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Said and the Mythmaking of Auerbach's Mimesis

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Abstract: In her article "Said and the Mythmaking of Auerbach's *Mimesis*" Hyeryung Hwang revisits critical debates on Edward W. Said's unwitting participation in the mythmaking of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* and analyzes the degree to which critical discourses overlook what Said actually wanted to revive, namely the spirit of philological methodology. Hwang argues that before Said worked on *Mimesis*, the book already acquired a sort of myth. Hwang attempts to go beyond the commonly held under-standing of philology and suggest it as a methodology for historical synthesis whose dialectical tension between texts and history amounts to the synthesis of "fact" and "truth."

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Said and the Mythmaking of Auerbach's *Mimesis*

A faulty premise does not always lead to a meaningless conclusion. This statement seems to betray what Erich Auerbach believed when he attempted to define *Weltliteratur* and the role of philology: "a good point of departure must be exact and objective" ("Philology" 15). When we think about how Edward W. Said based his whole idea of "secular criticism" on so-called "inexact' historical facts, the question around a "non-objective" point of departure becomes complicated. Many scholars have taken issue with Said's mystification of Auerbach's exilic position in constructing his own brand of secular criticism and exhilic humanism. In addition, the philological methodology for comparatists Said had in mind also faded. I revisit the critical discourse on Said's unwitting participation in the mythmaking of Auerbach's *Mimesis* from a different perspective in the hope that it might give us a reason to rescue philology from its marginalized status in US-American scholarship. What should be learned from Said's mythmaking of *Mimesis*, I argue, is not the commonly held belief of the impossibility of philology as a discipline of archival facts. Rather, the "mythical rigidity," in Walter Benjamin's words, inherent in Said's reading suggests that philology can be a methodology for historical synthesis. In such a synthesis the dialectical tension between texts and history amounts to an understanding of the text in its historical spirit to the synthesis of "fact" and "truth."

The essence of Said's theory of secular criticism is the refusal to belong to a dominant culture and totalizing forms of critical systems, that is, to remain in "exile." Said suggests Auerbach as the best model of a secular scholar since he had developed his theory from the vantage point of his exile in Istanbul. *Mimesis*, according to Said, exemplifies the exile's point of view as the ultimate interpretation of European history was written or could be only written outside Auerbach's European homeland which he had to flee because of his Jewish background. *Mimesis* owed its existence to the very fact of an Oriental viewpoint, a non-Occidental exile and homelessness. And if this is so, then *Mimesis* itself is not only a reaffirmation of the Western cultural tradition, but also a work built on an alienation from it. Auerbach's attention to the limits of the book's preparation and the obstacles that Auerbach had to face as a philologist are palpable in Auerbach's own postscript in *Mimesis*, in which he describes his exile in Turkey from 1933 to 1945:

I may also mention that the book was written during the war and at Istanbul, where the libraries are not well equipped for European studies. International communications were impeded; I had to dispense with almost all periodicals, with almost all the more recent investigations, and in some cases with reliable critical editions of my texts. Hence it is possible and even probable that I overlooked things which I ought to have considered and that I occasionally assert something which modern research disproved or modified … On the other hand it is quite possible that the book owes its existence to just this lack of a rich and specialized library. If it had been possible for me to acquaint myself with all the work that has been done on so many subjects, I might never have reached the point of writing. (557)

It is the multiple ironies of Auerbach's situation to which Said brings us by making "the drama of this little bit of modesty" ("Introduction" 6) his starting point. Said wants us to understand how Auerbach performed an act of cultural survival of the highest importance: not only did he risk superficial writing and being out of date in research, but also "the possibility of not writing and thus falling victim to the concrete dangers of exile; the loss of texts, traditions, continuities that make up the very web of a culture" (Said, "Introduction" 6).

Some scholars criticized Said's misunderstanding of Auerbach's exilic position since then. For example, in "Global *Translatio*" Emily Apter corrects Said's claim about the lack of European libraries in Istanbul from 1933 to 1945 and shows how Said accepted Auerbach's own postscript in *Mimesis*. The discussion revolves around the relation between the "belief" of a researcher about his/her object of study and what the object actually "is" rather than the relation between what is "true" and what is not. Apter points out the fact that there were resources available in Istanbul during Auerbach's stay thanks to Leo Spitzer who had been in Istanbul before Auerbach (256-71). For fear of anti-Semitism in the nazi years preceding World War II, he resigned shortly after receiving invitations to teach at the University of Manchester and fled to Istanbul in 1933 and it was thanks to Spitzer that Auerbach joined the Department of Latin in 1936 at the University. According to Apter, the exilic situation of Auerbach was different from what he would have us believe in the afterword to *Mimesis*: "Auerbach's jaundiced depiction of his loneliness in the wilderness really appears to be a distorted picture of what it was like to live and work in Istanbul" (261). As Geoffrey Green also points out, Istanbul was not a place of hardship for Auerbach: there existed a well-established European professional and artistic community by the time Auerbach arrived there in 1936 (261). Not to mention exilic predecessors like Leon Trotsky, Gerhard Kessler, and other German-speaking scholars and artists who joined the European intellectual circles,

for example Hans Reichenbach who taught philosophy at the University of Istanbul, Fritz Neumark who taught economy and law, George Rohde, a classical philologist who researched Arabic influences on world literatures, Wolfram Eberhard who taught Chinese language and literature at the University of Ankara, Paul Hindemith who founded the Ankara State Conservatory with Carl Ebert, and several innovative architects and planners like Bruno Taut and Henri Prost were also working in Turkey (see Apter 263-65).

To the suggestion that there existed a philological "school" in Istanbul prompted by Spitzer, Apter's adds that Auerbach could "edit a Romanology seminar publication … that included well-referenced essays on Shakespeare, Péguy, Shelly, Marlowe, Rilke, and Jakobsonian linguistics around 1944" (261). In "Pathos of the Earthly Progress" Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht relates Auerbach's self-portrait as a lonely European scholar and his feeling of intellectual isolation to a specific psychological status. Gumbrecht's explanation is that Auerbach's Istanbul period was the culmination of a sense of intellectual melancholia already existent in Auerbach's pre-exile professional life: "that his passionate and distanced view of European culture emerged during his exile in Istanbul or even after his emigration to the United States in 1947. At most, the experience of expatriation that the National Socialist regime had inflicted upon him gave Auerbach the opportunity to become fully aware of his distance and sometimes melancholic perspective on western culture as a culture that had entered its final stage" (31). In support of this argument, Gumbrecht quotes from a letter by Auerbach in which he describes his outlook on the world as the "attitude of somebody who does not belong to any place, and who is essentially a stranger without the possibility of being assimilated, which is expected from me" (Auerbach qtd. in Gumbrecht 32). Auerbach's intellectual melancholia in Istanbul is also found in his letter to Walter Benjamin, in which we discover the same kind of gloomy tone as in the afterword to *Mimesis*. To Benjamin's request "to learn more about the interesting and intellectually valuable experiences that Auerbach was having in Turkey" (Benjamin qtd. in Barck 82), Auerbach expressed his distress about "a fanatically anti-traditional nationalism" in Turkey: "Rejection of all existing Mohammedan cultural heritage, the establishment of a fantastic relation to a primal Turkish identity, technological modernization in the European sense, in order to triumph against a hated and yet admired Europe with its own weapons: hence, the preference for European-educated emigrants as teachers, from whom one can learn without the threat of foreign propaganda. Result: nationalism in the extreme accompanied by the simultaneous destruction of the historical national character" (Auerbach qtd. in Barck 82). The letter is significant not just because it functions as a clue to understand the personal relationship between the Benjamin and Auerbach or to reveal Auerbach's psychological status as an exile, but also because it brings us to another conflicting argument around Said's mythmaking of Auebach's exile.

Said's point of departure was that Auerbach devised *Mimesis* not from the inside of a European culture, but in a distance from it: the atmosphere of nationalism during Auerbach's stay in Istanbul involved a certain level of cultural repression, which Auerbach disapproved of. There were two conflicting positions on this new nationalism in Turkey and Auerbach was on the side of preserving ideals of Western humanism against the new nationalism. It is not obvious whether it was his political opposition against Turkish nationalist tendencies which caused his unwillingness to engage with Turkish culture and Abdul R. JanMohamed suggests that there is no evidence that Auerbach's views were modified by any influence of any aspect of Turkish culture: "the book could have been written in any other part of the non-Occidental world without significant difference" (99) and Harry Levin, as early as 1972 suggested Auerbach's disinterest in cultural and academic exchanges with non-European heritage. Presenting an interesting contrast in the way Spitzer and Auerbach responded to the potential for a broader vision of the world, Levin pointed out Auerbach's passivity toward the potential opened by his condition of exile. That is, unlike Spitzer who carried on the tradition of East-West exchange and commitment to translation, Auerbach concentrated on European languages and literature (see Levin 112-18). Further, in contrast to Spitzer who even published an article "Learning Turkish" in the journal *Varlık* (Being) in 1934, Auerbach never mastered or never intended to master the Turkish language although he spent more than a decade in Istanbul. That he discredited the scholarship of his Turkish colleagues, problematizing the case of a Turkish translator of Dante who admitted to working from a French translation chosen at random is an additional case in point (see Levin 112-13). What these incidences tell us is that although Auerbach was sympathetic to the broader cultural vision of his own generation of European philologists like Spitzer, he remained within the exclusive boundaries around European civilization keeping it "from being engulfed in another, more comprehensive unity" (Auerbach, "Introduction" 6). Unlike Said's belief that Auerbach could use an agonizing distance from his own culture as a chance to question received dominant notions of cultural belongings, Auerbach was concerned to maintain his European purview instead. Auerbach's attitude of Eurocentrism is, interestingly, similar to one of the nineteenth-century founders

of the discipline of comparative literature, Hugo Meltzl de Lomnitz's (1846-1908) anti-cosmopolitanism (see, e.g., Marno).

Many postcolonial thinkers including Aijaz Ahmad and Abdul R. JanMohamed, criticize Auerbach's method and Said's admiration of it implying that Auerbach only transcended his Europe-based culture to secure a comparative perspective necessary for the better knowledge of one's national heritage. As a result of Said's "mis-"reading of Auerbach's work, the philological method has not been given due attention. However, I argue that the reason why we cannot just dismiss Said's reading of Auerbach — and why it should be read as a productive interpretation — lies in its potential to reinvigorate Auerbach's and Said's philological legacies. I posit that what needs to be highlighted in Said's attempt to revive Auerbach from the dead list of comparatists is the very methodology of philology. We can approach the point by reading James Clifford's commentary on Said as an anthropologist: "the anthropologist as outsider and participant-observer (existential shorthand for the hermeneutical circle) is a familiar modern *topos*" (263-64). Clifford's remark highlights what an anthropological vision can actualize: an awareness of a simultaneous dimension, or an awareness, in Said's words, of the "contrapuntal" (186). As Clifford notices, Said's emphasis on the anthropological participant-observer's immersion in distant cultures is the logical result of his literary reflection on "the hauntingly beautiful lines" (185) of Hugo of St. Victor, a twelfth-century monk from Saxony, whose passage Auerbach quoted as a model for a nomadic literary critic: "The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner / he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong / but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as foreign land" (Auerbach qtd. in Said 185). I believe that what attracted Said was the possibility of achieving originality of vision by seeing the entire world as a "foreign" land and hence the importance of exiles for whom the plurality of vision is given as the condition of their existence. I argue that Said criticized the narrowness of a vision limited to the nation. Impressed by Adorno who once argued that everything one says or thinks, as well as every object one possesses, is ultimately a mere commodity, Said considered it our intellectual mission to extricate ourselves from this state of affairs. A life of exile is the manifestation of this outlook, a "life led outside habitual order" (Said 186).

Said's affirmation of the anthropological vision might sound incoherent; however, when we consider the fact that he was the one who charged the colonial thought held by many anthropologists and historians, this approach proves misguided. Although he was not the first one who pointed out the colonial origins of anthropological research, it is owing to Said's *Orientalism* that most scholars accept that the colonial view ought to be eradicated in scholarship. Said's attitude toward anthropology and its relation to the formation of colonial knowledge shows how Said's approach to his object of study is not one-dimensional. That is, the complicity between the methodology of anthropological research and colonial rules should be no reason to dismiss the discipline itself. I disagree with Ahmad who denounces Said's view as theoretical incoherence (168) and what I see as contradictory pluralism instead. For Said, the positive aspect of anthropological research lies in its "estrangement" effect which allows a scholar to secure a certain critical distance from which reimagining both home and the foreign culture can be possible. In a sense, this actually reminds us of Claude Lévi-Strauss's attempt to redefine anthropology in *Tristes Tropiques* as the symbol of atonement rather than the apparatus of producing a feeling of superiority over other cultures: "the anthropologist is less able to ignore his own civilization and to dissociate himself from its faults in that his very existence is incomprehensible except as an attempt as redemption: he is the symbol of atonement" (389). The remorse anthropologists feel while observing different societies being "Europeanized" is the feeling which is only possible through the comparison between their own society and others. It is the feeling and approach that involves the worries that other societies might repeat their own faults and experience the same sufferings and it invites anthropologists to question the basis of their own society.

To make matters more complicated, I argue that this might have been the feeling Auerbach had when he lamented over Turkey's self-colonizing policy in a letter that he sent to Benjamin during his stay in Turkey, saying "I have already suspected this in Germany and Italy in view of the dreadful inauthenticity of the blood and soil propaganda, but only here has the evidence of such a trend almost reached the point of certainty" (Auerbach qtd. in Barck 82). Despite his unwillingness to engage with Turkish culture, we might guess that the distance from his home made him sympathize with Turkish nationalism which seemed to follow the tragic historical trajectory of Western Europe and fall prey to a similar mistake. In this sense, the anthropological distance as a mode of existence for Auerbach was not to intensify the feeling of superiority of European culture resulting from his sharpened sense of the difference between Orient and Occident. Rather, it was a sense of dialectical relationship between self and the other and the resultant possibility of reflecting critically upon his own European culture and history that the existential estrangement imposed on Auerbach.

Auerbach reflected on his own culture in the form of melancholic and pessimistic anxiety over the apocalyptic tendencies of Western culture. With a tone that is as melancholic as the one in the afterword to *Mimesis*, he articulated the fear of facing the end of the Western civilization: "European civilization is approaching the term of its existence; its history as a distinct entity would seem to be an end, for already it is beginning to be engulfed in another, more comprehensive unity. Today, however, European civilization is still a living reality within the range of our perception. Consequently—so it seemed to me when I wrote these articles and so I still believe—we must today attempt to form a lucid and coherent picture of this civilization and its unity" ("Introduction" 6). The necessity to "form a lucid and coherent picture of this civilization and its unity" in the last statement captures is particularly relevant because similar statements to this are found in several other texts of Auerbach. For example, in "Philology and *Weltliteratur*" Auerbach wrote that "if my reflections on the future, with which I began this essay, have any validity, then the duty of collecting material and forming it into a whole that will continue to have effect is an urgent one … the phenomena treated by the philologist whose intention is synthesis contain their own objectivity, and this objectivity must not disappear in the synthesis … the performance of the synthesis is a form which must be unified and suggestive if it is to fulfill its potential" (5-11). It is clear at this point that these statements signify Auerbach's pursuit of a lucid view of the "whole" as a necessary basis for the study of European culture and history, and it brings us back to Said's aforementioned mythmaking of Auerbach in that Said interprets Auerbach's *Mimesis* as an attempt to draw a picture of the entirety of European literature in his Oriental exile. What is less obvious is, then, whether Auerbach believed it was possible to arrive at the wholeness or the unity that his philological methodology intended to seek for.

Philology is a discipline which takes an archival accumulation or collection of human knowledge as its basic principle. As Said clarifies in the introduction to Auerbach's "Philology and *Weltliteratur*," the task of philology is to "study of all, or most, of human verbal activity" (1), but not for eternal truths, but for "contingent, historical truths at their basic level: it conceives of man dialectically, not statically" (2). Although both philosophy and philology engage with the "truth," philological "truth" is more subject to historical change. Based on Vico's conception of philology, however, Auerbach asserts that this philological truth — that which Vico calls '*certum*' (the certain or established) — is not inseparable from philosophical truth — what Vico calls '*verum* '— in that the latter is actualized in every historical moment, and the philosophical truth can be known "only through a knowledge of history as a whole" (Said, "Introduction" 16). Therefore, for Auerbach it is philology that makes it possible to have access to philosophical "truth" whose wholeness is impossible to achieve by just looking at an individual historical period. Although philology investigates what people believed truthfully at each cultural age and the "truth" might be a product of their limited perspective, philology makes it possible to know the systematic context of human history and this "philological philosophy or philosophical philology is concerned with only one thing — mankind" ("Introduction" 16). In other words, philology tries to discover "truth" in the totality of historical facts, but its task entails not just the overt discovery of materials and the development of methods of research, but "beyond that their penetration and evaluation so that an inner history of mankind—which thereby created a conception of man unified in his multiplicity — could be written" (Auerbach, "Philology" 4). In this sense, philological "truth" is always historical and humanist and Auerbach's "historical humanism" ("Philology" 4) and the seemingly impossible task of studying every human verbal activity is founded on the belief that history is the one which makes us advance to a consciousness of the human condition and to the realization of humankind's potential. I posit that is in this context that Said affirms the significance of philology with Auerbach and feels regretful over the decline of philology in professional training. Thus, when he insists on a return to philology, which Said describes as the "detailed, patient scrutiny of and a lifelong attentiveness to the words and rhetoric by which language is used by human beings who exist in history" (*Humanism* 61), he is arguing for the restoration of the integrity of scholarship through fidelity to human history (on this, see, e.g. Villanueva). For Said, philology connects readers of a certain text with an author and the historical world in which both the author and the text are situated thus making it possible for readers to encounter the text's resistance to reality: "fundamentally an act of perhaps modest human emancipation and enlightenment that changes and enhances one's knowledge for purposes other than reductiveness, cynicism, or fruitless standing aside" (*Humanism* 66).

Going back to my earlier question as to whether it is possible to achieve the wholeness or unity philological methodology seeks for, whether the accumulation of historical fragments philologists glean correspond to the very synthesis of the parts, and whether the task of philology, namely the discovery of "truth" in the totality of historical facts would be absurd, I refer to Nietzsche's thought: "consequences of philology: arrogant expectations; philistinism; superficiality; overeating of reading and writing; alienation from the people and the needs of the people. ... Task of philology: to disappear" (334). Nietzsche's

main point of criticism lies in the "lack of judgment" (376) of philologists: not only do they misrepresent the ancient world and the present, but they misunderstand themselves too. Although his criticism is aimed at the ignorance and arrogance of the philologists as educators, it also undermines the ontological base of the discipline of philology itself by problematizing the possibility of philological "understanding" and "representation" itself. If we recall the subtitle of Auerbach's *Mimesis*, "The Representation of Reality in Western Literature," Nietzsche's argument can be considered a statement about the impossibility of Auerbach's intellectual goal to provide the long history of Western European literature as exact and objective as possible without distorting the whole picture. Auerbach himself is aware that he sets himself an impossible task as he notes in the last paragraph of his "Introduction" to *Literary Language*. Here, he makes us to ponder the philological methodology itself in terms of the relation between parts and the whole: "Despite its singleness of its purpose, this book is a fragment or rather a series of fragments. It lacks even the loose but always perceptible unity of *Mimesis*. It is not brought to a conclusion, but broken off; it achieves no proper integration of its subject matter. Nevertheless, some readers may sense the unity behind it. In his preface to the *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum*, Augustine wrote: a considerable part of discovery is to know what you are looking for … In this light the book is still in search of its theme. Perhaps its readers will help in the search; perhaps one of them, by giving more precise and effective expression to what I have tried to say, will find the theme**"** ("Introduction" 24).

In addition to inviting his readers to complete the task of philology, Auerbach recognizes the discontinuity which the philological search of historical totality involves inherently. In a way, he seems to have understood his readers' skepticism about the possibility of the whole, similar to Nietzsche's, and already shares their uncertainty. In *Mimesis*, despite his desire to secure scholarly objectivity by being faithful to history, it is not difficult to see him wandering toward his own commitment. It is true, as David Damrosch points that although Auerbach is willing to be fair and objective, "in practice he displays a deep ambivalence whenever that shaping goes beyond an almost random selection of themes and texts and begins to affect the actual interpretation of the material" (105). According to Damrosch, this ambiguity was noticed by Auerbach's early reviewers as well, among them René Wellek and Charles Muscatine (105). Auberbach's ambivalence surfaces, for example, in the Epilogue to *Mimesis* when he almost unwittingly stresses the role of his personal concerns in the shaping of his book thereby affirming the "accidental," but not without agonizing over the power of the contingent method: "of textual interpretation gives the interpreter a certain leeway … The great majority of the texts were chosen at random, on the basis of accidental acquaintance and preference rather than in view of a definite purpose" (556). The ambiguity of Auerbach's relation to the otherness of his material, however, is not a failure in his way of philological research. Or, if it is a failure, it should be understood together with the recognition that Auerbach was aware of the fact that failure would be inherent in his "method" as a way of achieving his "purpose." He acknowledged the researcher's own interests and intuition which might mislead him/her in the process of searching for historical objectivity: "in order for someone to penetrate and then construct an adequate presentation of the material of *Weltliteratur* he must command that material — or at least a major part of it — himself. Because, however, of the superabundance of materials, of methods and of points of view, a mastery of that sort has become virtually impossible" ("Introduction" 8).

Ambiguity in *Mimesis* or in Auerbach's philological methodology itself is derived from his willingness to embrace the thought that historical truthfulness is in tension with the personal inclinations of the individual researcher, as well as with the relative autonomy of any given text from historical influences. That is to say, Auerbach did not advocate a nihilistic view according to which it is impossible to seek historical totality, but instead he believed in the thorough understanding of the creative order which the otherness of the text would engender. For Auerbach the task of philology was to define a given work in a historical continuity in order to achieve a clear view of the whole, but the ambivalence in *Mimesis* signifies that he was caught in a double-bind between what he tried to accomplish — harmony and order of the philologist's representation and the free play of texts. Rather than repressing the latter for his philological goal, however, he freed himself to be guided by his texts and made the texts themselves lead him to find a creative order. In other words, I argue that he believed in the dialectical tension between a philologist and his or her texts, and what the tension would create in search of historical totality. This is a kind of literary materialism that Said also shares in his humanist historicism and it also resonates with Benjamin's understanding of the philological approach in his exchange with Adorno: "The philological approach entails examining the text detail by detail, leading the reader to fixate magically on the text ... The appearance of self-contained facticity that emanates from philological study and casts its spell on the scholar is dispelled according to the degree to which the object is constructed in historical perspective. The lines of perspective in this conclusion, receding to the vanishing point, converge in our own historical experience. This way, the object is constituted as a monad. In the monad, the textual

detail which was frozen in a mythical rigidity comes alive" (Benjamin qtd. in Barck 108). The magical power of the textual detail is broken by history, but history frees the textual monad from the mythical rigidity. In this way, the dialectic between texts and history makes it possible for the monad to acquire its true spirit.

Benjamin's expression of "mythical rigidity" alerts us to one important line in Auerbach's "Philology and *Weltliteratur*" again: "a scientifically ordered and conducted research of reality fills and rules our life; it is, if one wishes to name one, our Myth: we do not possess another that has such general validity" (4). Ironically, philology, a discipline of archival facts takes a myth as its starting point and moves from myth to historical "truth" guided by the dialectical tension between texts and history. But if we believe Auerbach when he says that this myth is the only one that has general validity, it also speaks to the non-factual starting point in Said's mythmaking of *Mimesis*. It might be interesting to add, in this context, that Auerbach thought "the discovery of a point of departure" was "a matter of intuition" ("Philology" 11). That is, even before Said worked on mythmaking, *Mimesis* had been already a kind of myth whose potentiality Auerbach believed in, namely that "in order to achieve its effect historical synthesis must in addition appear to be a work of art" (*Mimesis* 11).

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