of Auerbach's original phrasing – "*heiße Teilnahme ohne jede Hemmung*" [fervid participation without restraint],[4] oddly tempered in Trask's translation – marks the intensity of this miraculous release of the human figure from the logic of fulfilment. The flames of Dante's explosive deflection of Christian apocalyptic realism flicker and flare up again over the following centuries until they fade into an alternative fulfilment in the final pages of Auerbach's final chapter, "The Brown Stocking".

Crucially, this alternative apocalypse does not coincide with the convulsions of war ravaging Europe diagnosed by Auerbach from his position on the margins, as an exiled Professor of Philology in Istanbul. For these convulsions are only the last clashes between increasingly incoherent ideological constellations seeking to contain the human in new, mutually competing sectarian frames of significance always already shattering under the strain of what is to come. In the representational practices of serious realism in the decades following the First World War, the formal counterpart of this frame-breaking is the "dissol[ution of] reality into multiple and multivalent reflections of consciousness", which produces "a certain atmosphere of universal doom" and "leav[es] the reader with an impression of hopelessness", of "something confusing, something hazy [...], something hostile to the reality which they represent" (*M*, 551). We seem to have come a long way since the miraculous outburst

[4] All quotations in German are from: Erich Auerbach. 1946. *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*. Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 193. All subsequent references in the text are to this edition (page number only).

of "immediate and admiring sympathy with man" triggered by Dante, but Auerbach reassures us we are getting close to the goal. Announcing "something entirely different" (*M*, 551) that also characterises contemporary realist writing, he returns us once more to the human.

He first briefly revisits the analysis of *To the Lighthouse* opening his final chapter, with its celebrated proto-narratological re-construction of Woolf's deconstruction of Edwardian shabby genteel upper-middle-class charitable stocking-knitting. Admittedly atypical in its moments of "good and genuine love" (*M*, 552), the novel is still, like the other gloomy works of modern serious realism reflecting "the decline of our world" (*M*, 551), filled with "an air of vague and hopeless sadness" (*M*, 551), "with irony, amorphous sadness, and doubt of life" (*M*, 552). And then a miracle happens and Auerbach exclaims: "Yet what realistic depth is achieved in every individual occurrence, for example the measuring of the stocking!" (552). Mrs. Ramsay's knitwork-worrying becomes a prime example of "the random moment" (*M*, 552), "der beliebige Augenblick" (513), through which Auerbach redeems modern realism from its impotent implication in "the controversial and unstable orders [*Ordnungen* (513)] over which men fight and despair" (*M*, 552). We recall how Dante's denizens of Hell, too, broke through the "göttliche Ordnung" (193) [divine order] in a claim to "unmittelbaren und bewundernden Teilnahme am Menschen" (193) [immediate and admiring participation in the human]. Yet there is a subtle but decisive difference: Dante's characters are uniquely individuated in their representation of themselves against the Order that frames them, while "der beliebige Augenblick" that is uniquely the moment of Mrs. Ramsay knitting away at her stocking is transfigured into evidence of "the elementary things which men in general have in common" (*M*, 552) irrespective of the various "Ordnungen" they fight about. Dante gives us the "self-fulfilment" of the human individual, depicted with such power of independence that "even in Hell there are great souls, and certain souls in Purgatory can for a moment forget the path of purification for the sweetness of a poem, the work of human frailty" (*M*, 202). The paradox of the *Divina Commedia* is its interruption of the eschatological drive that structures it, giving the singular soul in limbo "einige Augenblicke" [a few moments] pause to forget "den Weg zur Reinigung" (193-194) [the path of purification].

Modern realism's counter-paradox is that in its emphatically contingent "Darstellung des beliebigen Lebensaugenblicks der verschiedenen Menschen" [representation of the random moment in the lives of different people], "das Ziel [...] der langer Weg zu einem gemeinsamen Leben der Menschen auf der Erde" (514) [the goal [. . .] the long way to a common life of humans on earth] stands revealed. In Dante the representation of the human obscures the goal; in modern realism the representation of the human exposes the goal.

> In this unprejudiced and exploratory type of representation we cannot but see to what an extent – below the surface conflicts – the differences between men's ways of life and forms of thought have already lessened. The strata of societies and their different ways of life have become inextricably mingled. There are no longer even exotic peoples. A century ago (in Mérimée for example), Corsicans or Spaniards were still exotic; today the term would be quite unsuitable for Pearl Buck's Chinese peasants. Beneath the conflicts, and also through them, an economic and cultural leveling process is taking place. It is still a long way to a common life of mankind on earth, but the goal begins to be visible. And it is most concretely visible now in the unprejudiced, precise, interior and exterior representation of the random moment in the lives of different people. So the complicated process of dissolution which led to fragmentation of the exterior action, to reflection of consciousness, and to stratification of time seems to be tending toward a very simple solution. Perhaps it will be too simple to please those who, despite all its dangers and catastrophes, admire and love our epoch for the sake of its abundance of life and the incomparable historical vantage point which it affords. But they are few in number, and probably they will not live to see much more than the first forewarnings of the approaching unification and simplification. (*M*, 552-553)

In this strangely poised passage, *Mimesis* comes to an end. That end has proven hard to read, involving as it does the undecidable difference between "solution" and "dissolution", between "the goal", "common life of mankind on earth", surely a Good Thing, and the process of "levelling", with its unsettling undertones of the Second Law of Thermodynamics.

Much as Auerbach's own bewilderment at Woolf's worrying over Mrs. Ramsay's knitwork delivers the triumph of judgement (real life at last!), critical paralysis in the sustained analysis of this closing passage in *Mimesis* paradoxically tends to generate conviction. A good instance is Sarah Pourciau's superb reading of Auerbach's "Philology of Extremity", which unpacks his apocalyptic rhetoric and documents its constitutive indecision, yet seems unable not to decide

that the book's conclusion is "unambiguously pessimistic".[5] Pourciau seeks to determine this pessimism as "anchor[ed]" "in a moment of crisis experienced at the furthest boundary of European time and space, in the liminal predicament of the philologist writing from Istanbul in the year 1945".[6] Yet in order to establish that predicament as the ground of her conviction that *Mimesis* ends in unambiguous pessimism, she dissolves without argument the basic grammatical distinction that renders its final paragraph so memorably unreadable – precisely the deictic distinction that secures and suspends discursive anchoring.

The final paragraph of "The Brown Stocking" opens with a statement – "But something entirely different takes place here too" – followed by an invitation: "Let us turn again to the text which was our starting-point" (*M*, 551). The community of readers accompanies the guide, who proceeds to show us how little we really know about Mrs. Ramsay's world, and then transforms that uncertainty into the triumph of the stocking-measuring as an index of "realistic depth" revealing random yet "determining factors in our real lives" (*M*, 552), "unser wirkliches Leben" (513). In Auerbach's original German, this last "unser" is the last but one occurrence of the first person plural. The text continues in passive, generic third-person and impersonal constructions up to the penultimate sentence, with its speculation that the approaching "simple solution" might be all "too simple" to "those [*diejenigen*] who, despite all its dangers and catastrophes, admire and love our [*unsere*] epoch". Ignoring this us-them distinction, notwithstanding its reinforcement in the final sentence – "But they are few in number" –, Pourciau categorically identifies Auerbach as one of this number:

> For regardless of how one chooses to interpret his final lines, there is no escaping the paradoxical fact that the epoch for which he professes such nobly understated loyalty, the epoch he loves "trotz aller Gefahren und Katastrophen, wegen ihres Lebensreichtums und des unvergleichlichen geschichtlichen Standorts, den sie bietet", is none other than the era of fascism, genocide, and a Europe torn apart by two world wars.[7]

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[5] Sarah Pourciau. 2006. 'Istanbul, 1945: Erich Auerbach's Philology of Extremity' in *Arcadia* 41(2): 438.
[6] *Ibid.*, 438-439.
[7] *Ibid.*, 439.

Granted, there is no logical reason why Auerbach could not be counted as one of those loving "unsere Epoche", but grammatically and ideologically – i.e. philologically – the distinction must stand, or at the very least be read. By firmly positioning Auerbach on the "incomparable historical vantage point" his text qualifies as the object of love and admiration of those who find the simple solution too simple, Pourciau further consolidates the myth of Auerbach's exile he himself began to draft in the "Epilogue" to the study and in other later comments. The upshot is that the putative "liminal predicament" of exile and crisis turns into a self-serving posture of confidently "pessimistic" dark irony, "tasteless[ly]" flirting with the apocalyptic as a matter of style.[8] Yet the fact that Auerbach himself contributes to this aestheticisation should not be allowed to obscure the resistance to this turn in his text – not only in its deictic indecision, but also and arguably more importantly in its faltering profession of a philology of the present for the future.[9]

Recent research by Kader Konuk carefully reconstructs the actual conditions of Auerbach's exile in Istanbul from 1936 to 1947 and brings valuable corrections to the received image of the lone witness to the end of Europe lovingly shoring its fragments against its ruins from memory.[10] Konuk offers a compelling account of Auerbach's residence in Istanbul as one of a considerable academic community of émigrés who did not just happen to land there in their flight from the catastrophic turns in the West, but were also actively recruited by a modernising Turkish state determined to claim its share of European belonging. Among the many fascinating findings she collects and discloses, one is particularly instructive here: a lecture held by Auerbach in 1941-1942, probably in French, and published, in Turkish translation, in Istanbul University's annual collection of lectures. The

[8] *Ibid.*, 439.

[9] In the first half or so of "Philologie der Weltliteratur", a 1952 text Pourciau turns to for support, Auerbach does spell out the predicament of philology of the present in dark detail that chimes with Pourciau's ungrammatical elision of the difference between 'them' and 'us' (Erich Auerbach. 1967. *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Romanischen Philologie*. Bern: Francke Verlag: 301-310). Yet the point stands that the final sentences of *Mimesis* keep that elision suspended – while the conclusion to "Philologie der Weltliteratur" reinforces an understanding of philology as a method – a "Weg" – to win the "rechte Liebe zur Welt" as "*terra aliena*" (310) and thereby dissociates Auerbach anew from the company of the latter-day 'them'.

[10] Kader Konuk. 2010. *East West Mimesis: Auerbach in Turkey*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

topic is "Realism in Europe in the Nineteenth Century", and here is how it ends:

> [T]he art of realism is in a developing state, and works to show forth to the mind our life on earth and its increasing tendency to become a life shared in common.
>
> Those who understand this should not be shaken by the tragic events occurring today. History is manifested through catastrophic events and ruptures. That which is being prepared today, that which has been in preparation for a century, is the tragic realism I have discussed, modern realism, the life shared in common which grants the possibility of life to all people on earth.[11]

These lines clearly prefigure the finale, some four years later, of *Mimesis*. Here, too, contemporary catastrophe is encoded as a passage to a new state, and here, too, that new state is named "a life shared in common" for "all people on earth". What is missing is the undecidable ambivalence of *Mimesis* – if anything, the perspective here is re-assuring, and specifically designed to ease the distinction between the third person and the first person that would later trouble *Mimesis*. Evidently, abstracting even from the generic differences between a lecture to the Rector and assorted company and the conclusion to a 500-page monograph, the four years separating both texts are so disastrous that a change of mind would hardly be surprising. Yet there is one further remnant from the earlier lecture in the finale of *Mimesis* that suggests a more subtle continuity.

The one sentence from the finale to *Mimesis* that is almost always glossed over is a left-over from the opening movements of the 1941-1942 lecture. Practising what Geoffrey Hartman has called his "urbane, undogmatic Marxism",[12] Auerbach informs his Istanbul audience that in the 19th century the realist novel was the literary form which, "as an economist might put it", "occupied production and found the most consumers".[13] He then tries to specify what characterises these novels as "realist" by labouring two terms "in need

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[11] Erich Auerbach. 2010. 'Realism in Europe in the Nineteenth Century' (tr. Victoria Holbrook) in *East West Mimesis: Auerbach in Turkey* by Karder Konuk. Stanford: Stanford University Press: 192-193.

[12] Geoffrey Hartman. 2007. 'Erich Auerbach at Yale' in *A Scholar's Tale: Intellectual Journey of a Displaced Child of Europe*. New York: Fordham University Press: 169. My argument is indebted throughout to the acute comments on Hartman's particular reception of the conclusion to *Mimesis* in: Pieter Vermeulen. 2010. *Geoffrey Hartman: Romanticism after the Holocaust*. London: Continuum: 21-26.

[13] Auerbach, 'Realism', 181.

of precise definition": "contemporary" and "ordinary".[14] The latter term is familiar to readers of Auerbach – it covers what his big book routinely refers to as the "everyday" (*M*, 282), "Alltäglichkeit" (269), whose combination with "tragic seriousness" is his high argument. The "contemporary", on the other hand, is more elusive:

> For a topic to be contemporary in the realistic sense, it must be modern [...] and must not be distant from the reader's environment.
>
> Those of our contemporaries who are still living at a civilizational level we have already surpassed, for example, the Ethiopians of Africa or the Australian aborigines, cannot be subjects of the realist novel. They could be subjects only of an exotic novel. This distinction is in itself quite obscure and relative. For Frenchmen living in 1835, the customs of Spaniards and the inhabitants of the Isle of Corsica described by Mérimée were so different from their own that Colomba or Carmen seemed more exotic than realistic. However, today a Parisian doctor may find the life story of a laborer in San Francisco to be a contemporary tale. We rightly consider the wonderful Chinese novels of Madame Pearl Buck to be realist novels.[15]

The post-exotic "contemporary" represents the "commonality" of the increasingly interconnected "life of human beings on earth," which in the 19th century was still "common only to Europe, or a part of Europe".[16] In *Mimesis*, this implicit tactical deference to Turkey in its aspirations to be "a part of Europe" is muted, and we are left with the Chinese: "There are no longer even exotic peoples. A century ago (in Mérimée for example), Corsicans or Spaniards were still exotic; today the term would be quite unsuitable for Pearl Buck's Chinese peasants" (*M*, 552).

As the last author named in *Mimesis* Pearl Buck carries a considerable burden. No longer the writer of "wonderful Chinese novels", she here and now only supplies figures of post-exotic human life on earth: "[D]ie chinesischen Bauern von Pearl Buck" (514). This is the here and now of the contemporary everyday concluding "the crowding of mankind on a shrinking globe" (*M*, 550) which the philologist calls to our attention as a first "Anzeichen" [indication] of "the approaching unification and simplification". Reading seems no longer required, seeing suffices: the end becomes "sichtbar" [visible] in neutrally noted Chinese peasants.

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[14] *Ibid.*, 182.
[15] *Ibid.*, 182.
[16] *Ibid.*, 182.

To register the significance of this suspension of reading, it helps to recall Auerbach's quotation of a "well-known and strangely arresting passage" from La Bruyère, about two thirds through *Mimesis,* as an indication of the kind of life unavailable for representation in 17th-century classical French literature:

> One sees certain ferocious animals, male and female, scattered over the countryside, black, livid, and burned by the sun, bound to the soil which they dig and turn over with unconquerable stubbornness; they have a sort of articulate voice, and when they stand up they exhibit a human face, and in fact they are men. They retire at night into dens, where they live on black bread, water, and roots; they spare other men the toil of sowing, tilling, and harvesting in order to live, and thus deserve not to be without the bread which they have sown. (*M*, 366)

What distinguishes these wild animals from Buck's peasants is that the animals "exhibit a human face" which arrests the onlooker and challenges representation, while the Chinese peasants represent humanity as the self-evident that goes without saying. La Bruyère's "concrete and serious treatment" of these barely human animals "attribute[s] to an everyday contemporary subject greater weight than is aesthetically its due" (*M*, 366) within the representational limits of his time; Buck just records available humanity. And Auerbach registers that record as a matter of course: there is no need any more for philology to read the release of the human from the strictures of representation. La Bruyère's peasants prefigure Buck's who fulfill them, and in this fulfilment lose face in the sense that they cease to figure and remain to be seen as more of the same. No "heiβe Teilnahme ohne jede Hemmung" (193)here, nor the miraculous recovery of human reality from "amorphous sadness, and doubt of life" (*M*, 552) in random stocking-knitting: what is ready for seeing goes without saying and is taken as read – it is always already said, *le dit*, the moralistic; as distinct from what always needs saying as writing requiring reading, the ethical. For such is the distinction Auerbach, with his customary maddeningly cavalier accuracy, confers on La Bruyère's vision: the "moralizing emphasis" (*M*, 366) of the passage on the peasants is not what makes it arresting; it is "packend" [arresting] because it is "ernsthaft ethisch" [seriously ethical] (348), and it is ethical, other than moralistic, because it is haunted by an uncanny feature its writing responds to but cannot exhaust: "une face humaine" (349). Buck's Chinese peasants, by contrast, just feature as so many familiar faces in which we recognise and forget ourselves.

Who reads Buck anymore? She has been read more than most: the most widely translated American author of the 20th century, 1938 Nobel Laureate, the only American author to make it into *Mimesis* (to the understandable chagrin of some).[17] Auerbach did not read Buck. Not as a philologist. Yet by not dropping her name when recycling his Istanbul lecture and instead dropping it into the final paragraph of *Mimesis*, he passed the buck to the philologists of the future, who have by and large chosen to ignore the challenge – or have decided it was not, or was not yet, enough of a challenge to write about, at least not while reading *Mimesis*. Buck's prose is indeed undeceptively easy and responds well to being processed as just another indication of "the approaching unification and simplification" (*M*, 553) as the aftermath of history in unarresting human homogeneity. Yet when read, it spells the haunting return of the face as the trace launching human history.

The best-known of "the wonderful Chinese novels of Madame Pearl Buck" was and still is (if at all) *The Good Earth* (1931). It charts the life of Wang Lung, who starts out as a poor peasant but thanks to thrift, effort, some good luck, considerable cunning and the unflinching selfless service of his first wife, O-lan, dies as a wealthy land-owner and head of a big family. Plot and characters are profoundly unpuzzling and the narrator generally withholds overt judgement and explanation, because what transpires explains and judges itself. The presentation of the plight of Chinese women is a good case in point. Buck does not explicitly criticise the deep structural misogyny of Chinese culture but deftly displays it as ideology in practice. O-lan has already given Wang Lung two sons – here is the description of delivery three:

> "What now – has your time come?"
> The voice of his wife answered from the bed more feebly than he had ever heard her speak:
> "It is over once more. It is only a slave this time – not worth mentioning."
> Wang Lung stood still. A sense of evil struck him. A girl![18]

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[17] Carl Landauer. 1996. 'Auerbach's Performance and the American Academy, or How New Haven Stole the Idea of *Mimesis*' in Lerer, Seth (ed.) *Literary History and the Challenge of Philology: The Legacy of Erich Auerbach*. Stanford: Stanford University Press: 179. The most solid single study of Buck is still: Peter Conn. 1996. *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[18] Pearl S. Buck. 1953. *The Good Earth*. London: Methuen: 60.

What is not worth mentioning is that to consider a baby girl not worth mentioning, not to mention downright evil, is bad. We all know that, and eventually they will learn: after all, they are already human, without fully knowing it.

The same representational strategy informs other descriptions of the communication, or lack of it, between Wang Lung and O-lan:

> Then Wang Lung turned to the woman and looked at her for the first time. She had a square, honest face, a short, broad nose with large black nostrils, and her mouth was wide, a gash in her face. Her eyes were small and of a dull black in colour, and were filled with some sadness that was not clearly expressed. It was a face that seemed habitually silent and unspeaking, as though it could not speak if it would.[19]

> Wang Lung, watching her move steadily and slowly about the rooms on her big feet, watching secretly the stolid, square face, the unexpressed, half-fearful look of her eyes, made nothing of her.[20]

> Sometimes, working over the clods in the fields, he would fall to pondering about her. [...] What had been her life, that life she never shared with him? He could make nothing of it. And then he was ashamed of his own curiosity and of his interest in her. She was, after all, only a woman.[21]

> [...] [S]he looked at him piteously and sadly out of her strange dumb eyes that were like a beast's eyes that cannot speak [...].[22]

We, as Buck's readers, know that O-lan is, after all, only human, not a beast, not only a woman, and that the unexpressed sadness in her eyes expresses the years of abuse she suffered as a young girl. It is Wang Lung who can make nothing of her; for us, Buck has already made her what she always was: human – and as she lies dying toward the end of the book, she grants O-lan a margin of expression in half-conscious murmured memories of her childhood, and Wang Lung, sitting by her, finally a measure of our understanding: "[F]or the first time Wang Lung saw into her heart".[23] In contrast, we, as readers, see into the hearts of Buck's characters all the time and can recover what we find there for an implicit ideal humanity – free from brutalisation,

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[19] *Ibid.*, 18.
[20] *Ibid.*, 27.
[21] *Ibid.*, 27.
[22] *Ibid.*, 192.
[23] *Ibid.*, 243.

ignorance, tyranny, and sadness – which Buck invites us to imagine as already embodied in ourselves.

It brought her the Nobel Prize, honouring her "notable works which pave the way to a human sympathy passing over widely separated racial boundaries".[24] As Bertil Lindblad's 1938 introduction to Buck's Banquet Speech put it,

> Mrs. Pearl Buck, you have in your literary works, which are of the highest artistic quality, advanced the understanding and the appreciation in the Western world of a great and important part of mankind, the people of China. You have taught us by your works to see the individuals in that great mass of people. You have shown us the rise and fall of families, and the land as the foundation upon which families are built. In this you have taught us to see those qualities of thought and feeling which bind us all together as human beings on this earth, and you have given us Westerners something of China's soul. When by the development of technical inventions the peoples of the earth are drawn closer to each other, the surface of the earth shrinks, so that East and West are no longer separated by almost insurmountable voids of distance, and when on the other hand, partly as a natural effect of this phenomenon, the differences of national character and ambitions clash to form dangerous discontinuities, it is of the greatest importance that the peoples of the earth learn to understand each other as individuals across distances and frontiers.[25]

One year later, "us Westerners" began to tear the world apart again over claims to land on which to found our families, and in this light the survival of this grammar of human unification and global understanding in Auerbach's wartime citations of Buck is all the more remarkable. As the last Nobel Prize in Literature laureate before the outbreak of the Second World War, Buck represents an emphatically idealist investment in literature as an apparatus for the advancement of understanding and sympathy. To point out that the intended increase in understanding apparently did not prevent another great war, as Auerbach could have done but did not, would have been to overrate understanding and to buy into the fantasy of sympathy as the solution to all conflict. There is no question that literature can generate understanding and sympathy; the question is what that understanding

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[24] Per Hallström. 1938. 'Nobel Prize Presentation Speech' in Nobelprize.org. Online at: http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1938/press.html (consulted 03.01.2012).

[25] Bertil Lindblad. 1938. 'Pearl Buck – Banquet Speech' in Nobelprize.org. Online at: http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1938/buck-speech.html (consulted 03.01.2012).

is of, what that sympathy is with, or for. And for a philologist the pursuit of that question must engage with writing that challenges rather than assumes the possibility conditions of sympathy and understanding.

What makes the final passage of *Mimesis* so difficult to read is its deadpan avoidance of the affective-ideological rhetoric of sympathy and understanding, all the more conspicuous in the presence of Pearl Buck. Admiration and love are qualified as felt only by those who feel the future looks too simple, the others – all of us, readers of Auerbach, not Buck – are left without feeling. So we supply it ourselves, celebrating or denouncing Auerbach's finale to the extent that we feel it does or does not properly represent the fears or the fantasies we happen to harbour in the face of the past as a forewarning for our present. Yet all the text itself delivers is the difference between La Bruyère and Buck: there was a time when seeing peasants as human was a shock to the regime of representation, requiring the ethical recognition of these ferocious male and female animals as, indeed, human; now is the time when all peasants are always already human and should be enjoying the rights this entails – the only thing shocking is that in China they do not, hardly a shock to the regime of representation, only a shock to the system of distribution of goods and rights, which to a philologist, no matter how Marxist, is the business of others – who may not like this unification of the human, but that is their problem. For the philologist loves language and feels that love most when it is tested or thwarted and feeling fails into passion.

Mute in her world, O-lan's face communicates its essence to the reader as an irresistible and unsurprising call for sympathetic understanding. No need for philology here. Philologists are only of any use in the face of the unreadable – such as the face of Mrs. Ramsay, or indeed the face of Lily Briscoe, facing the reader as the final chapter of *Mimesis* opens:

> "And even if it isn't fine tomorrow", said Mrs. Ramsay, raising her eyes to glance at William Bankes and Lily Briscoe as they passed, "it will be another day. And now", she said, thinking that Lily's charm was her Chinese eyes, aslant in her white, puckered little face, but it would take a clever man to see it, "and now stand up, and let me measure your leg". (*M*, 525)

Mimesis comes to its conclusion in a stretch of reading between two instances of the proper adjective "Chinese". The first is used

improperly, for the elusive charm of the painter Lily Briscoe; the second is used properly, for a people whose representation prefigures the advent of the "common life of mankind on earth". The improper use of the adjective at the start throws a spanner in the dialectical works, preventing the argument from coming to rest in the proper use at the end as a mark of revelation, be it the apocalypse of harmonious humanity or the post-apocalypse of horrible homogeneity. Chinese is not coming – it was always here, not as a cipher of abstract humanity but as one figure among many of the challenge to reading put up by the human face which no ideology of sympathy can short-circuit in the name of the human, and no ideology of apathy can put down as a thing of the past.

Lily's Chinese eyes. Auerbach cites them twice, Woolf records them five times.[26] They are, trivially, the slits of her vision, as she sits painting Mrs. Ramsay's figure, unable to finish her picture until well after Mrs. Ramsay's death, and finishing it finally only after a prolonged crisis of sympathy resolves itself as a matter of fact, breaking through the limitations of "the human apparatus for painting or for feeling", that "miserable machine" that "always [breaks] down at the critical moment".[27] "With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision".[28] The content of that vision, Auerbach remarks, remains "enigmatic, only dimly to be conjectured" (*M*, 551). As a philologist, he could have refined his earlier exploration of the enigma of representation in the narratological scandal of the passage on Mrs. Ramsay's uniquely sad face by articulating the metafictional coincidence of author and artist in the novel's last "I", as a figure for Woolf's claim to the vision she hopes to have had – the I as the finishing line in the centre. Yet Auerbach stops reading and instead imagines Mrs. Ramsay's "beliebiges Augenblick" as disclosing "the wealth of reality and depth of life" we share with Chinese peasants. The task for future philology is to pervert the course of this vision by

[26] For alternative readings of Lily's Chinese eyes, see: Eric Hayot. 2009. *The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, Modernism and Chinese Pain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 181-188. Hayot's study is a superb exploration of things Chinese as demarcation lines for ideologies of sympathy in Western modernity, also engaging with Buck (207-214).
[27] Woolf, *Lighthouse*, 158.
[28] *Ibid.*, 170.

returning to what remains of Mrs. Ramsay's face after it "blazed up" into the "rapture of sympathy" Lily remembers but fails to feel.[29]

> Never did anybody look so sad. Bitter and black, halfway down, in the darkness, in the shaft which ran from the sunlight to the depths, perhaps a tear formed; a tear fell; the waters swayed this way and that, received it, and were at rest. Never did anybody look so sad.[30]

"Who is speaking in this paragraph?" (*M*, 531), Auerbach asks. The text offers no answer other than its own writing:

> Virginia Woolf wrote this paragraph. She did not identify it through grammatical and typographical devices as the speech or thought of a third person. One is obliged to assume that it contains direct statements of her own. But she does not seem to bear in mind that she is the author and hence ought to know how matters stand with her characters. (*M*, 531)

Auerbach's mock-exasperation marks the difference between Woolf and Buck: O-lan's sad face speaks for itself, Mrs. Ramsay's face eludes "proper interpretation" – all we get is "the shock received by one looking at Mrs. Ramsay's face", in a sequence that "verges upon a realm beyond reality" (*M*, 532). To receive that shock philologically requires mapping that realm as the reality of writing and reading words like "shaft which ran", whose force of inscription interrupts the representation of reality and translates the generic "random moment" back to the "beliebige Augenblick", the glance of an eye that bespeaks the excessive economy of love.

At the time she was writing *To the Lighthouse* in 1926, Woolf was reading Thomas De Quincey for an essay in the *TLS*. Here is the record of this reading that concerns us here:

> When he was a child he stood by his sister's dead body and suddenly
>
> > a vault seemed to open in the zenith of the far blue sky, a shaft which ran up for ever. I, in spirit, rose as on billows that also ran up the shaft for ever; and the billows seemed to pursue the throne of God; but that also ran before us and fled away continually.[31]

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[29] *Ibid.*, 125.
[30] *Ibid.*, 26.
[31] Virginia Woolf, "Impassioned Prose" (*TLS*, September 16th, 1926) in: 1966. *Collected Essays by Virginia Woolf*. Volume 1. London: The Hogarth Press: 167. Some of De Quincey's impact on *To the Lighthouse* (though not the shaft which ran)

The direction is reversed but the shaft which ran runs from Woolf to De Quincey as the trace of the face. In the passage Woolf quotes from here, De Quincey revisits his visit to his sister's bed chamber, recalling her "angel face" changed utterly by death, the "solemn wind" that "began to blow – the saddest that ear ever heard",[32] and the "trance" that fell upon him as this "one great *audible* symbol of eternity" "settled upon the frost which overspread my sister's face": "A vault seemed to open in the zenith of the far blue sky, a shaft which ran up forever".[33] Woolf reads the passage as a writer reading a precursor in the impossible quest for prose without precedents, "modes of impassioned prose" in De Quincey's own phrase. For De Quincey, Woolf writes, as "for all writers", the "indispensable condition" for any measure of success in this quest was "adjusting the perspective to suit his own eyesight": "Nothing must come too close"; "A mist must lie upon the human face".[34]

As her diary for the days on which she is reading and writing this reveals, Woolf suffered this imperative of perspective as an acute personal challenge. She records how on seeing two girls, "city clerks, or secretaries, tramping along the road", her "instinct at once throws up a screen, which condemns them".[35] Condemning the screening instinct as "a great mistake", she suspects that it also "preserves our sanity":

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is documented in: John Ferguson. 1987. 'A Sea Change: Thomas De Quincey and Mr. Carmichael in *To the Lighthouse*' in *Journal of Modern Literature* 14: 45-63.

[32] Woolf's "Impassioned Prose" picks up this sad wind too (170).

[33] Thomas De Quincey. 2003. *The Works of Thomas De Quincey. Volume 19: Autobiographic Sketches vol. 1.1* (ed. Grevel Lindop & Daniel Sanjiv Roberts) London: Pickering & Chatto: 12.

[34] Woolf, 'Impassioned', 169. Mist as a figure for what shelters us from others is a central trope in *To the Lighthouse*, e.g. 61, 74. In the former passage, the claim of the other conjures up "the whole world spread out beneath [...] as if it were Constantinople seen through a mist", and demands attention for its distinctive features "emerg[ing] from the mist" (62). Down in Istanbul, Auerbach must have sensed being seen.

[35] Virginia Woolf. 1980. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Volume III: 1925-1930* (ed. Anne Olivier Bell, assist. Andrew McNeillie). London: Hogarth Press: 104.

> If we had not this device for shutting people off from our sympathies, we might, perhaps, dissolve utterly. Separateness would be impossible. But the screens are in the excess; not the sympathy.[36]

In the essay on De Quincey, just before the "shaft which ran" passage, she notes how he was "incapable of a sustained and passionate interest in the affairs of other people" and illustrates this with an unreferenced allusion to the *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*: "He would follow a poor family who went marketing on a Saturday night, sympathetically, but at a distance".[37] De Quincey's interested distance from the poor seems to strike a liveable balance between screen and sympathy, and the passage in "The Pleasures of Opium" in the *Confessions* initially confirms that impression. De Quincey describes how he habitually took opium on Saturday nights and then ventured out to wander the "parts of London, to which the poor resort", intent on expressing his "interest in the concerns of the poor" not, as most men do, by "sympathy [...] with their distresses and sorrows", but by "sympathising with their pleasures".[38] But these memories of happy slumming end with a twist: "For all this, however, I paid a heavy price in distant years, when the human face tyrannized over my dreams".[39]

"The Pains of Opium" details that price. De Quincey reconstructs his increasing mental deterioration as evident in the decisive decline of pleasurable reverie into tormenting nightmare.

> But now that which I have called the tyranny of the human face began to unfold itself. [...] [N]ow it was that upon the rocking waters of the ocean the human face began to appear: the sea appeared paved with innumerable faces, upturned to the heavens: faces, imploring, wrathful, despairing, surged upwards by thousands, by myriads, by generations, by centuries: – my agitation was infinite, – my mind tossed – and surged with the ocean.[40]

And the moment this downturn sets in, it turns East, "transport[ing]" the dreamer "into Asiatic scenes" unleashing full-blown sinophobia:

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[36] *Ibid.*, 104.
[37] Woolf, 'Impassioned', 167.
[38] Thomas De Quincey. 2000. *The Works of Thomas De Quincey. Volume 2: Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, 1821-1856* (ed. Grevel Lindop). London: Pickering & Chatto: 49.
[39] *Ibid.*, 50.
[40] *Ibid.*, 70.

> In China, over and above what it has in common with the rest of southern Asia, I am terrified by the modes of life, by the manners, and the barrier of utter abhorrence, and want of sympathy, placed between us by feelings deeper than I can analyze. I could sooner live with lunatics, or brute animals.[41]

But the Chinese are not brute animals. On the contrary, southern Asia – comprising China in De Quincey's geography – is "the cradle of the human race," it "is, and has been for thousands of years, the part of the earth most swarming with human life, the great *officina gentium*. Man is a weed in those regions".[42] What Auerbach engineered as the advent of shared humanity delivered by Western tragic realism stands revealed here as the persistence of the human as an oriental weed. The sinister sinophobia of this deranged vision is ultimately only a fetishist displacement of the sad wisdom it harbours, as witness its origin in the tyranny of the human face as the hangover after overindulgence in interested sympathy with the Caucasian poor seeking pleasure in the West End: not that our future is about to finish in drab homogeneity or sober if noble equality, but that we have always just been badly finished beings unable to live up to the love of the other and doomed to denial to preserve our sanity. The fantasy of Christ as the fulfilment of the human which finds a secular finish in Auerbach's tragic realism is only ever a screen on which humanity projects its excessive aesthetic investment in sympathy to forget the fearfully unreadable face of the human. What prevents this sad wisdom from losing itself in an aestheticisation of autist authenticity is the love of language, i.e. the world, not the earth. This is where it starts.

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