



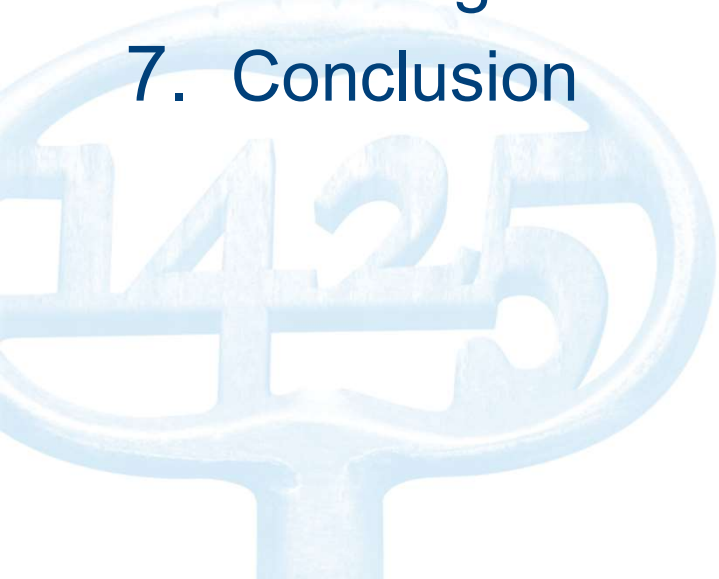
Erich Auerbach - *MIMESIS*

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2021-2022

MA westerse literatuur/ MA Western Literature

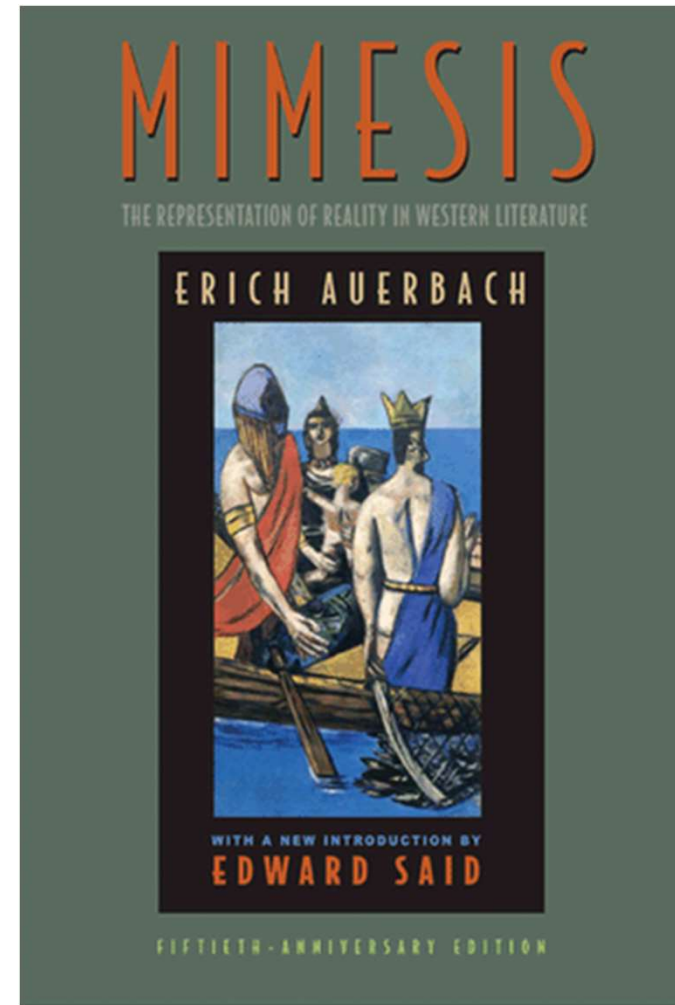
Overview

1. Why Auerbach / Why *Mimesis*?
2. The author: who was Auerbach?
3. The book: structure, method, main arguments
4. Background
5. Critical reception
6. Reading of sample chapter
7. Conclusion



1. Why Auerbach – why *Mimesis*?

1. Title
2. Important/influential book
3. Mythic moment



Why Auerbach – Why *Mimesis*?

1. Title

- *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1953)
- *Mimesis: dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (1946)



Why Auerbach – Why *Mimesis*?

2. Important – Influential book

"only a small number of books seem perennially present and, by comparison with the vast majority of their counterparts, to have an amazing staying power. Certainly this is true of *Mimesis* [...] As one can immediately judge by its subtitle, Auerbach's book is by far the largest in scope and ambition out of all the other important works of the past half century" (Said, 2003)

"one of the few genuine classics of literary scholarship from the second half of this century" (Bremmer, 1999)

"Auerbach's ability to respond knowledgeably and sympathetically to so many different cultures and authorities is amazing, and it is unlikely that research in the humanities will ever again produce a monument of scholarship so catholic in scope and so unpedantically learned" (Lodge, 1972)

Why Auerbach – Why *Mimesis*?

3. Mythic moment

- "Begun in exile in 1942 and completed in April 1945 (the very month of Hitler's death), *Mimesis* stands as an affirmation of the scholar's ability to rise above every obstacle that adverse historical circumstances can present" (Damrosch, 1995)

- German Jew
- Romance philologist
- Wartime exile in Istanbul
- On the brink of move to the States

"Mimesis is quite consciously a book that a particular person, in a particular situation; wrote at the beginning of the 1940s."

2. Who was Auerbach? (1892-1957)

1924. Translation of Vico's *Scienza Nuova*

1929. *Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt*

1938. "Figura"

1946. *Mimesis: dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur.*

1952. "Philologie und Weltliteratur" ("The Philology of World Literature")

1953. "Epilegomena zu Mimesis" (translation, 1957a)

1957b. "Vico's Contribution to Literary Criticism"

1965. *Literary Language and its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*

The book: structure

1. Odysseus' Scar 3
2. Fortunata 24
3. The Arrest of Peter Valvomeres 50
4. Sicharius and Chramnesindus 77
5. Roland Against Ganelon 96
6. The Knight Sets Forth 123
7. Adam and Eve 143
8. Farinata and Cavalcante 174
9. Frate Alberto 203
10. Madame Du Chastel 232
11. The World in Pantagruel's Mouth 262
12. L'Humaine Condition 285
13. The Weary Prince 312
14. The Enchanted Dulcinea 334
15. The Faux Dévot 359
16. The Interrupted Supper 395
17. Miller the Musician 434
18. In the Hôtel de la Mole 454
19. Germinie Lacerteux 493
20. The Brown Stocking 525
- epilogue

The book: method

1. Clues in epilogue?

“As for the methods employed, they have been discussed in an earlier context...” (556)

2. Clues in first chapter?

Particular - general
Literature - society



The book: main argument

1. "the subject of this book, the interpretation of reality through literary representation or 'imitation'" (554)

2. "history of realism" (556)

=> Tension between 2 objectives: relativistic >< teleological

"We are all now familiar with Auerbach's guiding narrative - the struggle between historicity and a static, moralistically colored, eternal view of things; the changing fortunes between Judeo-Christian egalitarianism and a classical class stratification; the ultimate victory of a tragically perceived everyday reality in the great French realists of the 19th C" (Green, 1982)

The book: main argument

3. “three other guiding ideas”

- a. doctrine of stylistic levels: mixture >< separation
- b. modern (French) realism – mediaeval realism
- c. Christian aspect: figural thinking

"figural interpretation establishes **a connection between two events** or persons in such a way that the first signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The two poles of a figure are separated in time, but both, being **real events or persons are within temporality**. They are both contained in the flow of historical life, and only the **comprehension**, the intellectus spiritualis, of their interdependence is a spiritual act. But this spiritual act deals with concrete events whether past, present, or future, and not with concepts of abstractions"

4. “Literature of Europe”

Background

“*Mimesis* attempts to comprehend Europe, but it is a German book not only on account of its language. Anyone who is a little familiar with the structure of the humanities in various countries sees that at once. It arose from the themes and methods of German intellectual history and philology; it would be conceivable in no other tradition than that of German Romanticism and Hegel. It would never have been written without the influences that I experienced in my youth in Germany” (epilegomena)

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- | | |
|----------------|------------------|
| 1. Philology | 3. Plato |
| 2. Historicism | 4. Weltliteratur |

Background: Philology

- Study of language and literature
- ><philosophy: analyze mentalities and cultural sensibilities through language
- Method of literary study

"This is not to say that we should return to traditional philological and scholarly approaches to literature. No one is really educated to do that honestly anymore, for if you use Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer as your models, you had better be familiar with eight or nine languages and most of the literatures written in them, as well as archival, editorial, semantic, and literary skills that disappeared in Europe at least two generations ago" (Said, 1988)

Background: Historicism

Influenced by Giambattista Vico, *Scienza Nuova* (1745)

Auerbach's definitions:

- “What we are we have become in the course of our history, and it is only in history that we can remain what we are, and develop” (Philology of World Literature”)
- “the wealth of events in human life which unfold in earthly time constitutes a totality, a coherent development or meaningful whole, in which each individual event is embedded in a variety of ways and through which it can be interpreted” (“Vico and Herder”)
- “the conviction that every civilization and every period has its own possibilities of aesthetic perfection; that the works of art of the different peoples and periods , as well as the general forms of life, must be understood as products of variable individual conditions, and have to be judged each by his own development, not by absolute rules of beauty and ugliness” (“Vico's contribution to Literary Criticism” 267)

Background: Plato

"My 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" (epilogue 554).

- Plato: Cave
- Kant: problem of representation
- Auerbach: show modes of representation

"that my presentation is all too time-bound and all too much determined by the present. That is also intentional. [...] No one today can see such a context from anywhere else today than precisely from the present, and specifically from the present that is determined by the personal origin, history, and education of the viewer. It is better to be consciously than unconsciously time-bound. [...] Mimesis is quite consciously a book that a particular person, in a particular situation, wrote at the beginning of the 1940s".

Background: Weltliteratur



Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
1827 *Über Kunst und Altertum*

Weltliteratur as IDEAL

>< Auerbach: REALITY of Western
literary tradition

Essay: “Philologie und Weltliteratur”

Critical reception

1. Contemporary reception

“The preponderance of Romance material in Mimesis is to be explained not only because of the fact that I am a Romanist, but rather above all because in most periods the Romance literatures are more representative of Europe than are, for example the German [...] It would be erroneous to read between the lines of my selection any preferences or aversions of a fundamental kind - and equally wrong to see estrangement or aversion in the regret or criticism that occasionally comes to be expressed about certain limitations of outlook in German literature of the 19thC”

"The book is no theoretical construct; it aims to offer a view, and the very elastic thoughts or ideas that hold it together cannot be grasped and proven wrong in single, isolated phrases“

Critical reception

2. Subsequent uses

- New Criticism
- Great Books tradition
- Comparative literature
- World literatures

3. Critique

- Canon
- Binaries
- eurocentrism