*“Odysseus’ Scar” (1946)*

*Erich Auerbach*

* Key Terms:
  + *Retarding Element*: The “going back and forth” by means of episodes. To Auerbach, this is not used by Homer to create suspense but to “leave nothing which it mentions half in darkness and unexternalized” in accordance with the Homeric style.
  + *Figura*
* **Introduction: What does Odysseus’ Scar refer to?**

🡪 Refers to the scene in book 19 of the Odyssey where Odysseus returns to Penelope and Euryclea (the housemaid) after being long gone. While Euryclea notices a distinguishable scar on his leg and is able to piece together that this is Odysseus finally returned (Penelope hasn’t yet noticed).

* **Why is there an “Interruption”? Is it for suspense?**

🡪 Auerbach is specifically in the *interruption* just before Euryclea notices the scar– some seventy verses describing how Odysseus received the scar while hunting with his grandfather Autolycus (as well as more information on who Autolycus is).

🡪 But Auerbach does not see this interruption as a device used to create suspense. The digression is “not meant to keep the reader in suspense, but rather to relax his tension.”

🡪 As Auerbach says, a digression that is used for suspense must be constructed so that it does not completely fill the present, but keeps the reader vibrantly aware of the moment of crisis now moved to the background

\*\*\*But according to Auerbach, Homer knows no background, only a perpetual foreground. The digression into Odysseus’ past has taken the present, and the temporally present moment in which Odysseus has shown up “completely vanishes from the stage and the reader’s mind.” \*\*\*

* **What is the “retarding element”? How is it used by Epic and Tragedy Poets?**

🡪 Refers to the “going back and forth” by means of episodes

🡪 As said, this “retarding element” does not mean the element of suspense, though that can be something created using it.

🡪 Schiller wants to create absolute distinction between Tragedy and Epic poets, stating that epic poets are not interested in suspense while Tragic poets are. Auerbach does not agree with this distinction and questions whether Homer would have even thought of the “retarding” element in these terms at all.

🡪 To Auerbach, the true use of the retarding effect by Homer has to do with “the need of the Homeric style to leave nothing which it mentions half in darkness and unexternalized.” In other words, *the past cannot be left unilluminated; it must be set in full light.*

\*\*\* “The excursus upon the origin of Odysseus’ scar is not basically different from the many passages in which a newly introduced character, or even a newly appearing object or implement, though it be in the thick of a battle, is described as to its nature and origin.”\*\*\*

* **The Homeric Style and the “Retarding Effect”**

🡪What is the original “urge” behind the Homeric Retarding Effect? Auerbach thinks it has to do with the Homeric style. That is, “to represent phenomena in a fully externalized form, visible and palpable in all their parts, and completely fixed in their spatial and temporal relations.”

🡪 In other words, nothing should be left unexpressed.

🡪 Even things not said to others are expressed internally through words: “Much that is terrible takes place in the Homeric poems, but it seldom takes place wordlessly.”

🡪 Auerbach specifically talks about how the Homeric language specifically shows this tendency in not just the *parole*, but the languages *langue* as well. Particles, conjunctions, adverbs, etc. are carefully placed so that “never is there a form left fragmentary or half-illuminated.”

* **Is the Homeric “Retarding Effect” just a fancy way to talk about a Flashback?**

🡪 No. The digression that seems to interrupt becomes the local and temporal present; it is brought into the foreground.

🡪 A Flashback or recollection of the boar incident is too subjective in that it forms a perspective with a foreground *and* a background.

🡪 “The Homeric style knows only a foreground, only a uniformly illuminated, uniformly objectively present.”

* **What about the Story of Isaac in Genesis 22?**

🡪 Auerbach notes that we are immediately introduced to an incomplete story; God says, “Here I am.” But we don’t know where “here” actually is. Nor do we know exactly why he is tempting Abraham (he has not discussed it like Zeus might do with other gods).

🡪 Does this level of un-enlightenment that is so different have to do with the Jewish religion? Auerbach says yes, but not as a cause; more like a “symptom of their manner of comprehending and representing things”

🡪 Similarly with Abraham, we don’t know where he is either except “here.” And furthermore, “here” Is understood as a moral position in relation to God.

🡪 This is very different from the Homeric verse where everything is illuminated.

🡪 Additionally, there is a “depth” between God and Abraham in the sense of Foreground and Background.

🡪 Not told anything about the journey except that it takes 3 days. And these 3 days are completely void of any real present: it is inserted as something between what has taken place and what will come

* **Suspense and the Story of Isaac**

🡪 With the introduction of Isaac, we aren’t told anything about him except in how he relates to the action.

🡪 The overwhelming suspense is present.

🡪 “The conversation between Abraham and Isaac on the way to the place of sacrifice is only an interruption of the heavy silence and makes it all the more burdensome.”

🡪 Though this story is Epic, it keeps a suspense Schiller associated only with Tragic poets (so Auerbach is providing more evidence against Schiller here)

* **Direct Discourse in Story of Isaac vs Homer**

🡪 In Story of Isaac, direct discourse is used to “indicate thought which remain unexpressed.” Example: God gives his command in direct discourse, but he does not express his motives and purpose

🡪 In Homer, speech is used to manifest or externalize thoughts.

* **Why did Auerbach use Genesis story to compare with Homer?**

🡪 He is showing the big differences between these texts that are both ancient and both epic texts.

* **Foreground vs Background**

🡪 Foreground: In Homer, impression that what is being narrated is always the present, pure and without perspective (subjectivity).

🡪 Background: In Genesis, God always “extends into depths.” And human figures also exist in great depths of time, fate, and consciousness that is different form the perpetual foreground in Homer. Their “thoughts and feelings have more layers, are more entangled”

- Example: Abraham actions are not explained only by what is happening to him in the present moment nor only by his character (though with, say, Achilles, we know his actions based on his character traits of courage and pride). But Abraham has a history in the “depths” of the background. He is conscious of God’s promise to him as well as what has happened to him. But he is torn between rebellion and hopeful obedience. A very *psychological* position that is not available for Homeric heroes.

- To suggest rather than express is “unthinkable” in Homer

* **Multilayeredness**

🡪 Homer is only able to show a character’s psychological life by the succession and alternation of emotions… Not Multi-layered.

🡪 Whereas Jewish writers of the Bible “are able to express the simultaneous existence of various layers of consciousness and the conflict between them.”

\*\*\* “The Homeric poems, then, though their intellectual, linguistic, and above all syntactical culture appears to be some much more highly developed, are yet comparatively simple in their picture of human beings. […] Delight in physical existence is everything to them, and their highest aim is to make that delight perceptible to us.” \*\*\*

**Questions – Erich Auerbach, “Odysseus’ Scar”**

1. What does it mean to begin a book on “the representation of reality in Western literature” with an analysis of a passage from the Old Testament and one from Homer? What conception of “Western literature” is being projected by this choice?
2. What does it mean to begin a book on “the representation of reality in Western literature” with a comparison? What conception of “Western literature” and of literary studies is being projected by this choice?
3. What are the stylistic differences Auerbach detects between the two texts he discusses? How does he explain these differences?
4. Which of the two texts discussed seems to be prefered by Auerbach? On what basis?
5. What can we say of Auerbach’s method in these pages? Is it a form of close reading? Contextualization? How are cultural elements explained (what causes what, what explains what)? Try to formulate this method as precisely as possible.
6. Trace and explain his reference to 'figura' in this chapter.
7. How does his central opposition of the separation / mixture of styles function here?
8. How would you summarize the distinction between legend and the writing of history (18-20)? What is so bad about legend? Can you see this as an encrypted comment on Auerbach’s own method?
9. Auerbach’s comparison introduces a tension between realism and truth (see especially 13-15). How do the two texts relate to this issue? What do their respective “realisms” consists in? Which one is favored by Auerbach?