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Erich Auerbach: History and Metahistory (1988)

A comparative analysis between Auerbach and Giambattista Vico, establishing the counter-lesson which Auerbach found in Vico's work: an alternative to Cartesian positivistic philology. Thus in considering the problematic frontiers between the discourses of historiography and fiction, Auerbach's distrust of overarching conceptual frameworks, and his preference for a close analysis of single texts arranged contiguously, leads him to the use of mimesis as a metahistorical tool for the understanding of realism in literature across time. Rather than establishing a fixed model for 'realism' and applying this to literary texts from different historical periods, mimesis allows Auerbach to establish a 'constant variable' to show how the concept of 'realism' itself operates differently throughout history.

The first of three meditations on the work of Erich Auerbach included in this Special Issue – the others being "Auerbach and Literary History" (1996) and "Between Realism and Figuration: Auerbach's decentered realism" (2004) – here Costa Lima also sheds light on his own critical practices. Although Auerbach's 'mimesis' still operates under the erroneous *imitatio*, his work stands in relation to Costa Lima in a similar way that Vico stands in relation to Auerbach: as providing a creative counter-lesson.

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ERICH AUERBACH: HISTORY AND METAHISTORY

We must return, in admittedly altered circumstances, to the knowledge that prenational medieval culture already possessed: the knowledge that the spirit [*Geist*] is not national.

Erich Auerbachⁱ

I. QUESTIONS HANDLED BY THE PENCIL TO THE PAPER

More than ever, I am not sure how to start this essay. The sheet seems tacky; the pencil does not progress. The falling rain interferes with the rhythm of the words. Maybe I fear my actual reading is no longer capable of recovering the old charm in which, in front of these same pages, I used to sink twenty years ago.

After all, what is being asked of me? As no encyclopedia is paying for this, I can be sure nobody is demanding a text with polished and sterilized information. But neither must it be a slow and meditative rumination addressed to the monks of some remote monastery. Anyway, it is not enough to recognize my dilemma. The glasses must be glazed, or maybe it is that the language is foreign to my mind. As someone who hands down a message, I repeat over and over: They are asking me to write on a German-Jew romanist, Erich Auerbach, who was born in Berlin (1892), who was O. Universitätsprofessor in Marburg (1929), who was dismissed six years later from his chair and chased by the Nazis from his own country in 1936; who, forced to emigrate, taught at Istanbul State University until 1947; who was acknowledged satisfactorily only after his migration to the United States, where he taught first at Pennsylvania State University, then later at Princeton, and finally, from 1950 onward, at Yale where, in 1956, a year before his death, he was appointed Sterling Professor of Romance philology.

Nothing of this kind is difficult to find or to understand. But dates, names of countries, cities, and universities—what are they but the stuff of modern red tape? They are merely mean, and often useless, information. Fabrice del Dongo witnessed Napoleon's defeat.

What had he seen, however, except confusion, galloping horses, moans, mess, and death? What matters is how one's ideas have been fertilized.

What has Auerbach done? Materially, he did not write very much, at least by German standards. However, if we read his works carefully, we discover what his favorite poet might have called a real *selva selvaggia*: How then does one find a path that is neither too well travelled, nor too entangled? The extreme and precise refinement of his expression seduces rather than helps us. But is this accurate? If we do not want to be cheated by our own words, we must think more clearly. After all there is no hurry. No essay is capable of bettering the conditions of the world. To be sure, his verbal architecture overwhelms our strabismic eyes. Then let us mistrust the eyes! Or rather let us try to improve their field of vision. Are the eyes forbidden to think?

Auerbach taught us since his book on Dante that the comparative approach is the requisite one for nonbelievers, like himself, in what Thomas DePietro calls an "ideal existence outside of history."ⁱⁱⁱ But to whom can we compare him? To Leo Spitzer, as is usually done? To Vossler and Curtius, the other well-known romanist of his generation? To Hegel, whose ideas on history and poetry are explicitly present even in Auerbach's first book? To the most remarkable names of *Geistesgeschichte*, to whom Auerbach acknowledges his debt in one of his last texts, the "Epilegomena" to *Mimesis*? All of these paths would be possible. I prefer, however, to follow another.

II. VICO'S COUNTERLESSON

Vico was one of the first thinkers to awaken the enthusiasm of the young Berliner, who translated *La Scienza Nuova* (*The New Science*) in 1924, and who made Vico's thoughts a constant theme of his essays. But before discussing a possible correspondence between their ideas, we cannot overlook their absolute distinguishability. Auerbach's and Vico's uses of language (*parole*) are quite opposite. As his readers recognized, Vico simultaneously explored several arguments, and was often defeated by his passion to put them together. His argument was either too condensed, or it was expanded by fanciful and absurd proofs, such as those in his analysis of the etymology of gods' names and their derivations. In addition, he employed the same word both in its common sense and in a specialized one, often creating the impression that he was entangled in his own syntax. As a consequence, his treatise shows opaque spots, dark isles which challenge the good will of the explorer. This is why one could surmise that Vico, aside from being incredibly advanced for his epoch—a fact which would delay full acknowledgment of his achievement until the second half of the nineteenth century—was handicapped by his own use of language.

Isn't it more than an exercise of the imagination to assume that Auerbach drew his first lesson from that misuse of language? I am not interested in whether or not there is some passage that would endorse my supposition. Perhaps it is enough to know that it is not an absurd hypothesis. Earlier, Auerbach had translated some of Dante's and Petrarch's poems. Is it possible that we would fail to notice the disparity between the well-constructed language of these poets and, in contrast, Vico's unbalanced expression? As a sign of his mental flexibility, Auerbach was capable of seizing the respective credits of these three Italians and recognizing their respective limitations. In this way, contrary to the style of Viconian prose, Auerbach's flows with measured passion; it is "measured" because his prose has been subordinated to a plan of construction and therefore has been drawn away from the strictly individual self. Auerbach's measured passion is a keen passion, but also an ironic one, verging on the self-ironic; it is drawn from him, but not to the point of concealing him or masking his position and reasoning. Whether or not readers observe that passion—and unfortunately we cannot forget that the majority of Auerbach's readers are "busy" fellows, that is, professional scholars—they are admonished by the final words of the "Epilegomena": "One finds often in scholarly essays a sort of objectivity in which, against an author's complete unconsciousness, appear, in each word, in each trope, in each phrase, judgements and prejudices [*Urteile und Vorurteile*], and many times not only from nowadays, but from yesterday and before yesterday. *Mimesis* as a book takes for granted that it could only have been written by a given man, in a given situation, at the beginnings of the 1940s."ⁱⁱⁱ We may posit, then, that Vico's contribution to the construction of Auerbach's analyses begins with a counter-lesson: to counter Cartesian geometries or the factualism of positivistic philologists, it was not enough just to have ideas or fertile insights. In addition to these elements, it was necessary to learn how to establish verbal control of one's passions. What many years later the poet Mallarmé said to his friend Degas—that a poem is not made with ideas, but with words—would be equally valid for every text aiming at *poiesis*, that is, formed by a creative tension. To be sure, this does not mean, contrary to past and present prejudices, that the critical text must be identical to the work of art, as Auerbach was accused of believing by René Wellek: "Mr. Auerbach has the artist's skill in marshalling his materials, his sensitivity of observation, and a personal imaginative vision. But a work of scholarship and criticism can never be a work of art in the true sense of the word."^{iv}

Only a misconception of science can lead someone to mingle *poiesis* with poetry in the way Wellek does. But such a conception is so ingrained in contemporary scholarship that, if a critic does not obey the "scientific" ritual by beginning with a definition of his terms, someone will blame him for mixing the requirements of a scholarly work with those peculiar to a work of art. This kind of criticism was common among the first reviewers of *Mimesis*. Only recently have we found reflections on the most acute problems posed by Auerbach's works. It would be absurd to assume that his interpreters have become more insightful. What we can infer is that they began to employ *more fitting* parameters. During the fifties, for instance, Wellek, who was addicted to a paradigm which posited the absolute separation between scientific and poetic productions, criticized Auerbach for overstepping the bounds of science. More recently, however, Wolfgang Holdheim stresses in contrast the aesthetic qualities in Auerbach's construction of his argument: "We have a complex structure of contrast and expansion, the perspectivist variation and progression of a theme. Is this exclusively an aesthetic procedure, perhaps a series of rhetorical tricks to persuade by arousing our pleasure and interest?"^v According to the normal paradigm, Holdheim ought either to endorse Wellek's restrictions or, in modish Barthesian fashion, admire the "fiction" created by an author whose strength of *écriture* would lead him to undermine philological limits. But, in fact, this is a crude and arbitrary alternative, since it assumes that the aesthetic experience is exclusively a noncognitive activity, as art is supposed to be. But as long as *poiesis* is not confused with poetry, Auerbach's aesthetic construction, as it appears in his historical work, prompts a very different question concerning the very status of historical writing: "Is history to strive," Holdheim asks, "for an analytic, a 'scientific' ideal of cognition, seeking universally valid 'covering laws' or perhaps abstract patterns to which the wealth of its phenomena can be reduced? Or is it a form of hermeneutic understanding, with features that are related to aesthetic understanding—with *narrative* features, to be more precise?"^{vi}

The fact that Auerbach's works provoke an aesthetic response does not make them literature, nor should it be concluded that literary criticism and history are literary genres! This is a necessary conclusion only for those who finally go on to believe that history is the accurate reconstruction of what happened, exactly as it happened. If we go beyond this old, positivistic assumption, we will be better able to face the problematic frontiers between two *discourses*, that is, between two different forms of the appropriation and construction of reality: historiographical and fictional discourses.

Although this is not a suitable place to pursue this reflection,^{vii} any corroborative analysis of Auerbach must begin with an emphasis on his use of language. Hence it is necessary to reiterate: Vico is in Auerbach even where one would least expect it—in the disparity between their respective forms of composition. But this

disparity stems from the same assumption: *poiesis* is not an exclusive gift of a certain higher discourse. The opposite of *poiesis* is not science, but routine. If Auerbach did not agree with Vico's way of composition, it was not only because he possessed a better understanding of the ancient world, which would prevent him from endorsing Vico's fanciful mistakes, but also (and rather) because he felt he had to forcefully establish the connection between intuition, language, and passion in a different way.

Having clarified the approach to be followed, it is now possible to study the changes which the Viconian *Scienza* undergoes before its incorporation in Auerbach.

III. VICO AND AUERBACH

It would be useless to summarize the whole of Vico's *La Scienza Nuova*, because its importance to our romanist is basically limited to the first part, the "Libro Primo." However, it is necessary to emphasize those principles which the German philologist considered to be substantive ones. His 1936 essay, "Giambattista Vico und die Idee der Philologie," may serve as a good guide. Auerbach singles Vico out because he offers a point of departure which was not contingent upon Descartes's geometric method: "The most important of his discoveries, from which has stemmed all the others and the resultant whole, is man's knowledge in earlier times of his social state. In the middle of rational Utopias, in the atmosphere of the first Enlightenment, he was the first to give birth to a concrete image of the spiritual structure of the so-called primitive man."^{viii} Auerbach's target was not so much Cartesianism itself, as it was contemporary currents indirectly derived from it: factualistic empiricism, scientific evolutionism, and positivism—all rooted in the philological practice of the nineteenth century. Auerbach was also impressed by the Viconian conception of language and the role which poetry played in it: "His conception of language presupposes the notion that the language of primitive man represented the things themselves and that he thought he possesses them by the expression (*una lingua che naturalmente significasse or else a parlare fantastico per sostanza animate*)"^{ix}

In sum, the Neapolitan thinker emerged from his obscure existence to offer the German romanist a conception of history that transcended the method of the natural sciences, and he offered a theory of language that did not consider the word a mere vehicle of reason, but instead stressed the necessity of the poetic. Why precisely would such a conception impress Auerbach? To begin with, Vico's renown came several decades before Auerbach's recognition of him. In an essay that looks for a means of separating Vico from Hegel, Pietro Piovani, for instance, feels he must begin by recognizing the significance of Hegel's influence (as promulgated by Victor Cousin's teachings) for the affirmation of Vico's work in Europe: "Anyone seeking to deny the debts that Vico's nineteenth-century fame owed to Hegel and Hegelianism would only fall into error and give evidence of an intrinsic bad taste."^x But it was not only Hegel who was seen to have been anticipated by Vico's thought. For someone who grew up in German culture, it would be impossible to overlook the links with Herder and the Schlegels, as well as the anticipation of *Verstehen* philosophy and historicism. Is it possible to say, by chance, that Vico's significance for Auerbach arose from the fact that the Berliner philologist found in Vico's work the pristine source of his own *Bildung*? As a matter of fact, that thesis would be very incomplete. To be sure, the German cultural horizon weighed heavily on Auerbach's choice. In order for us to understand that influence fully, however, it must be supplemented by more personal considerations.

Auerbach received his first postdoctoral diploma in law from Heidelberg University in 1913. Soon afterward, he was drafted into military service and fought in the First World War. When he returned home, Auerbach gave up the previous career, one that seemed best suited to his well-to-do family situation. Then he began to study Romance philology and earned his doctoral degree in 1921. As Geoffrey Green comments: "Quite possibly the violence and horrors of the war contributed to the disillusionment and cynicism that would motivate a person to alter the order of his life."^{xi} Facing his second professional choice when no longer an adolescent, Auerbach understandably felt a strong need for an epistemological ground for his career. Just as Spitzer rebelled against the positivistic orientation he inherited from Meyer-Lübke and shocked the philologist's common sense by concentrating on contemporary poetry and—supreme scandal—by attaching Freud to his analyses, Auerbach opted less for a conspicuous act of provocation to the *bonne société* than a radical choice: to discover and to explore the basis of the science he had elected. Vico furnishes the sought-after answer, as much by his autonomous theories of history and language as by his theory of the interrelationship between history, language, and poetry. There are phenomena, Vico says, that don't belong to the search for the *verum*, but for the *certum*, that is, that don't rely on philosophy, but on philology. As will become clear later in this essay, if the search for *verum* depends on reason for its ability to comprehend the nature of the world, then the category of *certum*, in contrast, appears in a more modest way: in people's habits, values, and traditions. The *certum*, therefore, doesn't stem from the reflexive power of reason but from an autonomous source, which Vico called the *sensus communis generis humani*. So long as Vico grounded philology in the *certum*, so long as its exercise imparted

dignity to anthropological and historical matters, and so long as it was separated from the necessary basis of philosophy (and, because separated from *Verstehen* philosophy, separated from the natural sciences as well), then the claims for both the nonexclusivity of reason and the intimate interrelationship between history and poetry were justified. Thus, Vico had legitimized for Auerbach why the concern for poetry could not be separated from the concern for history. This is why there is no contradiction in his well-known statement: "My purpose is always to write history."^{xii}

Even these various considerations, however, have strict limits in their ability to form a complex analytical approach. It is necessary to add that to submit the *certum* to the *sensus communis* means at once that the same dignity is offered to every historical object and period. This is due to the fact that otherness is not located in a different position from the "I"; instead, both are merged in the same atmosphere: "He not only discovered himself in the otherness, but otherness in himself: he discovered himself, men in general, in the history and, therefore, forces of our nature that were buried long ago were revealed to him."^{xiii} In sum, rather than following the program of positivistic philology, Auerbach gained from Vico an epistemological ground for his field, a ground that was not only apt for methodological development, but also included an ethical dimension. To face poetry historically does not mean, as it has often been believed, experiencing it "from the outside," that is, as serving or corresponding to social institutions, or "from the inside," that is, without relation with the external world, as a bare and noble testimony of individual idiosyncrasy and verbal skill. Rather, facing poetry historically identifies the twisting line by which the poet's voice belongs to social and cultural otherness and shows how that otherness takes form in it.

Have we found what we are looking for? No—for the time being this is an insufficient result. Without Thelonijs Monk's fingers, there is no other means but to try a new version of our "Round Midnight." We must face the *Scienza Nuova* itself.

IV. LA NUOVA ARTE CRITICA

Even before publishing the final version of the *Scienza Nuova* in 1744, Vico posited the existence of an irremovable dualism between two classes of objects: those which are made by man, such as his cities, his institutions, his own language, and those created by God, such as the world other than man himself. Although he was far from positing the subsequent difference between *verum* and *certum* in the way he does in his masterpiece, Vico had, according to Isaiah Berlin, "broken the spell of Cartesianism from which he had begun" as early as the beginning of the century.^{xiv} He accomplished that using the argument that the geometrical method was an inadequate tool for encompassing human achievements. His concern for philology, then, was not restricted to the pages of his most famous book. In any case, it is interesting to ask what Vico understood philology to be. In fact, the limits he conceived were much broader than the dimensions fixed by the nineteenth century. In his words, philology supposes "the doctrine of all the institutions that depend on human choice; for example, all histories of the languages, customs, and deeds of peoples in war and peace."^{xv}

Later in the same paragraph Vico states that when philosophy attempts to examine philology it "has had almost a horror of treating [it] . . . because of the deplorable obscurity of causes and almost infinite variety of effects" (*NS* 6). Despised then by philosophers, philology as Vico conceived it was the nucleus toward which all the research concerning human artifacts might converge. And as long as philosophers confronted philology with horror or with unsuitable methods, its approach could only be conceived in a quite new critical way. Book One, with the subtitle "Establishment of Principles," is devoted to this task. But why, instead of emphasizing the dualism between divine creation and human artifacts, would not Vico undertake their unification under a new philosophy? Why was philosophy doomed to be so restrictive? The implicit answer can be found in the famous paragraph X: "Philosophy contemplates reason, whence comes knowledge of the true; philology observes that of which human choice is author, whence comes consciousness of the certain" (*NS* 63). Be that as it may, the last part of the same paragraph emphasizes that the author did not intend these two areas to remain separated forever: "This same axiom shows how the philosophers failed by half in not giving certainty to their reasonings by appeal to the authority of the philologists, and likewise how the latter failed by half in not taking care to give their authority the sanction of truth by appeal to the reasoning of the philosophers" (*NS* 63).

Thus, after maintaining methodological autonomy, philosophy and philology might support one another. However, the desired interrelation could not interfere with the fundamental difference between their respective objectives. As a reply to the question stated above, one could say that for Vico there was not a possibility of unification a priori because (a) philosophy could not dismiss its basic instrument, reason; and (b) for its part, reason is not sufficient to grasp the meaning of human artifacts, from the establishment of a language to the development of political acts and commercial undertakings. A shadowy zone interposes itself between reason

and man-made products. Now whenever philosophers have tried to think about such shadows (as in Plato's *Sophist*), they have rejected them and lumped them in with the unstable and polymorphous phenomena. As a result, philosophy has identified shadows with whatever has not deserved its noble attention.

What we have called shadows—that is, nonlegitimated philosophical space—would otherwise be labeled by Vico as affection, passion, and the use of force. As paragraph CXI states: "The certain in the laws [*leggi*] is an obscurity of judgment backed only by authority, so that we find them harsh in application, yet are obliged to apply them just because they are certain. In good Latin *certum* means particularized, or, as the schools say, individuated; so that, in overelegant Latin, *certum* and *commune*, the certain and the common, are opposed to each other" (NS 93). This fragment^{xvi} implies so many questions that it is possible only to provide a sketch of them. First, to grasp this passage's meaning it is necessary to remember that when Vico refers to *leggi* he is considering them in toto, that is, not only those suitable for a rational age, but also those enacted since the remotest eras of mankind. Both forms of laws exhibit the same hindrance to knowledge: they are not explained as effects of some universal cause, but are supported by the force of the authority that states them and/or enacts them. Second, thanks to the force that justifies them, the laws are not valid for all human communities. On the contrary, their incidence is a particularized one. Therefore, the *leggi* belong to the *certum* and not to the general *verum*. That is why they are not common to all. (It is curious to see the parallel between Plato's and Vico's reflections: the Greek philosopher takes the condemnation of shadows as a basis for the condemnation of mimesis; for Vico, accepting the fact that human laws are based on force and passion—which, like shadows, are not well grasped by reason—will result in acknowledging poetry's social role. Truth is no longer identified with a single standard but is conditioned by a necessarily bifurcated knowledge.)

The commentary above already allows us to see that the reflection on the *certum*, assuming the enhancement of historical object, implies a conception of history—a relativistic conception of history. Several "fragments" can be read in the same light. Paragraph XIV, for example, establishes the particularity of social laws: "The nature of institutions [*cose*] is nothing but their coming into being (*nascimento*) at certain times and in certain guises. Whenever the time and guise are thus and so, such and not otherwise are the institutions that come into being" (NS 64). The meaning of social institutions cannot be separated from the careful examination of the time in which they arose. Human institutions are not *reasonable* products but *historical* deeds. How then could they favor research grounded on the *verum*. As Isaiah Berlin, one of Vico's best interpreters, has said: "his boldest contribution, the concept of 'philology,' anthropological historicism, the notion that there can be a science of mind which is the history of its development, the realization that ideas evolve, that knowledge is not a static network of eternal, universal, clear truths, either Platonic or Cartesian, but a social process, that this process is traceable through (indeed, is in a sense identical with) the evolution of symbols—words, gestures, pictures, and their altering patterns, functions, structures, and uses—this transforming vision, [is] one of the greatest discoveries in the history of thought."^{xvii}

We must recognize, however, that this is but one side of the Viconian conception. As we have already said, Vico required that philology would eventually harmonize with philosophy, even if the object of philology was to maintain an autonomous status. Now, if social institutions are not explained outside of their historical conditions, and if, therefore, dogmatic appraisals and a priori judgments are necessarily abjured, how could one make use of some metahistorical criterion? How, in other words, could philology harmonize with a noncontingent analysis, that is, with philosophy? Vico anticipates this earnest question, which will later confront relativism, and which will also be found in Auerbach's work. But why was metahistory necessary for Vico, and why did it become a serious problem? To understand these questions, let us begin by observing how Vico reaches beyond the circle of relativism ("circle" seems to be an appropriate word because relativism supposes each epoch is circumscribed in itself). In order to escape from the circle, Vico employs two kinds of arguments: (a) those encapsulated in a reflection on human history, and (b) those grounded in the intervention of divine providence. Before the rational era, to which philosophers had confined themselves until Vico's day, men were wild, rude, and greedy creatures. With only these characteristics, *l'umana generazione* would have disappeared from the earth. But these destructive components were acted upon by *la legislazione*, which transforms the vices themselves into virtues: "Legislation considers man as he is in order to turn him to good uses in human society. Out of ferocity, avarice, and ambition, the three vices which run throughout the human race, it creates the military, merchant, and governing classes, and thus the strength, riches, and wisdom of commonwealths. Out of these three great vices, which could certainly destroy all mankind on the face of the earth, it makes civil happiness" (NS 62). This transforming principle, the same passage adds, "proves that there is divine providence and further that it is a divine legislative mind." The divine spark respects the human order, and it takes advantage of the human psyche to transmute its irrationality into a legislating principle. That way, if laws are always particularized rules, beneath their necessary diversity lies a common and positive impulse.

Whereas paragraph VII stresses the divine origin of the legislating principle, paragraph XII emphasizes the corresponding human response: "Common sense is judgment without reflection, shared by an entire class, an entire people, an entire nation, or the entire human race" (NS 63). To define *senso comune* as *un giudizio senz'alcuna riflessione*, that, in short, covers all *gener umano*, is to say that common sense preceded the stage of conscious reflection—that it was present in the current of centuries flowing from *gli autori delle nazioni medesime*, until the poets of *teogonia naturale* (NS Bk. 2, §VI).

Vico's historical measuring is not so important as the fact that the presence of such common sense was a product of a trend against brutality and egotism. How could this trend arise but from divine providence? Vico clearly affirms it. That is why he can declare that the criterion operating in his *arte critica is insegnato delta provvidenza divina, comune a tutte le nazioni; ch'è'l senso comune d'esso gener umano* (taught by divine providence and common to all nations, namely the common sense of the human race) (NS 104). So what seemed to be an iron circle, where the interpretation of historical material was contained within the limits of a relativistic approach, becomes now a delta, where specifically historical material and transhistorical constancies are blended. It is only through this intermingling that we may grasp, without violating the Viconian text, the double movement of his *Scienza Nuova*. The first movement, the particularizing one, seems already well explained. The second can be almost immediately inferred, and is suggested by the sequence of Vico's discussion. The passage transcribed above is followed by this:

Our Science therefore comes to describe at the same time an ideal eternal history traversed in time by the history of every nation in its rise, development, maturity, decline, and fall. Indeed, we make bold to affirm that he who meditates this Science narrates to himself this ideal eternal history so far as he himself makes it for himself by that proof "it had, has, and will have to be." For the first indubitable principle posited above is that this world has certainly been made by men, and its guise must therefore be found within the modifications of our own human mind. (NS 104)

Vico assumes that there is a continuity between divine and human orders. Therefore, narrated history encompasses both the particularized and the eternal plans. Vico does not conceive of divinity as a sort of overarching power, a *condottiere* that at every moment would interfere with human business. The human competence to narrate the *certum* arises from the assumption that the particular profile of institutions necessarily stems from *le modificazioni della nostra medesima mente umana*. Or, as it is paraphrased in the next sentence, "history cannot be more certain than when he who creates the things also narrates them." Its narrator is at the same time its creator, and thus, since his mind is an unchanged source, he who narrates history always finds in human institutions its common root. Hence man is historically defined by his *virtuality*—the agent of these modifications; the divine seal discloses itself in the verification of those changes which are not aimless or arbitrary modifications. It is from this divine presence in man that common sense and *una lingua mentale comune a tutte le nazioni* (NS 67) arise.^{xviii} Thus, the Viconian historical man is at the same time in possession of free will and subject to divine order. It would be an idle task to ponder the cyclical nature of eternal history (symptomatically also called a *teologia civile ragionata della prov-vedenza divina*), or the reasons for its phases: "The nature of peoples is first crude, then severe, then benign, then delicate, finally dissolute" (NS 79).

For the Neapolitan thinker, this question might dictate an attempt to depict the unconquerable divine *verum*, and that would be a futile temptation. But our intention is not to harass Vico for positing harmony between the intrinsically historical profile and its everlasting succession. Our interest is only to understand the links established between them in order to depict an intellectual background for Auerbach's reflection.

For our purpose it is an equally important endeavor to analyze the role Vico has reserved for the mythopoetical object. It is well recognized that the first practical consequence of the *Scienza Nuova* was to widen the margins of historical research. Without the idea of prehistory at his disposal, Vico assumed human history did not begin with rational times, which he took to be an age of prose. Several centuries had elapsed before the coming of rational times. The knowledge of the past would remain lost if we would not learn to understand the poet's language. According to Vico, the first men were incapable of rational strength. But they were able, through their own ignorance, to wonder about the phenomena which they could not explain in intellectual terms. Wonder and curiosity, both daughters of ignorance (compare §§XXXV and XXXIX; NS 71), lead them to want to know, despite being unaccustomed to rational commitments, what such a thing could mean (*che tal cosa voglia dire*). For this purpose, they disposed of the strength of imagination (*fantasia*), which "is more robust in proportion as reasoning power weak" (§XXXVI; NS 71). Here Vico appeals to an image whose dreadful legacy has been damaging until now—the idea that these first men were children: "and it is characteristic of children to take inanimate things in their hands and talk to them in play as if they were living persons" (NS 71). From there, as the same passage indicates, can be derived the spontaneous trait of primitive poetry. Poetry rises from a dawnlike energy. This poetical magma erupts and coalesces in the first mythologies. Therefore, these

mythologies cannot be taken as distorted images, obvious mistakes, or capriciousnesses born from the will to beautify the world. We must perceive them as just the opposite, as *istorie civile de'primi popoli*.

As long as primitive men, *gli uomini del mondo fanciullo*, were unable to philosophize, they were poets. We might wonder, however, what surety of truthfulness their fables would offer us. For Vico, it was the same security that children offer in their imitation: although they lack conceptual capacity, they excel in the ability to simulate reality. Thus, mythologies are trustworthy, even if they don't precisely document the institution they portray. And this because, as poetical characters are "imaginative class concepts or universals" (*generi o universali fantastici*), they transform in "certain models or ideal portraits" (*a certi modelli, o pure retratti ideali*) "all the particular species which resembled them" (NS 74). Primitive poetic imitation is valuable for the philologist because its *faber*, unable to lie or deceive, accomplished the childish drive to imitate that which aroused his curiosity. Therefore Vico legitimizes the mythopoetic and lends to poetry a character that is in opposition to the decorative principle enunciated by neoclassicism.

Contrary to the neoclassical conception of poetry as an idle entertainment and a kind of eloquence, Vico's view of poetry is that it serves as a political tool for the constitution of primitive societies. Its goal was accomplished as long as it fulfilled these requirements successfully: "(1) to invent sublime fables suited to the popular understanding, (2) to perturb to excess, with a view to the end proposed: (3) to teach the vulgar to act virtuously, as the poets have taught themselves" (NS 117).

In this manner Vico not only made an invaluable contribution to the advance of philology and the theory of history, but he also unintentionally offered a fertile path for a quite different reflection on poetry. Let us quickly specify the traits that are put in relief here. If Vico follows the classical tradition in designating poetry as imitation, he distinguishes it strongly, however, from "adult" imitation, that is, that which is done with the desire for verisimilitude, for repetition of a pattern already known. Viconian imitation has no commitment to truth; it is the daughter of fantasy and the mother of wisdom. Although the neoclassical prejudice had indirectly nurtured his idea of poetry as a product of a rationally inferior phase, Vico taught us to look for its kernel in something distinct from mere reason. If we forget the phases of his ideal and eternal history and emphasize instead his definition of poetic characters as *universali fantastici*, we will better understand his leap, which Auerbach himself understood in a remarkable way.

Vico transcended his times when he stated that poetry's appropriate concern consists in transforming the impossible into the believable (*l'impossibile credibile*). And what can we say of the beginning of paragraph XXXVII but that it strikes at the heart of the matter? "The most sublime labor of poetry is to give sense and passion to insensate things" (NS 71). These three striking traits of poetic labor can tell us why poetic form is better able than other forms, such as philosophical or scientific ones, to free itself from the manner in which it was conceived and received by its contemporaries, and become renewed by the response it gets from different epochs and even different cultures. Aristotle could not and cannot be read but as a philosopher. Homer, however, was a thinker and the founder of Greek *paideia* before becoming the forefather of Western poetry. After these principles have been established, it seems easier to analyze Auerbach's use of them. But something is still missing. We already know how, according to Vico, the study of history and poetry are deeply interrelated, and why the philologist may trust them. We can then dismiss the most fragile part of the Viconian program: the idea that history follows a predetermined rhythm. Considered by itself, this point is moot. Nevertheless, it requires our reflection. At the very least, we must ask at what point the Viconian conception of history is not a continuist conception. One could expect such a statement to be received with a disdainful smile. The conception of history as a continuous process is clear enough to those who fight for the idea of progress, as it was systematically laid out by the French Enlightenment. But no one would say that anything similar appears in Vico. Be that as it may, David Bidney has observed that "the basic principle of a law of historical development is present first in Vico, then in Kant, and finally in Comte and Tylor and their followers."^{xix}

The idea of a law of historical development, with the succession and exhaustion of phases until the cycle is over, is a variant of the conception of history as continuity. The fundamental gesture in viewing history as continuous is not so much the refusal to acknowledge substantial differences in temporally distinct behaviors and values, as it is the claim that it is possible to subsume those differences in a continuous and progressively congruent whole. In other words, the concept of continuity implies that different appraisals and behaviors must not be taken as irreparable gaps. To be sure, man's internalization of the divine project, as revealed by common sense, accomplishes just this function. That is to say, Viconian continuity is expressed precisely in the aspect we usually would consider a dead one. But are not the dead capable of metamorphosis?

V. AUERBACH: A SHORT PATH

If we compare Auerbach's first book, *Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt* (1929; translated as *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*), with *Mimesis* (1946) and *Literatursprache und Publikum in der lateinischen Spätantike und im Mittelalter* (1958; translated as *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*), we find a strange thing: as he grows older, Auerbach loses confidence in the capacity of conceptual tools, and he increasingly puts more trust in the enlightening force of the interpretation of single texts. In reply to reviewers of *Mimesis*, he said, "If it were possible, I would have given up any general expressions, and rather would have suggested the thought to the reader, from the mere presentation of a sequence of single texts."^{xx} His answer could not please his critics, if we can assume they understood it. Wellek, in his paradigmatic review, charged that Auerbach's "extreme reluctance to define his terms and to make his suppositions clear from the outset, has impaired the effectiveness of the book."^{xxi}

The same criticism is repeated two years later by another scholar, Charles Muscatine: "I find myself in agreement with those who have found the book, in large, strikingly ambivalent. Auerbach's 'reality' is sometimes dynamic, its nature different in different times and places, and sometimes it is more fundamental, universally valid."^{xxii}

One might surmise that a closer colleague, Leo Spitzer, would be the first to be critical. While in the commentary reproduced below, Spitzer is not referring to *Mimesis*—which was then still being written—his statements delineate a sharp contrast with Auerbach's direction. In criticizing the dissecting method of A. O. Lovejoy's attempt to specify some traits of German Romanticism and reveal them to be a part of a Nazi platform(!), Spitzer admonished that "there is, of course, a certain violence done in cutting out of the flow of time a particular period, marked by various traits, and subsuming these under a label. *But such violence is in the nature of the classifying function of language.*"^{xxiii} The question becomes more intricate when we remember that, in a well-known passage, Auerbach, after acknowledging his debt to his friend and colleague, added that their respective methods were different because their goals diverged: "Spitzer's interpretations are always concerned primarily with an exact understanding of the individual linguistic form, the particular work or author . . . [while] my purpose is always to write history" (LL 19—20).

So it is Spitzer, the advocate of individualized forms, who maintains the usefulness of general categories such as romanticism, with the proviso that they be seen in their original contexts. And by contrast it is the philologist interested in a collective interpretation who mistrusts "general expressions." It is as though we were being left in a puzzle. If, however, we are possessed of the necessary patience to think over Auerbach's essays, and if, above all, we don't forget the relationship Vico sets out between relativism and continuity in history, we may disentangle the apparent Gordian knot. Let us try.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, only an extremely stubborn evolutionist would support the Viconian diachronical order of the ages of poetry and prose. As Auerbach himself observed, "Of course, the opinion that only primitive or prehistoric civilizations are capable of producing poetry is a prejudice: the dialectic relation between imagination and reason is not a purely temporal succession, and the two do not exclude each other; very often they collaborate, and reason may well enrich imagination."^{xxiv} We can be sure that Auerbach was not concerned with this kind of historicism. For him, the remarkable pages of *Scienza Nuova* were those dealing with the relations between what is particular and what is constant in history. The question was already well posed in his earlier book on Dante: as Dante and his contemporaries lacked a historical consciousness, they did not confront—nor would a next Petrarch—the question of a cultural difference that would separate their time from Augustan Rome. For this reason, the Latin poet could appear to Dante to share the same mentality, to partake of the same values, without problems of communication between the earthly traveller and his celestial guide. But when we acknowledge the relativity of times and cultures, we proceed otherwise: "We possess at least a relatively better understanding of past or foreign cultures and are able to adapt ourselves to them rather than to take the opposite course like Dante; we are able, for a limited period and without binding ourselves, to accept strange forms and presuppositions very much as one accepts the rules of a game, and we do so in the hope of acquiring the feel of strange countries and their institutions and of learning to enjoy their art."^{xxv}

Since our relationship with the Florentine poet is quite a different one from that which he maintained with Virgil, how may we yet understand him? Auerbach's answer does not yield to despair. Given the *Einfühlung* to accept what is culturally diverse and strange, given the capacity historicism has allowed us, we, as relativists, are now in a better position to empathize with Dante than Dante himself was with Virgil. Auerbach soon recognizes, however, that this would be too easy a solution to offer as a sufficient answer—a solution that indeed would spoil a good question. For this reason, he restates it in sharper terms: "Can a modern reader, even

if he is supremely learned and endowed with the highest degree of historical empathy, penetrate to Dante if he is utterly unwilling to accept Dante's mode of thought?" (D 158). To be sure, he adds, all great works are subject to strenuous changes in their process of reception. But these changes are not infinite ones, since "where the form of admiration becomes too arbitrary, they refuse to go along" (D 159). And he ends this reflection by formulating a reply that is diametrically opposed to his previous answer: "It *seems* to me that with regard to the *Divine Comedy* such a limit has almost been attained when philosophical commentators begin to praise its so-called poetic beauties as a value in themselves and reject the system, the doctrine, and indeed the entire subject matter as irrelevancies which if anything call for a certain indulgence" (D 159).

In other words, such philosophical admiration for Dante hides an arbitrariness whenever it neglects a poem's historico-theological background and submits it to our own conception of poetry as an autonomous sphere. Certainly Auerbach's intention was not to propose that the reader become an expert in scholasticism and Thomism in order to appreciate Dante's poem. But a necessary respect for the relativity of values would furnish, for an adequate interpretation, enough knowledge of Dante's intellectual concerns. In sum, Auerbach's statement does not call historical continuity into question; however, he does not agree that a proof of it would come from the sheer feeling of empathy and derived understanding. Nor does the passage state that we could appraise Dante only if we "acted" like his contemporaries. Auerbach does not believe in such mystical transmigrations. For him it was unthinkable that one could transcend one's own historical limits. Therefore his position is quite the opposite: since there is an unquestionable difference between the life orientations of remote ages such as Dante's and our own, is there a possible common ground? If so, then can we bridge our temporal seclusion? For Auerbach, a bridge could be built from the constitution of our horizon of the past, and then, from our acknowledgment of the echo the past evokes in us. That is, against an anachronistic reception of Dante, the choice is neither to misrepresent nor to seize the *real* Dante. In historical terms, truth does not imply a return to the same glorious origin, which would then be redeemed by our reconstitution of past times. Truth is always displaced according to new temporal values and parameters. Truth is not that stable unity so praised by Plato; instead, it has acquired a *mouvance* that is similar to the uncertainties of shadows.^{xxvi}

In the aforementioned passage, the formulation of the question is more relevant than the answer it receives. This question shows us that Auerbach is conscious of the fact that the interrelationship Vico has proposed, although we no longer agree with his formulation, is not an old-fashioned issue or concern. And precisely because we disagree with the providential solution, the Viconian question becomes a very critical one. Aware of its seriousness, Auerbach was not satisfied with the empathic solution that Schleiermacher's romantic hermeneutics favored. Therefore it is no wonder that when the question reappeared in the introduction to his last book, he paraphrased it in Viconian terms:

It is a grave mistake to suppose that historical relativism results in an eclectic incapacity for judgment, and that judgment must be based on extrahistorical standards. Historicism has nothing to do with eclecticism. To grasp the special nature of an epoch or a work, to perceive the nature of the relations between works of art and the time in which they were created, is an endless problem which each of us, exerting the utmost concentration, must endeavor to solve for himself and from his own point of view. For historical relativism is relative in two respects—of the material and of those who are striving to understand it. It is a radical relativism, but that is no reason to fear it. The area in which we move in this effort at understanding is the world of men, to which we ourselves belong. This gives us every reason to believe that our problem is open to solution, for *dentro le modificazioni della medesima nostra mente umana* it must be possible to find all forms of human life. (LL 12—13)

To acknowledge the strict limits of epochs, to assert the relativity of their values and of the values of the analyst as well, does not compromise our own capacity to understand and judge, because these were modifications of a mind constantly unchangeable. In other words, the human mind is the source of an articulating capacity, and so we will always find it in the diverse combinatorial solutions that identify different epochs. Beneath these choices, there lies a *lingua mentale comune*. And, suddenly, it looks as though we have understood better why Auerbach progressively mistrusted "general expressions," those institutionalized clichés, and preferred the close analysis of single texts. The intuitive capacity of the analyst who chooses them and reads them, together with his previous historical knowledge, are the necessary conditions for guaranteeing the singularity of the texts and, at the same time, the continuity that flows through them. This belief is consubstantiated in *Mimesis* and in the metamorphosis to which realism is subjected. To Auerbach, it made no sense to fix a concept of realism and then chart its passage through history. However, to be able to talk about metamorphoses, one must possess a constant variable. In order to know the constancy invested in Auerbachian realism, we need to understand the principle which supports it: mimesis.

VI. MIMESIS AS AN OPERATING CATEGORY IN *DANTE ALS DICHTER DER IRDISCHEN WELT*

Chapter 1 of Auerbach's book on Dante constitutes his largest theoretical text. Entitled "Historical Introduction: The Idea of Man in Literature," it presents a reflection on the Western poetological tradition. Still trusting in the power of concepts, and delving into classical antiquity, Auerbach does his best to get the operational key that would unify the representation of man in literature. That key is mimesis, derived from Heraclitus's fragment: "A man's character is his fate." According to Auerbach's proposed interpretation, this means that each fate is not a fortuitous one: one's character works as the basis of his misery, fortune, or *mediocritas*. Several years afterward, and independently of Auerbach, Jorge Luis Borges proposed the same idea concerning his relationship with his fictional creatures: "In my short experience as a narrator, I have learned that to know how a character talks means to know who he is; that to discover an intonation, a voice, a peculiar syntaxis, is to have discovered a fate."^{xxvii}

Therefore, mimesis does not imply the adjustment of the fictional creatures with respect to the external world; it does not stem from "the probability or credibility of the events" it embraces, but rather from how the author actualizes his narrative. It is "the poet's fantasy [that] creates the character and his fate." However, in order for the creative operation to be effective, it is necessary that character and fate be interdependent components "whose unity is present even before observation begins" (D 2). The fictional creation thus becomes "convincing regardless of whether such a thing has ever been seen or of whether or not it is credible" (D 2).

From these features, we trace the following proposition; at least in the Western world, literature, since its Greek beginnings, was understood as a kind of imitation characterized not by its similarity to something previously known or verifiable, but rather by its means of narration, that is, by a construction in language, through which the solidarity that the individual character maintains as to his probable fate is actualized and becomes convincing. Where this is verifiable, we have the right to talk of literature. But we might immediately wonder whether or not the author is taking the response to this conviction as a nontemporal response. The initial example, Homer, enlarges this suspicion: no epoch that knew his epics rejected him. Could not one therefore think that this would be the glorious fate of great literary works, or, at least the actualized fate of the first "poet"? The next pages of *Dante als Dichter* show that its author would not partake of such a naive philistinism. Auerbach observes that the a priori unity of the individual character is already lost with the Sophists. Thus, before the golden age of Greek culture, a break had been introduced. Considering this, why, then, does the author hold to individual character as his point of departure? For Auerbach, essentially because of Plato's legacy. Paradoxically, it would have been Plato who better understood the poets for concluding that they be banished from the ideal city. Similarly, it is he who would have taught us to praise their relevance: "It was Plato who bridged the gap between poetry and philosophy; for, in his work, appearance, despised by his Eleatic and Sophist predecessors, became a reflected image of perfection. He set poets the task of writing philosophically, not only in the sense of giving instruction, but in the sense of striving, by the limitation of appearance, to arrive at its true essence and to show its insufficiency measured by the beauty of the Idea" (D 5). And the paradox goes deeper, as Auerbach takes the Aristotelian attempt to save mimesis from Platonic condemnation as an inability to grasp it. In opposition to the "mythical illumination of the happening," Aristotelian rationalism approached tragedy with the aim of correcting it, instead of seizing its spirit: "To his mind the disorder and disunity of actual happening do not stem from the inadequacy of the eyes that look upon it, but are present in happening itself, so that the poet must create a happening superior to actual happening and tragedy must present a correction of actual events" (D 8).

As a result of this narrowly rationalistic view, the fusing of character and fate were menaced again. As a matter of fact, according to Auerbach's restrictive interpretation, for many centuries Aristotle's lesson was imposed on Western culture: "A rationalistic negation of fate was the prevailing attitude of antiquity from Aristotle to the triumph of Christianity and the mystery religions; that was just as true of the Stoics who, in their necessary order of the world, equated reason with nature, as of the Epicureans with their metaphysical concept of freedom; and both those philosophies culminated in an ethical ideal which insulated the individual against his fate" (D 9). But there was not a single current or a mere confluence of currents that would lead to an identical attitude. If the late rationalism ruled in Rome, it was not enough to hinder Virgil and Tacitus, in whom "the creative imagination overcame the fatelessness inherent in the philosophical style of the age, and then there emerged an image of actuality as a priori unity" (D 9). Auerbach is not suggesting that the idea of unity remained immovable, as if history could not undermine its profile; neither is he suggesting that the idea of an insoluble unity was preserved as such—that it was submerged, as among the Sophists, or that it endured a subterranean existence punctuated by rare eruptions and sproutings, as occurred under the domination of Greek rationalism. No, according to Auerbach, the unity itself changes and, at the same time, it keeps a crucial trait: the double attraction between events that spin the fate and the character that selects them, as if the character possessed an orienting magnet. The maintenance of that constancy is the reason for the following commentary on Christianity:

The drama of earthly life took on a painful, immoderate, and utterly unclassical intensity, because it is at once a wrestling with evil and the foundation of God's judgment to come. In diametrical opposition to the ancient feeling, earthly self-abnegation was no longer regarded as a way from the concrete to the abstract, from the particular to the universal. . . . Not only is Christian humility far more compelling and more concrete, one might almost say more worldly, than Stoic apathy, but through awareness of man's inevitable sinfulness, it also does far more to intensify man's awareness of his *unique, inescapable personality*. (D 14, my italics)

In opposition to Vico, Auerbach suggests that the changes suffered by an element, in this case the representation of an individual life, do not provoke a forceful deterioration. Whereas ancient mimesis assumes a static conception (according to Auerbach in *Mimesis*), Christ's history and his legacy break with the distinction between sublime and low styles. The consequence of this dissolution is the deepening interest in everything that concerns individual life. Human behavior is no longer predictable in terms of an individual's social position, as it had been until the time of Tacitus. Humiliation and rudeness are no longer separated from tragic fates, so that God's son will eventually be put on the same level as criminals and thieves, and His most cherished disciples will be recruited from the lowest strata of society. The Christian sublime breaks the division of styles and genres that was present in the ancient world. This happens precisely because Christianity posits a new vision of existence. However, neither the consequent fusion of styles nor the equalization of lives propagated by Christian doctrine were completely preserved. Neoplatonic spiritualism and Christian heresies appear as countercurrents that were able to destroy the simultaneous interest in individual fate and the world in which this interest is inscribed. Auerbach bestows on Augustine a position which resembles that occupied by Virgil and Tacitus in the ancient world: "By his analytical investigation of consciousness, he preserved the unity of the personality; with his metaphysical speculation, he saved the idea of a personal God; and in his teleological history of the world he saved the reality of earthly happening" (D 17). But the cherished unity seems to disappear again. Between the end of the Roman empire and the early Middle Ages, the transfiguration of concrete reality is given up on behalf of the didactic allegory. Already at the end of the first millennium, "The real event recaptured its legendary aura and became, with all its spiritual dignity and miraculous power, a part of daily experience" (D 19). Instead of ethereal and didactic allegories, instead of only a contemplative attitude or a rejection of the world, "the mimetic art of the Middle Ages . . . aimed directly at the concrete representation of transcendent substance" (D 20). We are already in the vicinity of the Provençal poets and Dante; and for Auerbach, Dante will be the climax, the peak that culminates the trajectory from the ancient world to the beginnings of modern times.

What does this loose sketch indicate? At once, that for the young Auerbach the basic task consists in the identification of a kernel that, thanks to its own metamorphoses, reveals the unity of Western culture. His search was accomplished with the guidance of mimesis. It was not mimesis itself, however, that concerned him. Were that the case, we might reply that his historical ventures would not necessarily have to be supported by literary works. Let us remember that in Vico the *fantasia* that created "imitation" did not provoke poetry *tout court*, but the mythical-poetic object. Now if "mythical" is not a redundant word, this means that the analysis of mimesis might be more difficult for Auerbach than it was for Vico if the actual intention is to use it as a starting point in determining the profile of "literary" poetry. We must see then whether Auerbach solves the problem. If, for example, it would be right to invoke Tacitus as a literary example (using the argument that ancient historiography conceived itself as a literary genre), why would it not be necessary to discuss Thucydides or Polybius as well? Auerbach's answer would probably be that they had not achieved the unity of character and fate he was striving to stress. But this is a vicious circle—he would have implicitly introduced the category "unity of character" without explaining how it differed from the remaining portion of mimesis. Therefore we reiterate that Auerbach was not interested in mimesis itself, but rather in the service that it renders to that posited unity of character and fate. In that case, and contrary to his explicit intention, Auerbach's analysis of mimesis cannot explain the unity of literature that he sought. But from our own vantage point, would it not be possible to delineate with greater precision the assumption included in that unity? Would it not be possible to try a better justification for its reenactment? The various transcriptions we have already made point in the same direction: Since Homer, Western culture has been characterized by its focus on the individual, that is, on his internal exploration. To be sure, it is not the individual as an autonomous whole who would keep all his distinctions for himself; it is rather the individual as an articulating center of the sensible world, the world of events and earthly expectations. In this sense, Auerbach maintains the Viconian scheme of connection between relativistic research and historical continuity, but he does so by replacing the providential plan with the individual. In other words, in Auerbach's solution, divinity is not so much removed as secularized. That is to say, continuity of history is preserved thanks to a new incarnation. The individual is now the tranquilizing central pole. We hold our Western identity so long as we guarantee his search.

This critical conclusion should be correlated with the previous one concerning the role of mimesis in Auerbach's theory. As we have seen, its fundamental role in poetry was associated with the disclosure of the indivisible unity of character and fate: that is to say, mimesis was an adjectival category at the service of individual expression. Individual expression is effectively the central category and mimesis its operational aspect. Auerbach's thinking on mimesis is subordinated to, and posited from, the centrality of that expression. Therefore the divine center only receives another occupant. Vico's religious center is replaced by a Romantic one. The Romantics banished mimesis after they confused it with normative imitation. In contrast, the Berlin philologist once again embraced mimesis, but only in order to make it a springboard whose true design would be to present the capacity of the individual, who could in turn disclose the potentiality of mankind. The blessed individual reveals and redeems mankind itself. It is true that between Romantic thought and Auerbach one can observe a minor divergence—the denial of mimesis versus its explicit appraisal—and a major convergence: in both cases, the individual is the kernel. The Romantics had rejected mimesis because they believed it implied the suppression of individual expression; Auerbach returned to it because he believed it concretizes the expression of man-in-the-world. Surely, the Romantics would think of the individual as basically a psychological entity, while Auerbach emphasizes the tension of his existence *in the world*. But I guess this is not a decisive difference. In fact, we remain within the same paradigm.

It is true that other, less critical, conclusions might be drawn from this first material. If, on the one hand, to mingle mimesis with individual expression means to hypostatize the modern conception of the individual, the theoretical program thus established allowed Auerbach, on the other hand, to break the nationalist enclosure to which nineteenth-century historiography was committed. Instead of nationalities, it was the world that concerned him—at least that world molded by a European conception of life and society. It is not fortuitous that Auerbach was obsessed by the Goethian idea of *Weltliteratur* and that, in his last essays, he wondered at the actual possibility of it. A distorted notion of specialization had established, since the previous century, the ideal image of the scholar as someone who would know everything about a national literature and would never wonder about the nature of his object. As a result, today's "normal" scholar views theoretical questions suspiciously. Why be concerned, for instance, by the hypothetical function of his object? Besides, this could have been a dangerous initiative: Who could say but that some colleague might be peeping around, waiting for one's mistake? In academia, everyone exercises the power of censorship and defends the limits of one's professional frontiers. Consequently, the literary historian and the critic, consciously or not, have become tied to narrowly nationalistic positions. In contrast, for Auerbach the Western world was his scope. He split national frontiers and infringed on the limits of his own speciality. Just as he took Marvell as an epigraph to his best known book, he concluded it with a chapter in which Virginia Woolf appears beside Proust. Thanks to his universalism, he has been subjected to severe criticism concerning *Mimesis*. He is blamed for not talking about this or that, for passing by such and such question, in sum, for not writing a detailed history on a restricted theme. Disagreement with the majority of the academic community, then, was inevitable. Because of his occidentalist option, allied with a radical relativism, Auerbach could not blend his history of the representation of reality with the expected detailed narrative of its development. As he put it, "The task my theme had placed before me was another one: I was not to present its process, but its changes [*ich hatte nicht den Ubergang zu zeigen, sondern den Umschwung*]"^{xxviii} It therefore looks like a mistake to explain the kind of articulation found in the chapters of *Mimesis* as determined by the fact that, because of his exile in Turkey, the author could not dispose of the necessary bibliography. His situation would undoubtedly explain several omissions, some of which were covered by the posthumous *Literatursprache und Publikum*, but the direction he chose for his studies would either make a book such as *Mimesis* impossible, or, like *Mimesis*, would always have provoked the grumbling of his contemporaries. His emphasis on the moments of change, on *Umschwung*—a decision responsible for such outstanding essays as "Figura" (1938), "La Cour et la ville" (1951), and "Baudelaires Fleurs du Mai und das Erhabene" (1950)^{xxix}—did not fit with a conception of history as continuity. Auerbach nevertheless continued to profess this conception. To renounce the principle of continuity in history was for him a betrayal of his ethical values, in the name of which he had the strength to fight against Nazism and through which he hoped mankind would overcome its barbarism. Here we must come back to our topic of discordance.

We have said Auerbach progressively mistrusted the effectiveness of theoretical reflections. It is worth pointing out that theory of literature was not a usual field of study during Auerbach's lifetime (young Lukács and Benjamin were among the few exceptions); he never referred, for instance, to someone so consistently worried about the question of mimesis as Max Kommerell. Besides, Auerbach's mistrust was not an annoyance for him, because the unity he formulated in the first chapter of the book on Dante seemed to him to remain unassailable. Auerbach did not have the opportunity to feel the full intellectual impact that the Second World War would exert on Western thought. (He sympathized with Sartre's ideas, but we could not say he had a deep involvement with the ideas that were maturing then.) Today we are partially removed from his beliefs, not so much from his identification of Western culture with its European expression—which could be explained in historical terms—

but from his assumption that the individual is a legitimate category for meta-historical analysis and, then, for preserving the conception of history as continuity. We must not forget, however, that he was aware of the problem. We can perceive that in his further essays on Dante. At the moment of writing *Dante als Dichter* he was unable to formulate the ground of the poet's peculiarity, because he had limited himself to maintaining Hegel's insight. Indeed, Auerbach was so faithful to the spirit of his source that it is not difficult to locate it: "Indeed even his damned souls in Hell still have the bliss of eternity—*io eterno duro* stands over the gate of Hell—they are what they are, without repentance or desire; they say nothing of their torments—these affect neither us nor them, as it were, at all, for they endure for ever—they keep in mind, only their disposition and deeds, firm and constant to themselves in their same interests, without lamentation and longing."^{xxx}

In light of Hegel's concise passage, if we already admire Auerbach's capacity to develop a forceful line of argument which was not explored by Hegel himself, what might we say about his later essay, "Figura," destined to reveal the missing Dantean structure? In it, Auerbach perceives that the reading of the Church fathers could offer him a hidden key. What he will then call "figural interpretation" is a procedure close to, and, at the same time, distinct from general allegory. In allegory, an event or representation is linked to a condition or an abstract idea, which covers it and lends meaning to it: "Most of the allegories we find in literature or art represent a virtue (e.g., wisdom), or a passion (jealousy), an institution (justice), or at most a very general synthesis of historical phenomena (peace, the fatherland)—never a definite event in its full historicity."^{xxxi} The figural interpretation differs from allegory because it brings together two concrete and "historical" scenes. The role of the first is to prefigure the second which, for its part, does not duplicate the anterior scene, but fulfills it and brings it to its fullness.

There is a difference between the Hegelian source and the Auerbachian determination. Hegel pierces the quality of Dante's text, but he does not intend to scrutinize the involved structure of the poem. Now, as was well observed by Dante della Terza, figural interpretation is "a valid principle of interpretation to discover the mechanism that arouses the poetic fate of Dantean characters." Furthermore, it is a principle that is not confined to a "tentative interpretation of *Divina Commedia* [because] it embraces a complex edifying literature."^{xxxii}

The brief example of "Figura" shows us why Auerbach's distrust of theoretical explanations—usually miserably represented by glosses of "general expressions"—would not bring him to the mere *explication de textes* to which Spitzer was accustomed. For him, it was more important to plumb deep enough to discern the logical structure of the object or to compare the texts to find out, under apparently so petty an expression as "*la cour et la ville*," the social structure of a historical period. To be sure, this was not enough to question the conception of history as continuity. But this concrete insight provided the best approach for those who did not confuse the justification of history as continuity with the very defense of human values. In short, the maintenance of the individual as the heart of Western identity was Auerbach's Achilles' heel. But if we learn to read him accurately, we may connect his position with other perspectives.

If the discovery of figural interpretation was so important for a deeper knowledge of Dante's *Commedia*, could it be related to Auerbach's other decisive concerns? We might suggest that relation in two ways: either by observing his consideration of the question of realism in *Mimesis*, or by analyzing an apparently secondary essay such as "Dante's Addresses to His Reader" (1954). Let us start with the latter.

Auerbach begins by noting the difference between the address to the reader one finds in ancient times and that found in Dante. In the first case, as he says about Martial, "He considers the reader as his patron, and his attitude is that of a man whose main object is to win the reader's favor."^{xxxiii} In Dante, however, the stylistic device changes direction according to the difference in the author's attitude: "Dante had reached a point where he conceived his own function much more as that of a *vas d'elezione*, a chosen vessel, than as that of a writer soliciting the favor of a literary public" (*DAR* 149). From here, it emerged in a form similar to that of the prophets' attitude toward their audience: "Authoritative, urgent, and, at the same time, inspired by Christian charity; trying, at every moment, to keep his hold upon the reader, and to let him share, as concretely and intensely as possible, in the whole experience reported in the poem" (*DAR* 151). This comparison not only verifies a change in the social position of the poet, but also indicates that the stylistic device had changed its *raison d'être*: the reader was no longer an immaterial presence that represented the writer's group of patrons, but now took the form of someone who listened to the poem because it was directly addressed to him. This new relationship contained a proposal that was the quintessence of an earthly-celestial vision that characterized Dante's epoch: "Namely, the idea . . . that individual destiny is not meaningless, but is necessarily tragic and significant, and that the whole world context is revealed in it" (*D* 111). In this manner, comparison became in Auerbach a very complex tool, whose function was to derive the historical role of a text from the discovery of its mechanism. Consequently, the research of style was for him nothing more than a tool for historical

understanding. It was not akin to so-called stylistics, and although Auerbach himself did not employ a theoretical reflection, he clearly did not dismiss it.

Let us now go to the link of figural interpretation with the question of realism.

VII. REALISM IN AUERBACH

We have said that Auerbach was not interested in mimesis except as a way to guarantee a continuous history. Added to this concept of history was the notion that the expression of the individual was constant. This point clearly indicates our disagreement with Auerbach's approach, since secularizing the providential plan does not provide for a less arbitrary vision of history. Such arbitrariness appears because of the diverse manners in which the historical situations are accommodated to contemporary expectations, thanks to an anachronistic interpretation. Since this poses a decisive argument, let us expand it a little.

We have seen that Auerbach's intermingling of the relativity of values with the universal plan was an inheritance from Vico. In demonstrating this, we were interested in mimesis because Auerbach assumed it could furnish a basis for the necessary metahistorical dimension. Now, if our assumption is correct, how can we reconcile this analysis of metahistory with Auerbach's attack on absolute and extra-historical categories? In the introduction to *Literatursprache und Publikum*, he says "the universally human or poetic factor . . . can only be apprehended in its particular historical forms, and there is no intelligible way of expressing its absolute essence." This is why he previously established that "we cease . . . to judge on the basis of extrahistorical and absolute categories" (LL 13).

As a matter of fact, *there is no a priori contradiction between the search for a metahistorical element and the attack against extrahistorical categories*. A metahistorical element or characteristic is not synonymous with extrahistorical determinations. *We say a category or a set of categories has a metahistorical nature when it shows a temporal incidence larger than a transhistorical one*. Though it is true that the nature of institutions is determined by their historical allocation, so that they can only be explained by their radical historicity, it is not the case that their features are exclusive to them or that they cannot be compared and articulated with those features one finds in similar institutions of different societies and cultures. Such an articulation presupposes a logical core underlying the differences of their particular structurations. The logical "family" that is then constituted is usually explained by historical interchanges and influences. When historical contact is a verifiable fact, we may talk of a transhistorical set of elements. As an immediate consequence, the presence of transhistorical components supposes changes either inside the same culture or among temporally and/or spatially contained cultures. Is it, for instance, legitimate, in the history of literature, to speak of a transhistorical component in the development of the novel, from Sterne to Joyce, or, in the history of poetry, from Baudelaire to Wallace Stevens or Carlos Drummond de Andrade?^{xxxiv}

On the other hand, metahistory presupposes a trait less explainable by contact with temporally or spatially contained societies. In its common meaning, metahistory implies a universal constancy. Taken in such a way, it is a contradiction in terms as long as an atopic statement is produced by necessarily topical (that is, historical) agents. At the very least, metahistory represents an unverifiable bet—that what history has presented up until now serves as a proof that it cannot assume a radically different shape. As one does not feel comfortable with obvious contradictions and metaphysical bets, it looks like a prudent attitude to rectify the usual meaning and to label as a metahistorical category that which appears either in very distant epochs of the same culture or even among quite different cultures. *Metahistory posits a common infralogical mark in mankind*. If we take "poetry" not as a synonym for fiction or literature, but rather as a use of language that is verbally differentiated from the practical and daily use of language, and symbolically connected to functions other than the exchange of pragmatic information, will not poetry be one of these constancies? And since we do not confuse mimesis with the fictional product^{xxxv} (or literature), it will be possible to take it as a metahistorical category. But, to be sure, this would not be in Auerbach's sense of the term, because the concept of the historical importance of the individual, which was taken by him as a Western constancy, is only a very recent one. Thus, if we agree with Klaus Gronau's observation that "to Auerbach, . . . the 'social constitution' function of literature is . . . closely linked to the mimetic function, and only by this connection one may, at last, theoretically grasp the social response of literary works,"^{xxxvi} we dissent from Auerbach's understanding of that *Nachahmungsfunktion*. Does this observation intend to deny Auerbach's contribution to the current theory of literature, to relegate him to the museum of "classic authors," or to reduce him to some single essays, as a sort of revenge against a father? Not at all. Besides, Auerbach is helped—or rather, we are helped—by the counterpart of his conception of history: by his radical relativism. Its presence is clearly manifested by the metamorphosis that realism shows in *Mimesis*.

Because "realism" adjusts to the social reality of each time, the realism of classical antiquity would impose very strict limits that would render it incompatible with the medieval or modern kinds: "In the mimetic literary art of antiquity, the instability of fortune almost always appears as a fate which strikes from without and affects only a limited area, not as a fate which results from the inner processes of the real, historical world."^{xxxvii} And this is as effective for ancient writers as it is for ancient historians because "historiography in depth—that is, methodical research into the historical growth of social as well as intellectual movements—is a thing unknown to antiquity" (M 38). This absence of historical consciousness is connected to the classification of styles, wherein the sublimity of tragic and epic genres did not fit with comical, vile, or base situations. From there follows Auerbach's emphasis on the break represented by the biblical narrative, where, as he says of Peter: "A tragic figure from such a background, a hero of such weakness, who yet derives the highest force from his very weakness, such a to and fro of the pendulum, is incompatible with the sublime style of classical antique literature" (M 42). Therefore, to the exasperation of his critics, Auerbach would not suppose that realism could always be a uniform category, but rather, as we can now declare, a metahistorical category, defined as man's representation in his temporal surroundings and according to temporal coordinates. Thus, realism in the ancient world presents a province of meaning that is split in the face of figural realism, where the new sublime does not reject but encompasses the experience of debasement. Thus, everyday life acquires a right of admission into the world of the "arts" and "literature." But neither, then, are its metamorphoses at an end. As long as the Church is institutionalized and achieves a form of secular power and becomes an aristocratic organization, it loses contact with humble people. Figural realism, which found its climax in Dante, changed into an earthly realism and, under the aspect of creatural realism, burst in Rabelais's guffaw. The absolutist classicism provoked a new reaction, and, through a misinterpretation of Aristotle—which I think is the source of Auerbach's misjudgment of his *Poetics*—a new separation of styles and genres was established. Romanticism will fight against it and will pave the way for the new discovery of everyday life by nineteenth-century realism and Baudelaire's new *Stilvermischung*. All of this is very well known to the readers of *Mimesis*. Remembering these changes, our aim was only to try to understand why it would be impossible to submit the various faces of realism to a historical definition. To "crystallize" it would be to mingle metahistory with atemporality.

At the end of his life, after the Second World War, Auerbach was conscious of the approach of the sunset of a whole epoch. And this was due as much to reasons external to his specialty—"the inner bases of national existence are decaying"—as to internal causes: the accumulating material would make it impossible "to speak of a scholarly and synthesizing philology of *Weltliteratur*" (PW 9). For a man who had grown up in an agonizing period, who represented the zenith of a territory of knowledge, it was no longer possible to conjecture successfully what the guiding ideas of his followers could be, or whether they would exist at all. He was conscious only of a certain point: "What earlier epochs dared to do—to designate man's place in the universe—now appears to be a very far-off objective" (PW 17). And this sensation was correlated with the fact that the philologist had lost his past home: the nation. If Auerbach regretted the loss of the ambition to designate man's place, he rejoiced in the second. It had been impossible for him to notice the solidarity between the two phenomena. But thirty years after his death, have we perceived it? Do we not go on confusing the study of literature with national frontiers? Have we not mixed man's praise with the praise of his individuality? Do we not associate metahistorical reflection with atemporality, and then, either reject it violently, in the name of the historical dimension of our studies, or become deeply attached to it, because we intend to delve into the so-called human condition?

These questions, rising from a mental travel through Auerbach's works, seem to declare that, if there is something almost useless in the world, it is the exceptional man. But perhaps this is only a very personal feeling.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Erich Auerbach, "Epilegomena zu *Mimesis*," in *Romanische Forschungen*, 65, No. 1-2(1953), 18.

^{iv} Rene Wellek, "Auerbach's Special Realism," *Kenyon Review*, 16 (1954), 305.

^v W. Wolfgang Holdheim, "Auerbach's *Mimesis*: Aesthetics as Historical Understanding," *CLIO*, 10(1981), 146.

^{vi} Holdheim, p. 149.

- ^{vii} See my discussion in *O Controle do imaginário* (Sao Paulo, 1984), pp. 165-239.
- ^{viii} Erich Auerbach, "Giambattista Vico und die Idee der Philologie," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur romanischen Philologie* (Bern, 1967), p. 235
- ^{ix} Auerbach, "Giambattista Vico," p. 236.
- ^x Pietro Piovani, "Vico without Hegel," in *Giambattista Vico: An International Symposium*, ed. Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Hayden V. White (Baltimore, 1969), p. 104.
- ^{xi} Geoffrey Green, *Literary Criticism & the Structures of History* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1982), pp. 20-21.
- ^{xii} Erich Auerbach, *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, tr. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, 1965), p. 20; hereafter cited in text as *LL*.
- ^{xiii} Auerbach, "Giambattista Vico," p. 241.
- ^{xiv} Isaiah Berlin, "A Note on Vico's Concept of Knowledge," in *Giambattista Vico: An International Symposium*, p. 372.
- ^{xv} Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, tr. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, 1975), p. 6; hereafter cited in text as *NS*.
- ^{xvi} The presence of the fragment—of the fragment as a form—in Vico is a question I have never seen discussed. By its strict limits and its witty character, the fragment hinders a systematic handling. And this is in Vico an adequate, however unconscious, strategy against arbitrary deductions. It looks like a fertile task to consider whether the fragment form is not related to the superior level of his "Libro Primo."
- ^{xvii} Berlin, pp. 372-73.
- ^{xviii} It would be tempting to compare Auerbach's reception of Vico with that of Levi-Strauss. As for the second, an excellent starting point is offered by Edmund Leach in "Vico and Levi-Strauss on the Origins of Humanity," in *Giambattista Vico: An International Symposium*, pp. 309-18.
- ^{xix} David Bidney, "Vico's New Science of Myth," in *Giambattista Vico: An International Symposium*, p. 263.
- ^{xx} Auerbach, "Epilegomena zu Mimesis," p. 16.
- ^{xxi} Wellek, p. 304.
- ^{xxii} Charles Muscatine, "Auerbach, Erich: *Mimesis*," *Romance Philology*, 9 (1956), 456.
- ^{xxiii} Leo Spitzer, "Geistesgeschichte vs. History of Ideas as Applied to Hitlerism," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 5 (1944), 192, my italics.
- ^{xxiv} Erich Auerbach, "Vico's Contribution to Literary Criticism," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, p. 264.
- ^{xxv} Erich Auerbach, *Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt*, translated as *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, tr. Ralph Manheim (Chicago, 1961), p. 158; hereafter cited in text as *D*.
- ^{xxvi} Concerning the question of the shadow in Plato's reflections on art and its importance for our own conception, see my *Mimesis e modernidade* (Rio de Janeiro, 1980), pp. 39 ff.
- ^{xxvii} Jorge Luis Borges, "La Poesía gauchesca," in *Discusión* (Buenos Aires, 1964), p. 14. Out of aesthetic considerations, and as a life testimony, one could add Martí's passage: "Sé que todo poder y todo provecho me están vedados por mi carácter austero en el mundo" (Letter to M. A. Mercado, 13 Nov. 1884).
- ^{xxviii} Auerbach, "Epilegomena zu Mimesis," p. 5.
- ^{xxix} These essays now appear in Auerbach's *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis, 1984) as "Figura" (pp. 11-76), "La Cour et la ville" (pp. 133-79), and "The Aesthetic Dignity of the *Fleurs du Mai*" (pp. 201-26). The first German version of "Figura" was published in 1933, under the title *Das französische Publikum des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Munich). The second version—which appears in *Gesammelte Aufsätze* (pp. 55-92), and is translated in *Scenes*—is identical for the first third of the exposition, but progressively diverges from the earlier version as the description of the material gives way to its interpretation.
- ^{xxx} Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Arts*, tr. T. M. Knox (Oxford, 1975), II, 874.
- ^{xxxi} Auerbach, "Figura," in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, p. 54.
- ^{xxxii} Dante della Terza, "Preface" to *Studi su Dante* (Milan, 1967), p. xii.
- ^{xxxiii} Erich Auerbach, "Dante's Addresses to the Reader," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, p. 145; hereafter cited in text as *DAR*.
- ^{xxxiv} See José Guilherme Merquior's *Verso universo em Drummond* (Rio de Janeiro, 1975), where the *Stilvermischung* is taken as the major device of the Brazilian poet.
- ^{xxxv} See my own *O Controle do imaginário*, pp. 68-69, and "Mimesis: A Proscribed Concept," *Eutopias*, 2, No. 2-3 (1986), 221-55.
- ^{xxxvi} Klaus Gronau, *Literarische Form und gesellschaftliche Entwicklung* (Königstein, 1979), p. 67.
- ^{xxxvii} Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, tr. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, 1953), p. 29; hereafter cited in text as *M*.