ALEX WOLOCH

Form and Representation in Auerbach's Mimesis

Since criticism has long understood literature to be embedded within—or, at least, as not entirely free from—politics, and since nearly everyone, today, would identify their ideological position (in one way or another) with the value of "democracy," it is not surprising that this value has been espoused on *both sides* of numerous aesthetic and theoretical debates.[1] Who would want to say that his or her critical position is not the democratic one: whether through the positions that we draw out of our own advocacy of—or simple intimacy with—a particular text or through the critique by which we mark an asserted distance with another? A case in point would be the boisterous arguments, throughout the twentieth-century, over realism as literary value and critical-aesthetic term. Proponents of realism have often seemed very capable of marking, and eager to mark, the affiliation of their work with democracy. The realist text, for example, seeks to foreground—and to confer aesthetic dignity onto—ordinary life, common experiences, mass culture. Realism widens the franchise of the represented, accounting for new histories, under-recognized particularities, emergent subjects. Alternatively, it grasps the systematic, interconnected nature of modern life. Opponents of realism (whether literary or critical) also have readily understood their position and work as fundamentally democratic. Here, we find a critique of any top-down, authoritative (potentially authoritarian) representation, any fixing of an actually unfixed, dynamic world through the congealing of lived, plural realities into a singular "reality" or of motile, fluid selfhood into static, literary "character". Alternatively, realism is too beholden, intrinsically, to the *given*, and thus to the status quo; its sheer fidelity to "what is" opposes imagination, and thus forestalls insurgent or revolutionary desire.

This conflict, perennial and recurrent, is not something to dismiss. The antagonists share an ambitious, formally mediated sense of literature as a

[1] I presented a version of this essay (and wrote this opening, in particular) for a 2012 conference on "The Novel and Democracy in the Nineteenth-Century" at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle organized by Paolo Tortonese and Peter Brooks. My thanks to the participants and organizers of this discussion.

politically significant process and act. The debate can sharpen each of the claims, revealing pressure points, internal contradictions, and new horizons (for both the referential and avant-garde camps). This is the debate at its dialectical best. "On the other hand." The debate has often become, as we all know, quite tendentious. Here each position, perhaps threatened by this other democratic horizon, promulgates a simplified internal image of what it opposes. Straw men abound. Inquiries are cut off and dogmas, with any rough edge long since worn-down, are repeated and re-circulated.

This kind of polemic took an emphatic, often undialectical form in the 1980s and 90s, the ascendant moment of high academic theory. Literary realism—or sometimes representation in general—was seen as overinvested in an aesthetics of transparency, as non-problematic, naïve, anti-formal, and, for all of these reasons, ideologically suspect. While attacking the institution of realism—or the "order of mimesis" as Christopher Prendergast put it, in a book of this title—such critiques could readily take on institutional coloration themselves; and realism the quality of a scapegoat, a term of opprobrium or reflexive distaste.[2] In this scholarly climate, quotation marks often seemed to magically slide up around the word, or the first letter to spontaneously capitalize itself (from "r" to "R"), as if to instruct the reader on the difference between an actual aesthetic category and a merely ideological one. Terry Eagleton offers one of many summaries of this entrenched point-of-view:

> Realist literature […] helps to confirm the prejudice that there is a form of "ordinary" language which is somehow natural […] In the ideology of realism or representation, words are felt to link up with their thoughts or objects in essentially […] uncontrovertible ways. The realist or representational sign […] is […] essentially unhealthy. It effaces its own status as a sign, in order to foster the illusion that we are perceiving reality without its intervention.[3]

---

[2] Christopher Prendergast. *The Order of Mimesis: Balzac, Stendhal, Nerval and Flaubert* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). All page numbers for Prendergast's book will be included in the body of this essay.

[3] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2008 [1983]), 117-18.

This catalogue—of "prejudice," "unhealth[iness]" "illusion," and "ideology"—rehearses a familiar indictment. Tellingly, Eagleton's resume of this perspective twice conflates realism and "representation" as such ("the ideology of realism *or* representation," "[t]he realist *or* representational sign"), suggesting that this polemic isn't directed at a particular school or historical moment but rather an intrinsic tendency—or aspiration—that recurs continually within aesthetic theory and practice. Criticism, however, has a quite difficult time eschewing representation altogether, and one sign of this is the numerous synonyms that critics can come to rely on, in a (sometimes manic) effort to avoid the shibboleth of the "realist or representational sign": "capturing," "registering," "indexing," "expressing," "revealing," "demonstrating," *etc*. These terms are not identical but all of them have a referential charge. Their sheer variety suggests the complicated, multifarious dynamics of representation, and their ubiquity—even in sedulously "anti-mimetic" criticism—suggests how pervasively these impulses can run. Even "efface" (as in "it effaces its own status as a sign") is a term that draws on a framework of representation—of concealment, disguise, discovery, and re-emergence. In this way Eagleton's description, too, relies on a version of the category it means to discredit. To write criticism without recourse to *any* such referentially-charged terms would be a difficult, if not acrobatic feat—akin to the liberating (and constraining) gesture that Georges Perec makes when he tapes down the letter "e" on his typewriter to compose his novel *La Disparition*.

In this essay, I want to consider Erich Auerbach's theoretical work in relation to this conflict and process. My opening premise is that Auerbach's work (unlike, say, Bakhtin's) has often—but particularly in the high theoretical moment of the 1980s and 90s—been under-recognized *as* theoretical, or, in slightly different terms, as methodological. It has been (too often) *naturalized*—and thus underread. The question of Auerbach's reception—the refraction or indeed "representation" of *Mimesis* itself—is worth consideration. In the Anglo-American context, certainly, Auerbach has a curious position during this period. For example, in the 50th Anniversary Edition of the English translation of *Mimesis*, Edward Said (in the introduction) and Stephen Greenblatt and Fredric Jameson (in solicited comments) all mark the radically central place of *Mimesis* in the literary-critical tradition: "one of the half-dozen most important literary-critical works of the twentieth century," "one of the essential works of literary

criticism," and "by far the largest in scope and ambition out of all the other important critical works of the past half century."[4] Clearly these three critics at once authorize themselves and the text that they so emphatically praise. But in fact, all three were more widely disseminated and institutionalized, as theoretical sources, than Auerbach himself. Thus, for instance, while Greenblatt, Said and Jameson are each well represented in the first edition of the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, from 2001, Auerbach was not included or discussed.[5] Such neglect would not necessarily be interesting in itself—what's striking is that simultaneous persistence of Auerbach. The encomia *and* the neglect—we can find numerous examples of both these things. Not still criticism, not yet theory: Auerbach's *Mimesis* seems particularly invisible—or illegible—in terms of method; as a book that we might not simply admire—"magisterial," "monumental"—but analyse, situate and incorporate into the work that we do.

As one example of this, I want to briefly consider that 1986 book, *The Order of Mimesis*, an influential account of realism from this period. Prendergast writes, in terms resonant with Eagleton: "Mimetic or representational notions have been exposed as an 'illusion', in the sense of a rhetorical trick designed to mask the arbitrary character of the literary sign, and similarly contaminated by an ideology whose effort is to convince us of an enduring (human) Nature beyond the changing and heterogeneous forms of culture and history[…]. The authoritarian gesture of mimesis is to imprison us in a world which, by virtue of its familiarity, is closed to analysis and criticism" (2, 6). Auerbach's double status—monumentalized and obscured—is vividly apparent in Prendergast's book. I was struck when recently turning back to Prendergast's book that there is no listing of Auerbach in his otherwise comprehensive index. This doesn't, however, mark a simple omission—which might be strange enough, given the

[4] Jameson and Greenblatt's comments are taken from the back of this anniversary edition, Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, translated by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003 [1953]). For Said's comment see Edward Said, "Introduction to the Fiftieth-Anniversary Edition" in *Mimesis*, ix-xxxii. All page numbers for Auerbach's texts will be cited in the body of this essay.

[5] See *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch (New York: Norton, 2001), 1932-1934 ("Fredric Jameson"), 1986-2011 ("Edward Said") and 2250-2255 ("Stephen Greenblatt"). The second edition, published in 2010, included "Odysseus' Scar," the first chapter of *Mimesis*.

title of the book. In fact, Auerbach *is* mentioned twice (his erasure in the index is just a telling mistake) and early on Prendergast singles out *Mimesis* for discussion:

> It may therefore be instructive to consider briefly how that elision [of the subject] has manifested itself in other bodies of thought, and in particular in two books which, until recently, have probably done more than any others to shape modern understanding of mimesis. What, despite numerous divergences, Auerbach and Lukács have in common is an intellectual commitment to the notion of totality. In Auerbach's account of the fortunes of mimesis it is largely implicit. (25)

With that last sentence, the Introduction ceases to discuss Auerbach, even though it has just suggested that Auerbach is one of two authors that requires our attention "in particular" and that *Mimesis*, more than any other book except for *Studies in European Realism*, has "shaped" the very object of study Prendergast's book concerns. There is, simply put, *no* consideration of Auerbach to follow ("brief" or otherwise)—only of Lukács. Here we have indeed not a simple lack of representation but a represented effacement. We can find a remarkably similar process, of *curtailed* inscription, in Eagleton's own book.[6]

[6] This text includes one reference only to Auerbach, which I will quote in full:

> With the advent of structuralism, the world of the great aestheticians and humanist scholars of twentieth-century Europe—the world of Croce, Curtius, Auerbach, Spitzer and Wellek—seemed one whose hour had passed. These men, with their formidable erudition, imaginative insight, and cosmopolitan range of allusion, appeared suddenly in historical perspective, as luminaries of a high European humanism which pre-dated the turmoil and conflagration of the mid-twentieth-century. It seemed clear that such a culture could not be reinvented—that the choice was between learning from it and passing on, or clinging with nostalgia to its remnants in our time. (93)

Quite strikingly, Auerbach is introduced into the universe of Eagleton's text in the *same* sentence that ushers him off (his name is mentioned and instantly, five words later, his "hour ha[s] passed"). There is thus *no* "learning from" these aestheticians here, only an emphatic but under-described "passing on." Ironically, this has the effect of naturalizing such a body of knowledge, casting it indeed as light itself (the works are simply equivalent to "insight," and "erudition"—the men are "luminaries"). So this is not simply a question of diminution or neglect. Eagleton's brevity—the endnote for this passage includes only *one* more word on Auerbach ("see . . . *Mimesis*," 211)—still manages to describe this book, famously composed in the shadow of 1930s fascism and Auerbach's

Likewise, at the other end of his book, Prendergast quickly alights, once more, on *Mimesis*, and offers a sentence that could stand in for (too) much of the critical reception of this book: "Auerbach's magisterial *Mimesis* is magisterial precisely because for him the concept of 'mimesis' as such was intrinsically non-problematical" (212).[7]

It's a striking way to summarize this book. *Mimesis* arguably offers the reader nothing *but* a series of problems: problem after problem, each chapter jostling against the rest, refracting and reopening the key terms of analysis and unfolding new, dialectically-charged resting-points, limits and tensions, that propel both the literary history and the aesthetic argument. This instability is not limited to Auerbach's method of exposition but also pertains, I would argue, to the formal structure of representation he wants to articulate and conceptualize. The conceptual dimension of *Mimesis* is already signalled by his well-known

---

own flight from Nazi Germany, as "pre-dat[ing]" the "turmoil and conflagration of the mid-twentieth-century" (93).

[7] Again I want to note how this brief (but positive) characterization of the book, as "magisterial," functions as strangely equivalent to the *dismissal* of the book. Auerbach's work is magisterial *because* it is "intrinsically non-problematical." And because it is "non-problematical" it merits—and receives—no further discussion. The same paragraph repeats this formula: "*Mimesis* is a monumental work, not just because of its extraordinary erudition, but because the conceptual foundation-stone of which the monument is built is always assumed to be entirely intact" (212). In the first case, magisterial "because" non-problematical. Here, monumental "because" of (not despite) an "entirely intact" conceptual foundation. Both descriptions (as well as Prendergast's ensuing silence) suggest, of course, that such a "non-problematical" concept is, in fact, quite problematic. But how, precisely, does this complacent sense of representation relate to the book's "extraordinary erudition," and, indeed, to its magisterial and monumental qualities? Why wouldn't a book with such a foundation be simply *repetitive* (rather than monumental)? And why wouldn't such erudition (if built on this unreflective basis) be simply a screen for unwarranted critical projections and assumptions? There is a sense, of course, in which "monumental," as used here, *is* simply a euphemism for something closer to "repetitive." But Prendergast doesn't quite avow this. Indeed he concludes this paragraph, which effectively segments Auerbach off from the rest of the chapter, by saying, 'only the most foolish and superficial 'anti-humanism' will treat [*Mimesis*'s concluding words] with anything other than respect" (213). The stripped-down discussion of Auerbach stands in stark contrast to the rest of this final chapter. Here Prendergast circles quite doggedly and energetically around a series of texts, closely reading the tensions, assumptions, insights and contradictions in theories ranging from Habermas and Ricouer to Deleuze and Guattari.

epigraph: "had we but world enough and time" (v). What's crucial to recognize about this quotation is that it doesn't merely reflect the putative pathos of Auerbach's own writing—the famous production of this text, in exile, under duress, with limited scholarly resources.[8] It also summarizes, if we can use that word, an essential negativity, or pathos, within Auerbach's model of representation—a negativity that leads us directly into form. Everywhere, in *Mimesis*, an extensive open-ended reality butts against the delimited forms that work to comprehend it. And throughout we find conspicuously active terms for this relationship—"conflict," "entrapment," "breaking out," "penetration," "absorption," "compression," "interruption." These terms neither describe the qualities of a reality that is reflected in different texts, nor the dynamics of the languages or forms of these texts themselves. Rather, they describe the interaction between these two levels of the literary text. This is a simple but essential distinction. Representation in *Mimesis* is kinetic, problematic and, perhaps above all, "dramatic."[9] The "drama" that Auerbach locates and

[8] The circumstances of this writing has been a focus of scholarship in the last two decades. See for example Emily Apter, "Global Translatio: The 'Invention' of Comparative Literature, Istanbul, 1933," *Critical Inquiry* 29 (Winter 2003), 253-281 and Kader Konuk, *East West Mimesis: Auerbach in Turkey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

[9] If my essay is making a case for the formal-grounding of Auerbach's realism, we can find a similar recourse to the idea of the "dramatic," now charged with an unexpectedly *referential* current, in a text that is often taken (from the title on) as one of the most hermetic, and generically-narrow, examples of formalist criticism: Cleanth Brooks' *The Well-Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1947). Strangely, the modifier "dramatic" becomes a key adjective in, and even a conceptual backstop for, Brooks' description of lyric. This inclination to describe poetry in terms of a different genre is quite striking. Crucially, as with Auerbach, Brooks' recourse to drama is usually on the second-order, as a drama that takes place only in terms *of* the dynamic organization and modulation of lyric form. Such organization of the lyric, it seems, must stretch into something beyond the lyric and that "something" is most often described as "drama" or the "dramatic." Some examples (all emphases added): "this paradox […] receives a powerful *dramatization*" (15, on Donne); ""Do the conventional 'materials' remain conventional, or are they somehow rendered *dramatic* and moving" (107, on Gray); "Wordsworth […] is not trying to inculcate anything. Instead he is trying to *dramatize* the changing interrelations which determine the major imagery" (147); "Mere psychological analysis is, of course, not enough to insure *dramatic* force" (177, on Tennyson). More surprisingly still, Brooks' sense of drama leans heavily into the question of representation and the ways in which lyric form can comprehend what he explicitly calls the "real": see discussions of Donne's "ironic tenderness and […] realism" (17); Milton's dialectical

emphasizes—throughout his book—is not simply one that inheres within represented life (not a drama merely of "story," content or plot). Certainly, Auerbach considers elements of life, and elements of history, that could be described as dramatic, or as constituted by a dramatic logic—but this is not the primary meaning of the term. Nor does drama refer to the agitation, movement and resolution of form in-and-of-itself. Rather, drama arises only at the intersection of form and content, in the very process of representation which, undergirding and refracted through all the "monuments" that Auerbach discusses, is coterminous with the literary. Representation—always a *dramatic* process, which is to say an open, unresolved, contingent, imperfect and, for all of these reasons, "problematic" one—takes as many forms, and has as much variety, as literature itself. Its nature is volatile. It is in no way a stabilizing or static category in this work.

What we have in Auerbach's *Mimesis,* then, is not drama as (a genre of) literary representation, but literary representation as a drama. This inverted sense of a formal drama—or of the dramatic relationship, within representation, *between* form and content—is the main idea I want to introduce in this essay. Let me first turn to one instance of the term, in a pivotal passage from Auerbach's discussion of Dante's *Inferno* in Chapter Eight of *Mimesis* ("Farinata and Cavalcante"). "We must also consider," Auerbach writes:

> that for the souls of the dead, Dante's journey represents their only chance in all eternity to speak to one from among the living. This is an aspect of the situation which impels many to express themselves with utmost intensity and which brings into the changelessness of their eternal fate a moment of dramatic historicity [*dramatischer Geschichtlichkeit*] (193).

I want to focus in particular on Auerbach's use of the two terms "dramatic" and "brings into," and on the crucial question of what *register*, within the literary

---

reconciliation of the "real" ("[i]t must be a world in which a real sun glares and real people sweat") and poetic mood (60) or Pope's realist "tact" (103-4). This is a suggestive chiasmus: it is not merely that both critics—the formalist and the realist—inscribe drama as a generic horizon for their work as a whole, but that this sense of "drama" operates, in each case, at the pivot or hinge between form and representation.

text, this action and this "drama" is taking place. History sits uneasily with form. The moment is "dramatic" because of the innately difficult, and volatile, articulation of history—of reality—through changelessness. This drama proceeds through the specific, dynamic unfolding of history as it is "[brought] into" (unchanging) form. Part of the brilliance of Auerbach's interpretation of Dante rests in a double sense of changelessness that I'm suggesting here: while the characters in *The Inferno* are anchored into a compressed, fixed space within the represented story, Auerbach's reading hinges on showing this compression—and the "changelessness" it implies—as simultaneously a formal and structural aspect of Dante's poetic narrative, of the *Divine Comedy*, itself. This is most simply, then, the doubleness of story and discourse. Not all characters, of course, are locked—uneasily, bitterly, with ironic resignation—into an eternally fixed or final space within the referenced world of a plot or narrative, but often narratives *do* take advantage of an equivalent tension between the particularity of the character, as implied person, and his or her emplacement within the fixed, substantialized, potentially constrained and distorting form of the narrative itself.[10] Auerbach's Dante, we might say, manages to create—in these infernal compressions—a *mis-en-scène* for the very structure of mimesis, which always relies on such an unstable, and thus "dramatic" interaction between the contingent (reality) and the unchangeable (form). Form, like Dante's conception of the afterlife, is by necessity "decisive for all eternity."[11]And form—in this decisive, even potentially calcified, sense—always lurks within and exerts its pressure on representation, no matter how vivid, immediate or specific.

I begin with this well-known example of Dante because it is famously one of the most *achieved* moments of literary mimesis in Auerbach's account. As such it would best accommodate a potentially complete, self-sufficient or stable version of representation (and thus a "non-problematic" one in Prendergast's terms)—a

[10]I draw this last sentence from an earlier essay, see Alex Woloch, "Partial Representation" in *The Work of Genre: Selected Essays from the English Institute* (Cambridge, MA: English Institute in Collaboration with the American Council of Learned Societies, 2011), http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=acls;idno=heb90055.0001.001;rgn=div3;view=text;cc=acls;node=heb90055.0001.001%3A6.3.3, accessed Sept 14 2014.

[11] Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, translated by Ralph Mannheim (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961 [1929]), 132.

sufficiency that stands in stark contrast to the chapters that precede and follow it; and, indeed, in contrast to the book as a whole.[12] There are two things to note about this fact. First, the partiality of representation is much *more* evident in most of Auerbach's other chapters and, in this sense, the formal nature of representation is easier to mark as well. If we can see such an intractably formal—and thus both *partial* and *dramatic*—process in the example of Dante, then it should be clear that *no* version of literary representation, in Auerbach's view, will simply transcend its mediated formal essence, nor the profound distortions and misprisions that emerge—often quite dramatically and *generatively*—out of this mediation. (I will turn to a couple of other instances, from a different chapter, shortly). But second, and relatedly, the very process of Auerbachian contrast—the way in which Dante's mimetic achievement is expressed, and even conceptualized, *through* a raft of counterexamples (counterexamples that come to form the body of *Mimesis*)—is connected to the formal "drama" of representation at stake in this key passage. Auerbach's method in this book is built, perhaps as much as any literary criticism has been, by an almost perverse attention to the counterexample.

As the reader might remember, *Mimesis* constructs the Dante chapter as a culmination of two dominant argumentative lines of the book: the separation of styles and figuration. For Auerbach, Dantean representation encompasses the full range of elite and vernacular styles that are available, or thinkable, at this historical moment. In this singular range, Dante's text doesn't just escape a narrowness that could inhere to any one "bandwidth" of this stylistic spectrum but, more profoundly, works to dissolve the pernicious nature, and consequences, of separation as such. I want to turn to an earlier moment now, one of many different examples in Auerbach's work where representation is distorted and circumscribed by the separation of styles. I'm thinking here of

[12] Crucially, Auerbach suggests how this sufficient form of representation carries with it such internal pressures that it can no sooner manifest itself then it eliminates the conditions for its own sustained possibility. This point drives the concluding pages of the "Farinata and Cavalcante" chapter (for example, "he created a world of earthly beings and passions so powerful that it breaks bounds and proclaims its independence. Figure surpasses fulfilment," 200; or again, "Dante's work made man's Christian-figural being a reality, and *destroyed it in the very process of realizing it*," 202 [emphasis added]). And the shrapnel from this aesthetic explosion (this combination of mimetic "realiz[ation]" and "destr[uction]") flies into the following several chapters of the book.

Auerbach's discussion of Roman prose, and his description of how the "organizing" nature of Latin rhetoric intersects with "the stuff of reality." The comment comes in the middle of Auerbach's analysis, in chapter 4, of Gregory of Tours's *History of the Franks*—Auerbach is contrasting this Roman prose with Gregory's more vernacularly-grounded Latin. (I note in citing this passage, how difficult excerption can be in dealing with Auerbach: in this case, the reader's encounter with Auerbach's term 'concrete reality'—in the first sentence of the excerpt—is drained of the full meaning that it might have as we work through the entire chapter).

> Gregory's literary Latin not only is decadent grammatically and syntactically, it is used in his work to an end for which, originally or at least in its heyday, it seemed little suited—that is, to imitate concrete reality. For the literary Latin, and especially the literary prose, of the golden age is an almost excessively organizing language, in which the material and sensory side of the facts is rather viewed and ordered from above then vividly presented in its materiality and sensoriness. Together with the rhetorical tradition, the legal and administrative genius of the Romans contributes to this. In the Roman prose of the golden age, there is a predominant tendency simply to report matters of fact, if possible only to suggest them in very general terms, to allude to them, to keep aloof from them—and, on the other hand, to put all the precision and vigor of expression into syntactical connections, with the result that the style acquires as it were a strategic character, with extremely clear articulations whereas the subject matter, the stuff of reality, which lies between them, though it is mastered, is not exploited in its sensory potentialities. (89)

We'd be hard pressed not to see the active, dynamic nature of what Auerbach is expressing here. Auerbach's effort to focus attention on the activity of representation accounts for a crucial "mixture" in his own syntax and style. The anchoring and structural opposition (on the one hand / "on the other hand") is supplemented by that free flow of terms in the middle, which are the opposite of hardened analytical language: that "tendency simply to report matters of fact […] to suggest them in general terms […] to allude to them […] to keep aloof of them." Is this Auerbach casually registering, as he writes, his own search for the exact term to describe this "tendency"? Or, on the contrary, is this list of

associated terms itself precisely chosen? The alternative we're confronted with here—whether Auerbach is projecting taxonomic clarity or gesturing toward a fluid and open process—marks a simple but essential feature of (and tension within) the critical procedure in *Mimesis*, and one that reflects on the aesthetic complexity of Auerbach's sense of representation itself. In fact, there is a wide array of mimetic possibilities here. To "allude to" is *not* necessarily the same thing as "suggest[ing]" in "general terms"; "report[ing]" on simple matters of fact could be conjoined with, or be made quite distinct from, keeping "aloof." What's functioning here as a counterexample to Gregory's much more viscerally embedded and sensuous (but thus confused) version of factual chronicling is itself not readily fixed: there are a range of choices implicit in the "tendency" that Auerbach is attempting to distil. This is so often the case in *Mimesis*. In this example, most importantly, Auerbach is sincere about the "precision" and "vigor" of such "administrative prose"—these are valuable qualities. And it is quite absorbing to think about the way that "precision" and "vigor" might be located strictly *within* syntax, even while this syntax organizes content that is pushed toward abstraction, compression, and allusion. (I'd also note that "precision" and "vigor" are not the same terms at all—in some ways they are antithetical. "Precision" suggests a passive ability to register external variegation while vigour implies a much more active, shaping assertiveness. I'm reminded here of Walter Scott's deceptively simple description of Jane Austen's "talent" at "portraits from ordinary life," a talent which he praises for its "force and precision"[13]).

The displacement of these qualities (clarity, precision, vigour) into the inner, syntactic logic of Latin rhetoric suggests, once again, an inextricable relationship of mimesis and form. Auerbach argues that Roman literary syntax works to *obscure* "the material and sensory side of the facts." But the terms he uses to

[13] "This is one of the portraits from ordinary life which shews our author's talent in a very strong point of view. A friend of ours, whom the author never heard or saw of, was at once recognized by his own family as the original of Mr. Bennet, and we do not know if he has yet got rid of the nickname. A Mr Collins, too, a formal, conceited, yet servile young sprig of divinity, is drawn with the same force and precision." See Walter Scott, Unsigned Review of *Emma*, *Quarterly Review*, 14 March 1816 (dated October 1815," in *Critical Assessments of Jane Austen*, edited by Ian Littlewood (East Sussex: Helm Information, 1998), 287-97.

describe this formalization reassert such sensory potentiality within the language itself. That Auerbach casually grounds this relationship in the "legal and administrative genius of the Romans" is also fascinating in terms of what we're examining. (Indeed, this sentence encapsulates much of the "authoritarian" aspect of mimesis that commands Prendergast's attention). As I've noted, this discussion of Latin literary prose is a counterexample and this quality of the passage also is significant. The counterexample, as a category, is both a component part of Auerbach's argumentative method and a crucial object of the argument itself. Counterexamples, in other words, form the material of Auerbach's history (its substance, its content) but also shape the modalities through which we grasp this history. The method of juxtaposition runs through numerous scales in this book: from the macro-historical shifts discernible from chapter to chapter, to, within a single chapter, the micrological distinctions (say, between vigour and precision) that we've been examining.

In Chapter Four, we can find an equally compelling overlap of representation and form in the dominant example, the reading of Gregory of Tours itself. In fact, the quite active term "to penetrate" or "to break through" is crucial to Auerbach's description of Tours' realism, and suggests how a disordering of form through content (content that is thus recoded *as* interruption) is a key dimension of mimesis in Auerbach's work. (In this sense I'm connecting these active verbs to that key phrase "to bring into" that we saw in the Dante chapter: in each case, the action, despite its concreteness, emerges at a juncture between form and substance).[14] Here it is as though the physical and sensory intensity of Tours' world were echoing through the aesthetic processes, and forms, by which

[14] We can find many instances in *Mimesis* of such lively and active verbal phrases being cast into a conceptual role. This dramatic relationship to formal processes is also apparent in the title of Auerbach's 1959 essay collection, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (New York: 1959, Meridian Books). It is useful to pause on this title for a moment and ask: what is the key term describing? This drama is obviously *not* a genre description (of plays, or tragedies, or dramas as a subset of European literature). Nor, I would argue, is it merely a description of content (the urgent concerns and topics of European literature), of form (the compelling structure and poetics of various literary texts), or even of literary history (how European literature develops, dynamically, over time). Rather "drama" is a description of the dynamic process of representation across different instances (and thus "scenes") of European literary history—a drama that accrues precisely in the volatile interaction and intersection of substance and form.

this world is grasped. In a memorable turn of his argument, Auerbach highlights Tours' novel gravitation toward direct discourse—present-tense and verisimilar speech that is depicted without adornment or commentary. But he emphasizes the paradoxical way that this direct discourse, "free from all rhetorical editing" (87), is still presented *in* Latin. As Auerbach puts it: "Sicharius' words sound as though they had been translated into Gregory's clumsy Latin from the vernacular in which they were spoken" (87). This odd conjunction has immediate formal effects, creating, as Auerbach memorably describes it: "words that break out in a moment and change the moment into a scene" (87) [*die in einem Augenblick hervorbrechen und den Augenblick zur Szene machen*]. Much of the conceptual suggestiveness of *Mimesis*, I believe, rests in the force of this aesthetic intuition. The elusive but essential difference between a "moment" and a "scene" takes us to a charged threshold between content and form. And the mimetic effect is largely produced *at* this threshold. This is not merely a monumentalization, in other words, a simple heightening of the event or "moment."[15] There is a negation, as well as a gain, in this reverberating modulation of what we might think of as the pre-formal (i.e. the "moment") through and into form ("scene"). Repeatedly, in *Mimesis*, Auerbach tinges aesthetic accomplishments with such loss—with flaws, limits, blind-spots, boundaries—until the overwhelming pattern must assert itself: that these flaws, limits, blind-spots, and boundaries don't pertain merely to the individual text, or even to a historically-bounded context, but to the aesthetic logic and dynamics of literary representation as such.

Auerbach deploys this same active verb a sentence later, describing the way that "time and again the concrete vigor of the vernacular penetrates [*hervorzubrechen*]" (88). We must, once more, understand this process or action

[15] I am invoking, once more, Prendergast's key description of Auerbach's text as "monumental" and a "monument" (212). It is in the face of this dense formal core of representation that Prendergast's characterization of *Mimesis* as "non-problematical" strikes me as too limited. Such a characterization of Auerbach's work—we see it as well in Eagleton's book—is important as part of the stark opposition that is drawn, so frequently, in twentieth-century literary theory between structuralist and humanistic camps. Both Eagleton and Prendergast, in their quite brief comments, do describe Auerbach, respectively, as "a luminary of humanism" (93) and as "courageously humanist" (213). Yet they both quickly link this quality to a simple (or simple-minded) complacency about representation that justifies their very brevity.

(of vernacular speech as it strangely "penetrates" into the Latin discourse) as both Auerbach's own analytic description of mimesis (i.e., as a second-order account of *how* representation is working, or unfolding, in this particular context) and also as an activity that is itself part of what he seeks to put on view. An "event" has occurred. But this "breaking out" or penetration clearly does not take place in the story-world itself (even if we might find analogues, echoes, or negations of this kind of event within the story-world). Still less could we conceive it as something independent of the story-world, or as immanent merely to form. This palpable but unclassifiable event seems to me a crux of Auerbach's view of representation. Representation is a key term, of course, in *Mimesis* but also a process, as we've seen with the Prendergast example, that can be strangely overlooked—or too quickly taken for granted—in the reception of this text.

As I've suggested, the abundance of counterexamples in Auerbach's book is, in one sense, a manifestation of this same process within the composition of *Mimesis* itself. In this history of partial (and thus formalized) representation, marked by the inflection of heterogeneous reality into delimited form (whether a sentence, a narrative structure, a genre, etc.), each counterexample highlights, even as it is partially constituted by, the incomplete comprehension of reality which takes place, in a highly varied fashion, across an unfolding and changing array of style, syntax, and form. Almost inevitably, in reading *Mimesis*, the reader is moved to tease out such connections between the central concept of representation in the book and its own textual structure. Like much of the book, Auerbach's discussion in Chapter Four (considered as a whole, comprised of both example and counterexample) returns the reader to, even while serving as a technical anticipation of, the reading of Dante in Chapter Eight. Chapter Four contains a counter-example, in other words, but is also a counterexample itself, that bears some of the contrapuntal weight against which "Farinata and Cavalcante" unfolds. As Edward Said writes in his introduction, "Read slowly and reflectively" this chapter on Dante "is one of the great moments in modern critical literature, a masterly, almost vertiginous embodiment of Auerbach's own ideas about Dante […] truly exhilarating to read."[16] Once again, and now in terms of Auerbach's own book, this exhilaration takes place *against* the exigencies of structure. In many ways, of course, Chapter Eight does stand out in

[16] Said, xxiv, xxvi

Mimesis, but in other, equally important ways, it does not. Considering the amount of material he was handling, Auerbach's chapters are remarkably uniform in length—this seems, in fact, a quite conscious intention. We could imagine other, compelling forms that could have suggested themselves—say, a dramatic middle or *entr'acte* that would confirm the structural nature of this book in a more explicit (and overtly literary) manner; or, just some units that served to organize the twenty sections into a few larger historical blocks; or, several chapters that were privileged in significance and extended in length.

The plod of *Mimesis* might seem to either hide or disavow its structure but, in fact, broken only by the conspicuously brief Epilogue (554-557), emerges as the structure's abiding (and thus enabling) constraint. The "paratactic" form of *Mimesis* itself—chapter after chapter, of equal length, with the deliberate withholding of any initial connection—is a crucial element in developing the tension between what we could call the "Whig" and the "Viconian" tendencies of Auerbach's book, or, again, the tension between a more progressive, linear structure and a more recursive, circular one. In the linear reading of *Mimesis*, Dante and the nineteenth-century realist novel might stand out as the acmes of representation: the telos toward which the reader is pointed. (As Prendergast writes, *Mimesis* moves forward with "an over-all design and purpose: a movement in Western representational literary art away from division and conflict," 212).[17] This seems to me, again, a quite narrow way to understand the

[17] Chapter 18 is often taken as another key example, for Auerbach, along with Dante, of a fully-actualized and definitive manifestation of realism, in the nineteenth-century novel's "serious imitation of everyday life" (482). Here it is important to begin by noting, however, that Chapter 18 is divided between three writers—Stendhal, Balzac and Flaubert—and that it works by means of creating subtle discrepancies and discordances between them. The sheer tensions between these three examples drives against any stable consolidation of a realist aesthetics here, and, in fact, the dynamics of representation in each of the three examples (in part because of such forceful juxtaposition) is more fragile, unstable and idiosyncratic than we might assume or remember. "There is something unsettled about his whole nature," Auerbach writes of Stendhal (459); Balzac's more expansively realized social canvas (with "far more closeness to reality," 468) is "spectral" (472), "demonic" (473, 478), "melodramatic" (473), and "bombastic" (482); Flaubert's countervailing precision, on the other hand, has something of the enervating and compensatory concreteness that we've seen in Roman prose: "Objective seriousness, which seeks to penetrate to the depths of the passions and entanglements of a human life, *but without itself becoming moved*, or at least without betraying that it is moved—this is

formal depth and complexity of *Mimesis* itself—but reducing the formal complexity, and indeed strangeness, of the book itself perhaps goes hand in hand with assimilating Auerbach's argument into that view of representation as overly-simplistic, authoritarian or non-problematic.

To put this another way, Auerbach's insistence on the formal and partial nature of realism—and, most specifically, on the "dramatic," and thus problematic, intersections between the form and the substance of representation—tells us much about the (strange) shape and structure of his own book. If a reading like Prendergast's seems to elide the "sheer reality" or "stuff" of *Mimesis* itself, there is a very real sense in which *Mimesis* intentionally, and rather brutally, produces its own forgetting. In the perverse holding off of any conceptual frame until the Epilogue that meets the readers only after she has finished reading the book; in the disarming slenderness *of* this four-page Epilogue against the material which it aims to encompass; in the paratactic structure of the text which—like the sprawling character-system of a nineteenth-century multiplot novel—won't wrest any of its episodes into a (secured) position of centrality; in the gaps, historical but *also* argumentative, that separate each chapter: in all of these ways, the progressive unfolding of Western literary history is shadowed by a negation or loss that operates at the most profound level of the text—at the level of conceptuality and understanding itself. To read *Mimesis* is to experience not merely the happy sense of gaining conceptual hold but the bewildered sense of continually losing the specifics we have just encountered. It is not just a matter of recognizing, as we absorb Auerbach's argument, how mimetic accomplishments in one chapter are so often diminished or radically recontextualized in subsequent ones—though this is certainly the case. More fundamental, and tied into this perspectival volatility of the argument, is the *process* of our absorption itself, as the abrupt shifts from chapter to chapter—again all of diabolically equal length—propel a sustained tension, co-extensive with any reading of this text, between immersion in and withdrawal from textual specificity.

In this way, Auerbach's book actively regenerates the complicated dialectic between manifestation and loss that underlies his own theory of representation.

---

an attitude which one expects from a priest, a teacher or a psychologist rather than from an artist" (490, emphasis added).

Mimesis forces the reader him- or herself into a dramatic relationship with reading: in a continuing oscillation between conceptual grasp and (a necessary, but necessarily short-lived) immersion in textual detail. In the passage from Gregory of Tours, immediately after that crucial description of "words which break out in a moment and change the moment into a scene," Auerbach continues: "I cannot here enumerate the long series of scenes in which [Gregory] has one or two people speak in his clumsy Latin" (87), suggesting, as he does so frequently in this book, that he is only partially refracting the text (even as so many of the texts he considers struggle, in various ways, to refract or comprehend the world). But these parallel struggles are often quite complicated. If the compression of Auerbach's analysis here and elsewhere stands in tension with the literary extensiveness he addresses, at other times the analysis comes up short in relation to a compression within the literary text itself. Thus, in a notable moment during his reading of Montaigne's *Essais*, Auerbach suggests a mimetic effect that is purchased through (not against or despite) truncation. Providing the causal syntactic links often *elided* in Montaigne's own tightly argued reflection ("the syntactic vincula" and "conjunctions or quasi-conjunctional connectives," 288), Auerbach muses: "Of course my emendations are at best of approximate value. The nuances which Montaigne expresses *by omitting them* cannot be caught in full" (289, emphasis added). The normative modalities of representation are reversed here, even as "omi[ssion]" and "nuance," which we might think to oppose, are cast perilously close together. This is not the typical loss, in other words, entailed by critical reduction or abstraction (as in the Gregory of Tours example). Instead, the critical re-articulation is an imperfect, or partial, one because it offers more details than the original it seeks to comprehend. As readers we have to work to grasp the full implication of Auerbach's point—to see his reading of Montaigne, to see *through* his reading of Montaigne by supplying the "omissions" which his exegesis erased (but how can you supply an omission?), and to see, in turn**,** what is produced by these elided "omissions" in Montaigne's own intricate process of self-reflection. In this moment—and largely because it is only *a* moment, intensified, like many passages in *Mimesis*, by its own contingency, and set in relief against the "magisterial" structure it helps to constitute—writer, reader and critic are strangely fused, caught in the same intellectual "drama" of reflecting, inflecting or comprehending what lies before us. It seems to me that moments like this suggest the methodological promise that *Mimesis* still holds.