Erich Auerbach’s Mimesis has a profoundly pessimistic conclusion. The present paper takes seriously the consequences of the apocalyptic rhetoric therein introduced for Auerbach’s humanist historicist project, arguing that Auerbach holds responsible his own brand of secular humanism — whose story his book tells and whose method it implements — for the “Nivellierungseffekt” he so clearly deplores. As an exile on the outskirts of European space and time (Istanbul, 1945), Auerbach possesses a privileged philological perspective from which to synthesize a history nearing its end; the techniques he employs in order to do so, however, are for him complicit in the destruction. The final chapter of Mimesis, so often considered a weak point of the work, provides a condensed and lyrical account of this predicament.

The final pages of Erich Auerbach’s Mimesis (1946) tell a story about endings. The end of the historicist era, the end of historical differentiation, the end of irreducible otherness, the end of European unity, the end of meaningful time, and the end of human history all make a subtle but readable appearance in the last chapter of his epoch-making study of western literary realism, under the aspect of a devastating and irreversible process of cultural leveling:

Unterhalb der Kämpfe und auch durch sie vollzieht sich ein wirtschaftlicher und kultureller Ausgleichsprozeß; es ist noch ein langer Weg bis zu einem gemeinsamen Leben der Menschen auf der Erde, doch das Ziel beginnt schon sichtbar zu werden; am sichtbarsten, konkretesten erscheint es schon jetzt in der absichtslosen, genau, inneren und äußeren Darstellung des beliebigen Lebensaugenblicks der verschiedenen Menschen. So scheint der komplizierte Auflösungsprozeß, der zur Zerfaserung der äußeren Handlung, zu Bewußtseinsspiegelung und Zeitenschichtung führte, nach einer sehr einfachen Lösung zu streben. Vielleicht wird sie allzu einfach sein für diejenigen, die unsere Epoche, trotz aller Gefahren und Katastrophen, wegen ihres Lebensreichtums und des unvergleichlichen geschichtlichen Standorts, den sie bietet, bewundern und lieben. Aber das sind nur wenige, und sie werden voraussichtlich von jener Vereinheitlichung und Vereinfachung, die sich ankündigt, kaum mehr als die ersten Anzeichen erleben (514). ¹

On this note – the elegiac, pathos-ridden note of a leave-taking lover turned herald of doom – Auerbach brings his book to its official conclusion, to the beginning of its end. The history of realism draws to a close and in its place we are left

¹ Erich Auerbach, Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur, Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 1946. All future pages numbers refer to this edition.
to anticipate: the “gemeinsames Leben der Menschen auf der Erde.” The teleological endpoint of 8000 years of difference and struggle. The timeless essence of the human. Speaking here in the name of the few for whom the end of the historical drama spells the end of the world, for whom a temporality without conflict and plot necessarily degenerates into a meaningless, stagnant stream of empty, unrelated moments, Auerbach quietly subjects the trope of the apocalyptic remnant to a cynical reversal, in which a backward-looking elite who will not survive self-consciously steps aside to make way for the undifferentiated, post-apocalyptic masses who will.

This single act of reversal undermines nearly five hundred pages of explicit privileging, for Mimesis elsewhere devotes much of its polemical power to celebrating the poetic potential and philosophical complexity of ordinary, everyday reality and ordinary, everyday human beings—the very realms here associated with the approaching annihilation of historical difference. In doing so, it also nullifies Auerbach’s (brief) attempt to salvage an affirmative element from the modernist texts whose “verschleierte, ausweglose Trauer” and “Abwendung vom praktischen Lebenswillen” he analyzes in his final chapter as evidence of a pervasive “Weltuntergangsstimmung.” The modernist mode, he informs us, “ist doch nicht nur ein Symptom der Verworrenheit und Ratlosigkeit, nicht nur ein Spiegel des Untergangs unserer Welt” (512)2, for in its emphasis on the “beliebigen Lebensaugenblick,” it provides access to the previously unrepresentable abundance of everyday existence: “Welch eine Wirklichkeitstiefe gewinnt überall der einzelne Vorgang […]! Es erscheinen Bezirke des Vorgangs und Verbindungen zu anderen Vorgängen, die vordem kaum geahnt, nie gesehen und beachtet wurden – und die doch bestimmend sind für unser wirkliches Leben” (513). How peculiar, then, that the very element which ostensibly allows the modern novel to transcend its role as an apocalyptic mirror turns out to provide the essential link between the enormous complexity of modernist literary techniques and the cultural levelling process (“die einfache Lösung”) those techniques make visible. How peculiar, too, that Auerbach should choose to emphasize this element as the point of convergence between modernist literary techniques and his own methodology—“Man kann dies Vorgehen moderner Schriftsteller mit dem einiger moderner Philologen vergleichen […] ja man kann die vorliegende Untersuchung selbst als Beispiel anführen” (509)—when this decision so obviously implicates him in the very levelling process he de- plores.

Different readers have dealt with the bizarre implications of these final lines in markedly different ways. Those who choose to emphasize Auerbach’s democratic, anti-hierarchical interest in the common man generally ignore them en-

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2 Emphasis mine, S.P.
tirely, as do those committed to a conception of Auerbach as enemy of despair and proponent of future-oriented action. Readers who make a serious attempt to confront the book’s unambiguously pessimistic conclusion tend to focus on the pathos of its tone, as a rare instance in which Auerbach’s personal sense of “moral urgency” takes clear precedence over the rigorous philologist’s commitment to scholarly objectivity and “ironic detachment.” According to this position, Auerbach’s struggle against the growing hegemony of an absolute relativism, his insistence that philological values must take their validity from the object of investigation rather than the arbitrary personal experience of the interpreter, clashes here with his equally profound awareness of his own, rooted perspective and the necessarily fragmentary character of his synthesizing vision – an awareness certainly intensified, as his readers seldom hesitate to point out, by the particularities of his position as a Jew in exile.

Auerbach himself acknowledges the all-encompassing significance of his concrete historical situation by performatively re-inscribing his finished book within the dates of its production: a near empty page between the title and the opening lines contains the deceptively neutral phrase, “Geschrieben zwischen Mai 1942 und April 1945,” which looks forward to an equally laconic reminder in the epilogue: “Dazu kommt noch, daß die Untersuchung während des Krieges in Istanbul geschrieben wurde” (518). Such a framing device unmistakably anchors Auerbach’s completed interpretive project in a moment of crisis experienced at

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3 Claus Uhlig goes so far as to suggest that the analyses of Auerbach’s final and most openly pessimistic chapter “could fade with time” – in opposition to the far more affirmative chapter on Michel de Montaigne, which Uhlig believes “will never lose its luster” – since modern reality, he claims, remains largely inaccessible to Auerbach’s particular hermeneutic methods. Devaluing the final chapter as a piece of inferior interpretive work allows Uhlig to portray Auerbach as an unambiguous proponent of the democratic cause, a champion of the common man (Claus Uhlig, “Auerbach’s ‘Hidden’ (?) Theory of History,” in: Seth Lerer (ed.), Literary History and the Challenge of Philology: the Legacy of Erich Auerbach, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996, pp. 36–49, esp. pp. 46 and 48). Jesse Gellrich ends his study, “Figura, Allegory, and the Question of History,” by comparing Walter Benjamin’s pessimistic understanding of allegory – as a profoundly non-redemptive form of signification – with Auerbach’s ostensibly life-affirming commitment to the irreducible “strangeness” of true historicity (a strangeness the study aligns with Auerbach’s own experience of estrangement as a German Jew writing in Istanbul). He makes no attempt to account for the unmistakable pessimism of Auerbach’s eschatological conclusion (in Lerer, pp. 107–123).

4 The terms are taken from David Damrosch, whose study “Auerbach in Exile” investigates Auerbach’s ambivalent attitude toward his own interpretive role as shaping agent (in Comparative Literature 47:2, 1995, pp. 97–117). See also Geoffrey Green, “Erich Auerbach and the ‘Inner Dream’ of Transcendence,” in Lerer, Literary History (see note 3), pp. 214–226. Green celebrates Auerbach’s pathos of estrangement as the poignant life force of Mimesis, and credits his “simultaneous engagement and detachment of self within the text” with anticipating “an inherent postmodernist strategy,” p. 220.
the furthest boundary of European time and space, in the liminal predicament of the philologist writing from Istanbul in the year 1945. Auerbach’s own understanding of the spatio-temporal extremity of his historical situation, however, would appear to take a rather different and significantly more disturbing form than most readers of his concluding burst of pathos are willing to admit. For regardless of how one chooses to interpret his final lines, there is no escaping the paradoxical fact that the epoch for which he professes such nobly understated loyalty, the epoch he loves “trotz aller Gefahren und Katastrophen, wegen ihres Lebensreichtums und des unvergleichlichen geschichtlichen Standorts, den sie bietet,” is none other than the era of fascism, genocide, and a Europe torn apart by two world wars. The unambiguously positive notion of Lebensreichtum lends Auerbach’s depiction of historical crisis a distinctly vitalist spin. It is an empty and, under the circumstances, rather tasteless prioritization of experiential abundance that would be utterly unthinkable without the aestheticizing distance built into his spectatorial viewpoint. His position as exile in neutral Istanbul provides him with precisely the kind of “unvergleichlichen geschichtlichen Standort” he elsewhere affirms as the proper perspective of all true philology, from which the philologist can witness the drama of history unfold, as it draws to a close for all eternity. The language he employs in the final lines of Mimesis can not therefore be dismissed as an anomalous outburst born of exilic despair, a cathartic moment in which the interpreting self overwhelms the interpreted object and the dispassionate philologist gives way to the experiencing man. The Auerbach who here so movingly mourns an era of unspeakable carnage for the sake of the dialectical spectacle it affords is the same Auerbach who will later refer to the progression of human history as a “Schauspiel” and the two world wars as a “praktische[s] Seminar in Weltgeschichte.” Crisis appears in all of these cases as the precondition of true philology, the apocalyptic interpretive standpoint as the essentially philological mode of experiencing the world. Far from leaving philology behind to make room for an unusual moment of subjective expression, Auerbach’s final lines thus give voice, radicalized and empowered almost beyond recognition, to the philological perspective as such.

There remains the question of how to reconcile this radicalization of the philological project with the unmistakable humanist thrust of the work itself. Paul Bové, in his insightful study Intellectuals in Power: A Geneology of Critical Humanism, suggests that the “modern eschaton” called into play by Auerbach’s conclusion should be read as a subtle acknowledgement of what will turn out to

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6 Muschg/Staiger, Weltliteratur (see note 5), pp. 41 and 45.
be Bové’s own thesis: “History’s trick has been to turn humanism against itself.” There can be little question that Bové’s formulation is apt. Secular humanists, after all, devote themselves almost by definition to the study of a hidden, human essence they hope to render visible, yet in Auerbach’s account it is precisely the newly visible nature of this once-hidden essence that spells the end of humanist historicism. Bové, however, never tells us why. Why, in the final lines of *Mimesis*, does the realization of the humanist dream end up looking so much like a nightmare? How does Auerbach’s mournful preference for his own age – “trotz aller Gefahren und Katastrophen” – over the approaching humanist utopia of equality and harmony affect the conceptual framework of *Mimesis*? What exactly does this peculiar passage, with its apocalyptic undertones and suffocating atmosphere of closure, have to do with the gargantuan preservationist effort it concludes and – to all appearances – undermines? The pathos that bursts onto the scene in the final lines does not emerge from a conceptual vacuum, even if it does arrive unannounced. In order to trace the arc of its progress, we must return to the beginning of the book and watch, once again, as Auerbach draws his well-known distinction between Homer and the Hebrew scriptures, for it is here that he establishes the conceptual categories that shape his project.

A close, critical look at these two stylistic modes requires a careful analysis of Auerbach’s own words on the subject, and these words must therefore be reproduced at some length. He begins with Homer. After introducing the famous foot-washing episode – taken from the description of Odysseus’ homecoming – as an illustration of the Homeric style, he makes the following preliminary observations:

> Dies alles wird genau ausgeformt und mit Muße erzählt [...] Klar umschrieben, hell und gleichmäßig belichtet, stehen oder bewegen sich Menschen und Dinge innerhalb eines überschaubaren Raumes; und nicht minder klar, restlos ausgedrückt, auch im Affekt wohlgeordnet, sind die Gefühle und Gedanken (5).

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7. Paul Bové, *Intellectuals in Power. A Genealogy of Critical Humanism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 96. Bové’s study focuses primarily on the various ways in which intellectual endeavors like *Mimesis* can serve to reenforce the authority of the intellectuals who author them: “Not incidentally, this response to what is, for Auerbach, little less than a modern eschaton uniquely positions a certain elite group of academic humanistic intellectuals as the last reservoir of value, knowledge, mastery, and method in this moment of terrible crisis,” p. 91.

8. Bové breaks the flow of Auerbach’s concluding lines into two distinct moments: “das elementar Gemeinsame unseres Lebens” rendered visible by modern literature receives a positive valuation, while the “wirtschaftlicher und kultureller Ausgleichsprozeß” is clearly negative. Auerbach’s dilemma, he concludes, springs from the realization that “the truth of the present moment is that this ontological commonality of men is being collectivized,” p. 94. Ontological commonality good, collectivization bad. Yet by introducing a distinction where Auerbach himself makes none, Bové has overlooked the true enigma of the passage. For Auerbach, the negatively marked leveling process occurs as a direct result of the commonality of man, and his refusal to perform the clear separation Bové tries nevertheless to draw makes clear that the ontological commonality of man is always already, by its very nature, collectivized and commodifiable.
A few pages later, he characterizes the “Grundimpuls des homerischen Stils” as the need to make all phenomena present both visually and palpably, in the fullness of their plastic form (“die Erscheinungen ausgeformt, in allen Teilen tastbar und sichtbar zu vergegenwärtigen”). He continues:

[W]ie die einzelnen Erscheinungen selbst, so treten auch ihre Verhältnisse, die zeitlichen, örtlichen, kausalen, finalen, konsekutiven, vergleichenden, konzessiven, antithetischen und bedingenden Verschränkungen in vollendeter Bildung ans Licht; so daß ein ununterbrochenes, rhythmisch bewegtes Vorüberziehen der Erscheinungen stattfindet, und sich nirgends eine Fragment gebliebene oder nur halb beleuchtete Form, nirgends eine Lücke, ein Auseinanderklaffen, ein Blick in unerforschte Tiefen zeigt. Und dies Vorüberziehen der Erscheinungen geschieht im Vordergrund, das heißt stets in voller örtlicher und zeitlicher Gegenwart. Man sollte denken, daß die vielen Einschübe, das viele Vor- und Zurückgehen, eine Art Zeit- und Ortperspektive schaffen müßten […] Aber solch subjektivistisch-perspektivisches Verfahren, welches Vordergrund und Hintergrund schafft, so daß die Gegenwart sich nach der Vergangenheitsstiefe öffnet, ist dem homerischen Stil völlig fremd; er kennt nur Vordergrund, nur gleichmäßig beleuchtete, gleichmäßig objektive Gegenwart […] (8–9).

Understood simply as a description of Homeric style, these passages could easily cause confusion, for the categories employed here seem in many ways more appropriate to a Winckelmann-inspired treatise on classical art than a literary analysis of an epic poem. Under Auerbach’s shaping gaze, Homer’s narrative emerges as a clearly circumscribed, uniformly illuminated, visually bounded, and physically continuous space, within which the uninterrupted parade of sensory phenomena takes place. Forms and relations are well-defined and harmoniously combined; there are no rough edges or ruptures to disturb the planar surface, no temporal delays or postponements to endanger the illusion of absolute presence. It is almost as though he has forgotten that he is dealing with text.

But this is, indeed, precisely the point. Text, in the modern sense of a riddle demanding a reader, presupposes for Auerbach a notion of directional time, a past and future beyond and behind the immediate present of a rooted subject. The “subjektivistisch-perspektivisches Verfahren,” to which the Homeric poems in their perpetual, static presence do not have access, opens into absent temporal depths. In his characterization of biblical narrative, for which he chooses, significantly, the Genesis account of the binding of Isaac, Auerbach initially does little more than stand his extensive elaboration of Homeric attributes on its head, so that the analysis can take the form of a series of “on the other hand”s: where the Homeric characters remain psychologically uncomplicated, their biblical counterparts are “vielschichtig” (14); where Homer’s syntax is hypotactic, the biblical structure is paratactic; where the Homeric poems express

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9 Damrosch notes that the language employed here also recalls the “rounded totality” of Greek culture as conceived by Georg Lukács in *Theorie des Romans* (1920) (Damrosch, “Auerbach in Exil”, see note 4, p. 101).
everything on the surface, in the biblical narratives “[bleibt] alles unausgesprochen” (13); and so on. The series peaks in the following paragraph:

Auf der anderen Seite [i.e. in the case of the biblical narrative] wird nur dasjenige an den Erscheinungen herausgearbeitet, was für das Ziel der Handlung wichtig ist, der Rest bleibt im Dunkel; […] Ort und Zeit sind unbestimmt und deutungsbedürftig […] das Ganze, in höchster und ununterbrocher Spannung auf ein Ziel gerichtet, und insofern viel einheitlicher, bleibt rätselvoll und hintergründig (14).

Like the Winckelmann-flavored language of the Homer passage, these lines suggest that the terms of Auerbach’s distinction may owe nearly as much to 18th century German texts – specifically, in this case, to Goethe and Schiller’s collaborative theorizing of epic and dramatic forms – as they do to the ancient epic ones. For though he disregards the generic component of Goethe and Schiller’s reflections, choosing to refer to the biblical narratives as “epic,” Auerbach nonetheless adopts their conceptual opposition between a static portrayal of timeless essence and a directional representation of temporal, goal-oriented development, even pausing to cite Schiller directly on the subject of Homer’s “ruhiges Dasein” (7).

With regard to the now-famous Hintergründigkeit, however, Auerbach feels compelled to make clear that the concept he has in mind bears “broader and deeper” implications than its obvious oppositional relation to the Homeric Vor-dergrund would otherwise suggest. The reason lies in its intimate connection to the one element of the biblical text that transcends the process of definition by opposition: the Jewish God. The appearance of the divine in the biblical text contains, for Auerbach, a paradox that can not be thoroughly grasped through a simple negation of the Homeric style. On the one hand, it opens up the possibility of a perspective extending beyond the planar space of physical existence, for God always arrives from somewhere outside the plane: “er ist nicht in seiner Gegenwart umgreifbar, wie Zeus; es erscheint immer nur ‘etwas’ von ihm, er reicht immer in die Tiefe” (14). On the other hand, his very appearance suggests that the distance can somehow be negotiated, that the divine “elsewhere” can interact meaningfully with the human “here.” Indeed, “die erhabene Wirkung Gottes greift hier so tief in das Alltägliche ein, daß die beiden Bezirke des Erhabenen und des Alltäglichen nicht nur tatsächlich ungetrennt, sondern grund- sätzlich untrennbar sind” (26). It is this “everyday” experience of qualitative difference, occasioned by a confrontation with the divine rupture, that definitively differentiates the biblical topology of perspectival depth from the evenly illuminated surface of the Homeric poems.

It is this experience, too, that provides Auerbach with his paradigmatic figure for the uneasy union of meaning and materiality that underlies a conception of text and history as “deutungsbedürftig.” Homer’s bounded, tautological surface refers to nothing outside itself; it contains no concealed meaning in its nonexistent depths. “Man kann Homer analysieren,” Auerbach explains, “[…] aber man
kann ihn nicht deuten” (16). The biblical narratives, in contrast, demand the very interpretation the Homeric poems supposedly resist:

In ihnen inkarniert sich Lehre und Verheißung, unscheidbar sind diese letzteren in sie hineingeschmolzen; eben darum sind sie hintergrünndig und dunkel, sie enthalten zweiten, verborgenen Sinn […] Die Lehre und das Streben nach Erleuchtung sind unlösbar mit der Sinnlichkeit der Erzählung verbunden (17).

Just as God can never wholly manifest himself in the realm of human existence, so the sensory material of the biblical narrative simultaneously reveals and conceals its epistemological truths. The insistence that such truths can be contained, however partially, within the textual frame – like the emphasis on the concrete, phenomenal appearance of a supersensible God – makes possible an entirely new approach to text. No longer defined solely by the Homeric attempt to reproduce the vivid sensuality of the plastic arts, narrative acquires its unique capacity to mean. This capacity, however, relies on precisely the kind of referential gesture the self-contained world of the Homeric poems tries successfully to avoid, for the narrative can only derive its epistemological resonance from claims that implicitly exceed the textual scope. From the biblical perspective, the purpose of literary production consists in bearing witness to a single, interpretive worldview that anchors and gives meaning to the whole, and only the success of this testimony, irrespective of aesthetic criteria like those that shape the Homeric poems, can legitimate the Hebraic version of narrative. “Das Deuten,” Auerbach notes, “wird in einem bestimmten Sinne zu einer allgemeinen Methode der Wirklichkeitsauffassung” (18). Within his spatially differentiated universe of surfaces and depths, foregrounds and backgrounds, this approach bespeaks a vertical orientation:

Der weltgeschichtliche Anspruch und das ständig bohrende, ständig in Konflikten sich auseinandersetzende Verhältnis zu einem einzigen, verborgenen und doch erscheinenden Gott, welcher verheißend und fördernd die Weltgeschichte lenkt, verleiht den Erzählungen des Alten Testaments eine ganz andere Perspektive als sie Homer besitzen kann […] So viel vereinzelter, horizontal unverbundener die Erzählung und Erzählungsgruppen nebeneinander stehen als die der Ilias und Odyssee, so viel stärker ist ihre gemeinsame vertikale Bindung, die sie alle unter einem Zeichen zusammenhält, und die Homer gänzlich fehlt (19).

It is the Hebrew scriptures, in the doubled verticality of their “Auffassungs- und Darstellungsweise,” that introduce into the western literary tradition the twin tasks of textual and historical interpretation (10).

Auerbach clearly intends these conclusions regarding the Homeric and Hebraic modes of representation to develop organically out of his textual analyses. The two opposing styles introduced in the first chapter delineate the perpendicular axes that structure his entire book, thus providing him with what he will later term an Ansatzpunkt, a notion characterized by the following methodological observations:
Der Ansatz soll nichts Allgemeines sein, was von außen an den Gegenstand herangetragen wird – er soll aus ihm herausgewachsen sein, ein Stück von ihm selbst. Die Dinge selbst sollen zur Sprache kommen [...].

All the more surprising, then, that here the texts do not speak. They do not speak because, unlike the other passages analyzed within the framework of Mimesis, they are not cited. Instead, Auerbach speaks for them, first paraphrasing, then briefly analyzing, and finally synthesizing and concluding. This textual vacuum does not occur for ideological reasons, as should be clear from the methodological statement cited above, but rather because Auerbach does not read Greek and Hebrew, and therefore can not subject these particular texts to the same rigorous, philological analysis he performs at other points in his text. The pragmatic origin of the problem does not, however, abolish the theoretical difficulty, since the absence of citation makes it nearly impossible to determine where the text ends and Auerbach begins. By the time he reaches his conclusions, and occasionally even before, it is no longer clear whether he is speaking for the texts or over them, taking them apart in order to reveal the paradigm or reconstituting them in its image. This is true particularly with regard to the Homer passages, which abound with concrete instances of interpretive distortion.

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10 Auerbach, “Philologie der Weltliteratur” (see note 5), pp. 39–50, p. 49. In “Epilogomena zu Mimesis,” a brief essay composed around the same time as “Philologie der Weltliteratur” and intended as a response to various critics, Auerbach describes the method of Mimesis in very similar terms: “Meine Bemühung um Genauigkeit bezieht sich auf das Einzelne und Konkrete. Das Allgemeine hingegen [...] sollte sich nach äußerster Möglichkeit dem jeweils Einzelnen fügen, und ist jeweils nur aus dem Zusammenhang zu verstehen. Das Ordnem muß so geschehen, daß es das individuelle Phänomen frei entfaltet leben läßt” (in Romanische Forschungen. Vierteljahresschrift für romanische Sprachen und Literaturen 65, 1/2, 1953, p. 15).

11 The most obvious of these concerns his use of the example of Patroclus, sent off in Book 16 of the Iliad to fight in Achilles’ place, in order to demonstrate that Achilles “[verliert] fast jede Gegenwart, solange er nicht körperlich gegenwärtig ist” (15). A glance at the original text makes clear the almost incomprehensible inappropriateness of this illustrative choice, for the details of the episode make rather the opposite point. What Auerbach neglects to mention in his passing reference is that Patroclus enters the battle wearing Achilles’ armor, in order to fool the enemy warriors into thinking that Achilles’ himself has swallowed his fury and joined the fight; the ruse works, and the borrowed garments therefore serve to keep Achilles constantly before the reader’s eyes. (Consider, for instance, the following verses, which describe Patroclus entering the fray: “The Trojans, soon as they saw Menoetius’ gallant son, / himself and his loyal driver flare in brazen gear – / all their courage quaked, their columns buckled, / thinking swift Achilles had tossed to the winds / his hard rage that held him back by the ships,” p. 421. The Iliad. Trans. Robert Fagles, New York: Penguin Books, 1990.) Another such example is the pointed irony of the dialogue between Penelope and a disguised Odysseus in Book 19, just after the foot washing scene. It is possible, of course, to read this scene, in which Penelope narrates a prophetic dream and announces the archery context, as simply an exchange between a polite and sympathetic vagabond and his gracious lady host. The veiled double meaning of Penelope’s speech – her ingenuous plea for help with the interpretation of her dream, her unnecessary lingering over the details of the sleeping arrangements – must in this case be ascribed to the superior knowledge of
Auerbach’s characterization of the horizontal form is problematic at a more general level as well, since it seems unlikely that the description he offers in this first chapter could realistically apply to any textual narrative, despite the fact that it supposedly originated with one, depending as it does on textually unattainable criteria like “vollkommene Klarheit,” “ununterbrochenes Vorüberziehen,” and “gleichmäßige Beleuchtung.” Ultimately, of course, every text requires a decision as to what should be left out and what should stay, how much the reader can infer and how much must be made explicit, and the rules by which these decisions are made – rules that remain external to the text and that have little or nothing to do with the relationship between contiguous events – form an ordering principle that can only be described as vertical. In the realm of textual narrative, the difference is always a quantitative one of degree, rather than a qualitative one of direction. In other words, to extend Auerbach’s analogy into the absurd, all texts have slope.

What, in that case, does Auerbach hope to accomplish with his description of such a form? Why force his texts to assume a perpendicular relation that he must know is a distortion? We will have a better sense of the issues at stake if we recall from our brief analysis that the perpendicular axes of the chapter and work are defined by an opposition between dynamic and static forms of representation, for this distinction invests his account of the two texts with an emotional and moral urgency that would be incomprehensible in a commentary devoted solely to the question of literary style. The reasons behind this urgency emerge most clearly in the passages devoted to the distinction between the legendary and the historical:

12 Auerbach himself has something to say on this subject: “Hier habe ich zunächst einzuruäumen, daß die Motive der Spannungslosigkeit und ‘Vordergründigkeit’ Homers im ersten Kapitel allzu stark betont sind, und daß ich überhaupt mit meinem ersten Kapitel nicht ganz zufrieden bin […] Einen Augenblick erwog ich, das Homerkapitel ganz fallen zu lassen – für meine Zwecke hätte es genügt mit der Zeit um Christi Geburt zu beginnen. Aber eine Einleitung zu finden, die an Deutlichkeit und Wirksamkeit für die Problemstellung sich mit dem Homerkapitel hätte messen können, erwies sich als undurchführbar […] es schien mir berechtigt, Motive stark hervorzuheben, auf die es im Zusammenhang des Buches ankommt, und die richtig gesehen, wenn auch einseitig herausgearbeitet sind” (“Epilegomena zu Mimesis”, see note 10, p. 2).
Die Sage verläuft übermäßig glatt. Alles Querlaufende, aller Reibungswiderstand, alles Sonstige, Sekundäre, welches in die Hauptereignisse und Hauptmotive hineinspielt, alles Unentschiedene, Gebrochene und Schwankende, welches den klaren Gang der Handlung und die einfache Richtung der handelnden Personen verwirrt, ist ausgewaschen. Die Geschichte, welche wir miterleben oder aus Zeugnissen Miterlebender erfahren, verläuft sehr viel uneinheitlicher, widerspruchsvoller und wirr [...] Die Sage ordnet den Stoff in eindeutiger und entschiedener Weise, sie schneidet ihn aus dem sonstigen Weltzusammenhang heraus, so daß dieser nicht verwirrend eingreifen kann [...] Man denke an die Geschichte, welcher wir selbst beizwohnen; wer etwa das Verhalten der einzelnen Menschen und Menschengruppen beim Aufkommen des Nationalsozialismus in Deutschland, oder das Verhalten der einzelnen Völker und Staaten vor und während des gegenwärtigen (1942) Krieges erwägt, der wird fühlen, wie unbrauchbar sie für die Sage sind [...] und bei allen Beteiligten sind die Motive so vielschichtig, daß die Schlagworte der Propaganda nur durch rohste Vereinfachung zustande kommen – was zur Folge hat, daß Freund und Feind vielfach die gleichen verwenden können (22).

Homer and the Hebrew Bible have disappeared for the moment, as though they were all along only a means to this particular end, and they have left behind two highly charged, conceptually unwieldy abstractions to finish off a battle that was never more than partly textual to begin with. The discussion enters the narrative present abruptly, without transition, but the marked increase in rhetorical intensity makes it possible to read this passage as a kind of surreptitious climax disguised as a digression. Auerbach jumps back and forth repeatedly between the deceptive surface of the legendary and the profoundly historical present – a present definitively anchored by the jarringly precise parenthetical inscription “(1942)” and defined above all by its resistance to legendary simplification – until, in one of the most telling movements of the entire work, he suddenly brings the two together by ascribing to the “literary” productions of propaganda the status of the modern legend. The undeniable relation between the Homeric horizontal and the fascist legendary expresses itself through a disturbing inversion of value. “Ausgeformt” reappears metamorphosed into “ausgewaschen,” “gleichmäßig belichtet” into “übermäßig glatt.” In place of the exhaustive expressivity, the rounded totality, the leisurely, all-encompassing inclusiveness of the Homeric style, there stands a frightening catalogue of exclusions which reads too much like a list of politically undesirable elements (“alles Querlaufende, aller Reibungswiderstand, alles Sonstige [...] Gebrochene und Schwankende”) to function innocently as the “objective” characterization of a representational form. In the realm of the modern legendary, real historical complication (1942) tips over into a false and falsely timeless simplicity, prefiguring the structure of the book’s concluding lines.

Auerbach, it turns out, is entirely aware of the counter-textual nature of his horizontal paradigm, aware that in the realm of text its two-dimensional simplicity can be achieved only by means of a conjuring trick, and aware, too, of the mutilations a text must undergo in order to achieve this illusion. His description of the legendary chronicles this procedure, making clear in the process that, far from devaluing the paradigm as an explanatory figure, the impossible demands
of the horizontal may actually engender the true terms of the discussion – a discussion that now appears to concern itself primarily, albeit surreptitiously, with the ethical implications of literary-historical forms. The inaccessibility of the horizontal ideal necessitates, in the case of a horizontally-oriented text, an element of deception at the origin of literary production; the apparently artless simplicity of the legendary always dissimulates a highly artificial process of (over)simplification. For Auerbach, this dissimulation is never entirely innocent, and his extremely ambivalent relation to the power of the Homeric style belies his tolerant dismissal of its creator as a “harmloser Lügner” (16). The Homeric narratives “bezaubern uns und schmeicheln sich bei uns ein”; reading them, we are magically transported into their world (“hineingezaubert”) and become temporarily lost to our own, complex historical reality, an effect at which Homer clearly aims (“er umgarnt uns, er spinnt uns in sic ein”) (15). In these ostensibly descriptive observations, we hear the anxiety called forth by the confrontation with a magic that “snares” and “charms” its victim into loss of conscious control, a magic, indeed, recognized as dangerous even within the realm of the legendary – think, for instance, of the sirens, the lotus eaters, or the terrible, transformative beauty of Circe. It is, however, the reference to propaganda, in its role as the modern legendary, which clinches the case against the horizontal illusion, for here we see the source of the ethical urgency that, for Auerbach, legitimates his distortion of the Homeric poems. Homer, after all, may qualify as a harmless liar, but his modern day counterparts can not be so easily exonerated.

Homer, however, is not the only casualty of Auerbach’s war on modernity; the biblical narrative, too, appears here primarily as a sign of things to come. To see this, we need only recall the language he uses to describe the crucially un-Homeric relationship between biblical narrative and biblical meaning: “[D]ie Geschichten sind eben nicht, wie die Homers, bloß erzählte ‘Wirklichkeit’. In ihnen inkarniert sich Lehre und Verheißung.” And again, a few lines later: “Die Lehre und das Streben nach Erleuchtung sind unlösbar mit der Sinnlichkeit der Erzählung verbunden” (17).13 Biblical meaning, for Auerbach, occurs as a divinely inspired rupture in the smooth surface of epic self-containment, blasting open the boundaries of the static, Homeric universe to animate the dead letter of the physical world, forcing it to gesture toward a transcendent beyond that reveals itself – miraculously, provisionally – only by assuming bodily form. The notion of embodied meaning fascinates Auerbach for its ability to transcend both the referential relationship of substitution, in which the sign disappears into the signified once meaning has been achieved, and the tautological non-relationship of self-identity, in which things merely are but never mean. In Auerbach’s biblical paradigm, world and text become the meeting ground for irreconcilable opposites, the precarious site of a transformative encounter between Word and Flesh.

13 Emphasis mine, S.P.
The difficulty, of course, is that Auerbach here imposes his interpretation, and with it an entire theory of textual and historical meaning, onto a text far older than the paradigm of incarnation he so clearly has in mind, and in doing so, effectively Christianizes the perspective he anachronistically refers to as Jewish – transforming the Akedah into a prefiguration of the Christian sacrifice. It is the Christian method of figural interpretation, with its emphasis on embodied meaning, which shapes Auerbach’s understanding of the Hebrew narrative and provides him with a redemptive counterpart to the exclusions and dissimulations of the horizontal legendary. The figural mode of comprehending history rests on a technique of reading developed by early Christian thinkers in order to assimilate for a Christian teleology the “historical” material of the Hebrew scriptures. In his early essay, “Figura,” Auerbach describes it as follows: “Die Figuraldeutung stellt einen Zusammenhang zwischen zwei Geschehnissen oder Personen her, in dem eines von ihnen nicht nur sich selbst, sondern auch das andere bedeutet, das andere hingegen das eine einschließt oder erfüllt.” Both moments, though often separated by vast amounts of time, remain immersed “in dem fließenden Strom, […] welcher das geschichtliche Leben ist,” and only the interpretive understanding that connects them, in accordance with a vertical organizing principle neither chronological nor causal, qualifies as a “geistiger Akt.”

The authority of this interpretive understanding and, consequently, the authority of the figural connection, remains always provisional, for it depends on a revelation as yet only partially complete. The incarnation of the Word through Christ’s embodied existence, which fulfills the already embodied history of the Hebrew scriptures, gestures in turn toward a final sublimation, a final fulfillment of history that will occur only at the end of time, a “Zukünftiges, […] welches erst das Eigentliche, voll und wirklich und endgültig Geschehende sein wird.” At this point, however, the temporality becomes rather complicated. For the same “ausbleibende verheißene Dritte” that will eventually transcend and preserve the original, historical duality of figure and fulfillment “ist, obgleich noch als Geschehen unvollendet, bereits in Gott vollständig erfüllt und war es in

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14 This hermeneutic approach is perhaps not quite as bizarre as it might at first appear. Auerbach, after all, devoted much of his scholarly life to the works of the early church fathers. His apparent willingness to Christianize the Hebrew scriptures might, however, raise some doubt about one of Geoffrey Green’s theses in his book *Literary Criticism and the Structures of History*. Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982). Green reads Auerbach’s decision to begin his investigation of the western literary tradition with the Hebrew scriptures as a gesture of political resistance, but it would be hard to argue, here, in light of the interpretation being offered, that Auerbach is really attempting to “re-justify” either the Bible or the European tradition he credits the Bible with grounding.


16 Auerbach, “Figura” (see note 15), p. 77.

17 Auerbach, “Figura” (see note 15), p. 80.
seiner Vorschung von Ewigkeit her.” History as a succession of meaningful figures, as “Gleichnis,” must therefore be considered “sowohl vorläufig als auch verhüllte jederzeitliche Wirklichkeit”; its true reality, unknowable from a temporal vantage point, is guaranteed by the extra-temporality of the third and final interpretive term and thus, ultimately, by the atemporality of a transcendent God. Only God, himself outside history, can invest concrete historical material with the capacity to mean. 19

Whether conceived as a rhetorical figure that maintains its literal, bodily character – the conceptual foundation of the Incarnation 20 – or as a literal reality that

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18 Auerbach, “Figura” (see note 15), p. 81. The Hegelian resonances are not, of course, accidental. Auerbach’s reading of Dante – a reading which both inspires and directs his investigation of the term “figura,” and with which the essay concludes – is deeply and explicitly (see “Figura,” p. 89) influenced by Hegel’s interpretation of the world of the Comedia as the realm of the figure fulfilled: “Statt einer besonderen Begebenheit hat [Dantes Gedicht] das ewige Handeln, den absoluten Endzweck, die göttliche Liebe in ihrem unvergänglichen Geschehen und ihren unabänderlichen Kreisen zum Gegenstande, die Hölle, das Fegefeuer, den Himmel zu seinem Lokal und senkt nun die lebendige Welt menschlichen Handelns und Leidens und näher der individuellen Taten und Schicksale in dies wechsellose Dasein hinein […] zugleich aber steht das sonst Vergänglichste und Flüchtigste der lebendigen Welt objektiv in seinem Innersten ergründet, in seinem Wert und Unwert durch den höchsten Begriff, durch Gott gerichtet, vollständig episch da” (G.W. Hegel, Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik III. Werke. Bd. 15, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986, pp. 406–7). The notion of the figural also contains, however, an implicit critique of Hegel’s prioritization of abstraction, a prioritization that allows Hegel to subject the concept of concreteness to its famous dialectical inversion. Thus, shortly after acknowledging the significance of the Hegelian perspective, Auerbach speaks of a figural perspective in which “die historische Wirklichkeit durch die tiefer Bedeutung nicht aufgehoben, sondern bestätigt und erfüllt [wird]” (p. 90, emphasis mine, S.P.).

19 One of the most interesting consequences of this “middle road” between meaning and matter is that the figural perspective implicitly collapses any meaningful distinction between historical reality and its textual representation. History, even in its extra-literary form, unfolds for the figural worldview as a narrative in which God has inscribed hidden meanings to be parsed by the faithful. Auerbach does not explicitly note this peculiarity – perhaps because he, too, rejects such a distinction. Consider, for instance, the passage in which he pronounces figural interpretation to be different from symbolic or mythological interpretation “dadurch, daß sich die Realprophetie auf Geschichtsdeutung bezieht, ja von Haus aus Textinterpretation ist”: textual interpretation and historical understanding appear here as synonym (“Figura,” see note 15, p. 80). The refusal to differentiate clearly between history and text shapes Auerbach’s entire conception of the philological project. Philology, in his eyes, is first and foremost a “historische Disziplin,” its literary subject matter “die innere Geschichte der letzten Jahrtausende” (Auerbach, “Philologie der Weltliteratur,” see note 5, p. 41). The figure, for Auerbach as well as for the Christian theologians, is always readable as both rhetorical moment and historical event. For an interesting attempt to confront the strangeness of this conflation, see Timothy Bahti’s study, “Auerbach’s Mimesis: Figural Structure and Historical Narrative” (in: After Strange Texts. The Role of Theory in the Study of Literature. Ed. Gregory Jay and David Miller, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1985, pp. 124–145).

20 This idea was also available to antiquity, though in substantially weaker form, as a category in Quintilian’s rhetorical handbook. See the passages in “Figura” devoted to Quintilian’s distinction between “trope” and “figure”: the former names a category in which the figurative meaning acts as a substitute for the literal one, the latter a category in which the figurative usage appears alongside the literal meaning (Auerbach, “Figura”, see note 15, pp. 62–4).
receives the provisional imprint of referential, figurative meaning, figural history must continuously enact a kind of “Kampf zwischen sinnlicher Erscheinung und Bedeutung” if it is to retain its redemptive function as a meeting ground of difference (52). Defined against both meaningless contiguity and atemporal substitution – the purely literal view of history, on the one hand, which perceives only a “niemals abreißende horizontale Linie des weiteren Geschehens”\(^2\), and the purely figurative or allegorical view on the other, which replaces the historical nature of the figural relationship with an abstract, theological concept – the figural paradigm turns out to encode, among other things, a 20th century philologist’s response to the so-called crisis of values. Grounded in the rigorously provisional reality of a truly time-bound form, the figural stands alone in the European tradition as a viable source of real, historical meaning; it alone directs the trajectory of \textit{Mimesis}, determines all interpretive value judgments, and justifies the opposition between Homer and the Hebrew Bible, for it alone transcends the binaries of modern experience in the struggle to join meaning and matter. The anachronism involved in reading a medieval form against the backdrop of a modern dilemma is the product of the perspectival method Auerbach unapologetically defends in “Epilegomena zu \textit{Mimesis},” as the only intellectually honest way of writing history:

\[\text{[A]m Ende habe ich gefragt: wie sehen die Dinge im europäischen Zusammenhang aus? Einen solchen Zusammenhang kann heute niemand von anderswoher sehen als eben von heute, und zwar von dem Heute, welches durch seine, des Sehenden, persönliche Herkunft, Geschichte und Bildung bestimmt ist […] \textit{Mimesis} ist ganz bewußt ein Buch, das ein bestimmter Mensch, in einer bestimmten Lage, zu Anfang der 1940er Jahre geschrieben hat.}^{22}\]

We will return presently to the question of Auerbach’s perspective; for the moment, it suffices to note that the figural paradigm, understood as a theory of meaning in the context of a modern crisis, provides a roundabout answer to the problem of secular humanism.

The answer goes something like this: The figural paradigm can generate no meaning without God. It is God who introduces and anchors the possibility of a timeless, transcendent truth to be revealed at the end of time, and this truth, in turn, that gives history the directional energy of a drama. And it is God himself, a transcendent cipher entangled in a relation with the worldly immanence he occasionally sees fit to rupture, who provides the model for the inherently paradoxical relationship between the provisional particulars of history and the timeless universal of truth – the relationship figural interpreters call meaning. Without God, then, the notion of meaning requires an alternative model, and \textit{Mimesis} prepares its readers to expect just such an alternative; according to the logic of teleological overcoming that governs the first half of Auerbach’s history, the disappearance of God should produce a sea change on the level of the shift

\(^{21}\) Auerbach, “Figura”, see note 15, p. 81.

\(^{22}\) Auerbach, “Epilogomena zu Mimesis” (see note 10), p. 18.
from Homer to the Hebrew Bible, from Abraham to Christ. But this is not what happens. Neither the European tradition as it appears in *Mimesis*, nor *Mimesis* itself as the chronicle of that tradition manages to overcome the figural model in the direction of a new paradigm. Instead, secular humanism simply adopts the figural structures it inherits – and subtracts transcendence.

Let us take a closer look at how this works. Dante, famously, sounds the death knell for the figural method of the pre-humanist age, and prepares the way for the great tradition of human-centered meaning to come, by allowing the extraordinary intensity and concreteness of his human characters to overpower the vertical, meaning-bestowing frame of the timeless afterlife:

There follows a period of two centuries during which the sublime and the everyday remain separated by the chasm Dante creates when he transcends the vertically-oriented interpretive space where otherworldly meaning and worldly matter once met. The notion of the real as a potentially problematic sphere, infused with the capacity to point beyond its own concrete thingness, first regains prominence in sixteenth century France with the innovations of Rabelais and, even more crucially, Montaigne. For if Auerbach’s Rabelais celebrates the amorphous but apparently unlimited potential for meaning beyond the tyranny of the Christian vertical, if for him reality appears for the first time as an open ocean of opportunities on which a post-figural humanity can float freely without succumbing to the rigor of direction, then it is Auerbach’s Montaigne who attempts to actualize this potential by directing it toward a new interpretive goal, who replaces one teleology with another and in doing so, blazes a trail across the open sea for humanity to follow. The search for a humanist model of meaning must therefore begin with Montaigne.

Montaigne himself begins with himself, turning inward to explore the subject he knows best in the dynamic fullness of its temporal unfolding, pragmatically and unapologetically positioning Michel de Montaigne, sixteenth century resident and one-time mayor of Bordeaux, at the center of his interpretive universe. The principles behind his investigation are simple but revolutionary. Rather than interpreting history as a way of gaining access to a transcendent God, he will sift through the concrete material of his inner experience as a way of gaining access to the human as such. Such a project presupposes the existence of the human essence it seeks to explore, defining it from the outset as the totality of possibilities in which the self, as human being, necessarily participates; it is the stipulated “fact” of participation, the presupposition of a meaningful, non-arbitrary relationship between the human essence as realm of possibility and the concrete human as sphere of actualization, that enables the self to assume the represent-
ative function Montaigne assigns it in the passage Auerbach cites: “chaque homme porte la forme entière de l’humaine condition” (271). An investigation of the self can stand in for an investigation of all human beings everywhere because every self has at least potential access to every aspect of the human condition, and thus to the totality of the human essence. This access remains merely potential, however, so long as the various possibilities of humanness fail to take concrete shape within the world of experience, for only those aspects of the human condition that the self actually actualizes can be considered by Montaigne as material for his interpretive investigation. The human essence itself does not exist for him, apart from its embodied revelation in the material world of concrete experience, and even the relatively certain truths of self-knowledge are never more than provisional. In Auerbach’s words:

Auerbach, of course, interprets Montaigne’s emphatic refusal to separate truth from world – together with his more prosaic but no less significant refusal to separate mind and body – in terms of the Christian tradition of embodied meaning that Montaigne, as a nominal Catholic, would certainly have inherited. But this profound, structural affinity can neither disguise nor diminish for Auerbach the radically new and distinctly non-Christian character of the immanent, human truth the *Essais* seek. “Montaigne,” he assures us, “ist etwas Neues” (281).

Readers determined to pinpoint a paradigm shift will discover one in Auerbach’s account of Montaigne, and they will not be wrong. Certainly Auerbach himself understands his account this way, for Montaigne’s unorthodox interpretive approach emerges here quite clearly as the forerunner, not only of his own philological project, but of the secular humanist project per se:

This passage contains as good a description of the interpretive method Auerbach considers his own as any of the more explicit reflections to be found in other texts.23 Indeed, in an earlier essay entitled “Giambattista Vico und die Idee

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der Philologie,” Auerbach celebrates the 18th century historian for developing a structure nearly identical to the one mentioned here in an effort to anchor his groundbreaking philological studies of primitive peoples. Vico’s notion of a sensus communis potentially available to every human being, grounded not in abstract concepts and definitions but on bodily “Instinkt und Gewohnheit,” allows him, according to Auerbach, to close the as yet non-existent hermeneutic circle, anticipate German historicism, and write “das erste Werk der verstehenden Philologie” – the very work Auerbach repeatedly credits with exerting such extraordinary influence on his own methods.  

Writing on Montaigne, however, Auerbach seems more intent on making the much broader claim that this particular, anachronistically Diltheyian brand of secular humanism (or Vicoian historicism) introduces into the tradition a new and universally applicable way of confronting the world without a transcendentally anchored, vertical frame. Yet for all the radical novelty of Montaigne’s orientation, the actual structure of the project outlined in these passages should look strikingly familiar. Indeed, if one conceives of interpreting self and interpretive object as two distinct historical events, separated by time but connected by a common ground of potential humanity, Auerbach’s characterization of the figural method can function as an accurate description of their relation: “Die Figuraldeutung stellt einen Zusammenhang zwischen zwei Geschehnissen oder Personen her, in dem eines von ihnen nicht nur sich selbst, sondern auch das andere bedeutet, das andere hingegen das eine einschließt oder erfüllt.” But where is God, who anchors the system and gives direction to the whole? Where is the atemporal third term that could guide the interpreting subject in establishing a non-arbitrary relation between the event of its own being and the past event of an other? We have several candidates competing for this particular honor, since each version of the humanist interpretive project seems to include its own transcendent, atemporal term, from Montaigne’s human essence, to Vico’s divine providence – otherwise known as the verum, in opposition to the concretely appearing and therefore provisional certum – to Auerbach’s own conception of history as drama, proceeding according to a plan that transcends the horizontal march of time. But whereas the divine anchor of the figural paradigm occasionally ruptures the immanent  

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25 For an extremely lucid formulation of Auerbach’s conception of history and its foundation in the ethical necessity of a hypothetical “plan,” accessible only to intuition and speculation, see the opening paragraph of the lecture entitled “Vico und Herder,” delivered in 1931 at the Deutsch-Italienischen Forschungsinstitut Köln and printed in Auerbach, Gesammelte Aufsätze zur romanschen Philologie (see note 15), pp. 222–231. The purely heuristic character of the conceptually necessary third term, common to all post-Christian attempts to make meaning out of history, is exposed here with unusual clarity: “Mit der Auflösung der geschlossenen christlichen Welt in Europa zerfällt die transzendentente Sinngebung des menschlichen Lebens […]”, p. 223.
fabric of history through revelation, thereby securing the interpretive relation between temporal world and atemporal truth, its secular imitation remains conscientiously beyond the reach of the realm whose concrete multiplicity it unifies and fulfills. Since the content of the secular third term remains radically unknowable, accessible only through the additive accumulation of concrete evidence out of which organizing principles are supposed to somehow, spontaneously emerge, its terms have no power to guide interpretation. They are, in the end, little more than empty, totalizing abstractions, each one a different name for the purely theoretical sum of all possible historical events.

Auerbach admits as much when he names Montaigne as the first to acknowledge what Auerbach himself understands to be the specifically modern phenomenon of dislocation and rootlessness:

"Er hat von allen Zeitgenossen am reinsten das Problem der Selbstorientierung des Menschen gesehen; die Aufgabe, sich ohne feste Stützpunkte in der Existenz Wohnlichkeit zu schaffen. Bei ihm zum ersten Male wird das Leben des Menschen, das beliebige eigene Leben als Ganze, im modernen Sinne problematisch (296)."

This, then, is the real sense in which Montaigne is "etwas Neues." Unlike his predecessors, he undertakes the interpretive project of reading the world without any guarantee that truth and matter can actually be joined, "ohne feste Stützpunkte" for the Christian structure he inherits but also without a reasonable alternative to the embodied meaning it generates. Under the influence of secularization, the figural paradigm comes unmoored and begins to float aimlessly around on Rabelais' sea of possibilities. No longer able to point forward toward a future fulfillment that could give provisional direction to the act of interpretation, it turns around to take its cue from the past in the hope that the events, given proper encouragement, will begin to speak for themselves. The only vertical element that remains – a pale shadow of God's meaning-bestowing ruptures – is the vertical imposed by the interpreting self as a result of that peculiarly intuitive and criterion-less negotiation between identity and difference, Verstehen and Beurteilen, which constitutes for Auerbach the "Kunst" of philology.27

26 In the final chapter Auerbach will rather conventionally assign culpability for this seasickness to the historical situation surrounding the two world wars, to a breakdown in values that culminates in a dangerously rootless relativism; here it becomes interestingly clear that his understanding of the dilemma is rather more complex.

27 "So bleibt die Erforschung geschichtlicher Vorgänge im weitesten Sinne […] eine Sache des urteilenden Verstehens oder des 'Wiederauffindens' im Geiste des Erforschenden […] Es ist eine mit gelehrtem Material arbeitende Kunst" (Auerbach, Literaturprache und Publikum, see note 23, p. 11). See also "Philologie der Weltliteratur" (see note 5), p. 45: "Die historische Synthese, an die wir denken, obwohl sie nur auf der Grundlage wissenschaftlicher Durchdringung des Materials ihren Sinn finden kann, ist ein Erzeugnis persönlicher Intuition, und also nur vom Einzelnen zu erwarten."
Auerbach himself, of course, never discusses the secular “fulfillment” of the figural paradigm in such terms. His responsibility, as he understands it, is to defend and preserve the dying tradition of a unified Europe, and he has no intention of exposing an inheritance so vulnerable and precious to explicit accusations of such a damning kind. And yet, he can not avoid critique altogether; his reverence for the figural paradigm and its theory of embodied meaning drives him to acknowledge, however, subtly, the parodic degradation it endures in all its secular transformations. It is therefore entirely possible to read the post-Dante portion of *Mimesis* as the thinly disguised story of a steady decline, in which the various permutations of the figural lose more and more of their substance and power, the further they get from the anchoring mechanism on which their structure depends.

Standing at the very origin of secular humanism, Rabelais and Montaigne both fare rather well in this regard, for Auerbach makes clear in both cases that their admirable refusal to separate mind from body, along with their tendency to assign a non-arbitrary spiritual weight to the concrete, worldly material of their narratives, derives directly from the Christian tradition of incarnate truth out of which they both spring (see 258, 295). These first two humanists participate for Auerbach in something like a liminal moment of grace, during which the Christian frame manages to exert considerable influence even at the instant of being transcended. Even so, there are a few dire signs of things to come. When Auerbach observes, for instance, that the Rabelaisian man tends to forfeit the fixed boundaries of the Christian individual in favor of a protean participation in the common, bodily experience of man as natural animal — “die gemeinsamen, über-individuellen Züge, zumal die animalischen, instinktiven, werden sehr stark hervorgehoben” (264) — or when he exempts Montaigne from a future levelling process for which the secular (“laienhafte”) reflections of the *Essais*, with their acute sensitivity to the “modern” dilemma of interpretive disorientation, nonetheless set the scene, he is gesturing toward the threat to which this revolutionary shift from God to man will eventually, inevitably succumb (294). Other such moments serve a similar function. The emphasis on Restoration-era France, birthplace of modern secular realism, as a claustrophic realm of suffocating boredom and paralyzing hopelessness, the peculiarly precise perversion of the figural relation-

28 For a rather different way of understanding modern realism as the fulfillment of the medieval figural worldview, see Hayden White’s study “Auerbach’s Literary History: Figural Causation and Modernist Historicism,” in which he claims that *Mimesis* presents western literary history as a story of the ‘fulfillment’ of the ‘figure’ of figuraiity” (in: Lerer, *Literary History*, see note 3, pp. 124–139, here p. 125). White, like so many other readers of *Mimesis*, ignores the pessimistic thrust of the book in order to focus on the figural — both medieval and modern — as a mode of historical interpretation that transcends mere mechanical causality: “The figure-fulfillment model is, therefore, a model for comprehending the syntagmatic dimensions of historical happening and for constructing the narrative line for the presentation of that history,” p. 129.
ship accomplished by Flaubert’s “fulfillment” of Dante⁹⁻, Stendhal’s sense of his own age as a post-historical wasteland, beyond all possibility of change and thus also beyond redemption³⁰: all these instances combine to prefigure the apocalyptic abolition of difference that must one day issue from the absence of a meaning-bestowing, boundary-drawing, difference-preserving vertical.

From the tonality of the final chapter, it is clear that Auerbach believes he has lived to see the day of abolition dawn. Understood in this eschatological context, the “wenige” who fear the reductive simplicity of a world without difference clearly anticipate the elitist “wir” of his 1952 essay “Philologie der Weltliteratur,” a “wir” whose urgent but impossible task is to synthesize and record the drama of human history, in all its infinite variety, before it disappears forever. Both the “few” and the “we” refer here to the philologists of the modern age, and the incomparable historical vantage point they treasure is the “Endstadium” of history – a standpoint that corresponds to the figural Judgement Day, to the final moments before time ends for all eternity, when total synthesis becomes possible and an omnipotent vertical subsumes into its meaningful structure the entire horizon of experience:

[D]enn mir erschienen schon sehr früh, und immer dringender, die europäischen Möglichkeiten der romanischen Philologie nicht nur als Möglichkeiten, sondern als Aufgabe, deren Erfüllung erst jetzt und gerade noch jetzt versucht werden könne. Die europäische Gesittung ist nahe der Grenze ihres Daseins […] Es schien und scheint mir die Zeit gekommen, wo der Versuch, jene geschichtliche Einheit […] zu erfassen, unternommen werden muß.⁳¹

⁹ Timothy Bahti was the first to point out and explore this relationship of perverted fulfillment in “Auerbach’s Mimesis” (see note 19), a study devoted to Auerbach’s Flaubert chapter. Bahti reads the modern secularization of the figural structure as a literalization of the (figural) allegory of history; he thus understands literature as a potentially redemptive force within the context of Auerbach’s thought, since literature could be considered capable of re-animating, or – more literally – de-literalizing the dead letter of history.

³⁰ Lazlo Géfin, in “Auerbach’s Stendhal: Realism, Figurality and Refiguration” (in: Poetics Today 20:1, 1999, pp. 27–40) expands on Auerbach’s notion of Stendhalian belatedness by arguing that Stendhal’s ironic use of intertextual models produces a structure of “disfigured figurality,” in which the novelistic universe takes on the status of a belated and hence inherently shadowy, lifeless figure in relation to an already accomplished (literary) fulfillment.

³¹ Auerbach, Literatursprache und Publikum (see note 23), pp. 9–10. Compare the following lines from Auerbach, “Philologie der Weltliteratur” (see note 5): “Wenn die Zukunftsgedanken, mit denen ich begann, einige Berechtigung besitzen, so ist die Aufgabe, das Material zu sammeln und zu einheitlicher Wirkung zu bringen, dringend. Denn gerade wir sind noch, wenigstens grundsätzlich, in der Lage, die Aufgabe zu erfüllen: nicht nur, weil wir über so viel Material verfügen, sondern vor allem, weil wir den historisch-perspektivischen Sinn ererbt haben, der dazu erforderlich ist. Wir besitzen ihn noch, da wir noch mitten in der Erfahrung von geschichtlicher Mannigfaltigkeit leben, ohne die, wie ich fürchte, jener Sinn schnell an lebendiger Konkretheit verlieren könnte. Wir also, so scheint mir, leben in einem Kairos der verstehenden Geschichtsschreibung; ob viele Generationen ihm noch angehören werden, ist fraglich,” p. 41.
The flattening that follows on the heels of this necessarily liminal clarity levels the dissonant cognitive power inscribed in the spatio-temporal extremity of Istanbul, 1945 – this “Ort des Abschlusses und der Wendung, der zugleich Über-schau gestattet wie nie zuvor”32 – in a process which is structurally analogous to the apocalyptic shift from history to eternity. Small wonder, then, that Auerbach’s rhetoric at times recalls the revelatory visions and moral urgency of the biblical prophets. Thus the distortions inflicted by propaganda on a world still too differentiated to accommodate it appear as a “Meer von Schmutz und Blut,” echoing the moment in Revelations when “the second angel poured out his bowl upon the sea, and it became like the blood of a dead man” (379).33 The impending collapse of linguistic differentiation – described in a 1937 letter to Walter Benjamin, and again in “Philologie der Weltliteratur” – presents the pentecostal inversion of the confusion of Babel, a phenomenon described in the Book of Acts as a sign of the “last days.”34 Only against this eschatological background can the carefully chosen epigraph to Mimesis – Andrew Marvell’s famous opening lines, “Had we but world enough and time” – truly begin to resonate with the book it precedes, a book about the end of both world and time: “But at my back I always hear / Times winged Chariot hurrying near: / And yonder all before us lie / De-serts of vast Eternity.”35

And yet: always there is Auerbach’s gentle, pessimistic irony, undermining the pathos. For he is fully aware that it is not actually the world which is ending, but rather the humanist ideal of a unified Europe. Die europäische Gesittung ist nahe der Grenze ihres Daseins. Partial endings have no place in an authentic eschatology, and Auerbach’s partial apocalypse would therefore bring no longed-for revelation, no redemptive fulfillment even if it were not already compromised by its debased, parodic fulfillment of the Christian figural tradition. A figural fulfillment of the figural method, but an empty one, unlikely to reveal anything to the philologist’s watchful, interpretive eye beyond the utter hollowness of its own impotent structures. Here again, Auerbach demonstrates his awareness of the farce by turning his rhetoric inside out, just as he did in the passage where mod-

32 Auerbach, “Philologie der Weltliteratur” (see note 5), p. 42.
ern propaganda appeared as the terrifying “fulfillment” of the ancient legendary. The modern fascination with the depths of everyday existence – vertically-oriented, democratic, fraught with background, requiring interpretation – elicits from him only a stream of descriptive vocabulary (“etwas der Wirklichkeit Feindliches,” “Abwendung vom praktischen Lebenswillen,” “verbissener und radikaler Zerstörungsdrang,” “das Verschleierte, Unabgrenzbare ihres Sinnes,” “ausweglose Trauer” [513]) intended to emphasize the exhaustion of the paradigm and the futility of the modernist search for meaning.

Even more illuminating are the things he manages to say with the texts themselves, for the final chapter completely reverses the structure of the first in bestowing great power on its cited passages, taken from Woolf and Proust. Auerbach comments on each of them only briefly, preferring to paraphrase at great length and allow his laborious, painstaking re-writings to force the reader to re-read. A close look at the Woolf passage, in particular, reveals the extraordinary complexity of a discursive contribution that remains largely unacknowledged by Auerbach’s explicit analysis. The chapter opens with a long citation from the opening pages of To the Lighthouse, Woolf’s passionately ambivalent paean to her dead mother. A novelist who once considered renaming her genre after the elegy form36, Woolf depicts Mrs. Ramsey’s valiant battle – hopeless despite the undeniably life-affirming power of her maternal attitudes and instincts – against the inexorable forces of death and decay. The passage exudes precisely the kind of twilight-flavored nostalgia that Auerbach’s analysis will first critique and ultimately perform.

Scolding and demonstrating (how to make a bed, how to open a window, with hands that shut and spread like a Frenchwoman’s) all had folded itself quietly about her, when the girl spoke, as, after a flight through the sunshine the wings of a bird fold themselves quietly and the blue of its plumage changes from bright steel to soft purple. She had stood there silent for there was nothing to be said. He had cancer of the throat […] and there was no hope, no hope whatever […] (489).

Hope, after all, is a particular prerogative of the Christian figural perspective37, offshoot and origin of its generative dynamism and future-turned face. It has no place amidst the airless immanence of Woolf’s profoundly secular reconfiguration – a reconfiguration, moreover, that figures both the vertical, interpretive movement of the figural and the timeless horizontal into which it disappears38:


38 The novel, “der Teile von zwei zeitlich weitauseinanderliegenden Tagen schildert,” juxtaposes two trips to the same destination – one merely planned, one actually accomplished. Divorced by the text from their horizontal context, the two events enter into a by now familiar relation of fig-
Never did anybody look so sad. Bitter and black, half-way down, in the darkness, in the shaft which ran from the sunlight to the depths, perhaps a tear formed; a tear fell; the waters swayed this way and that, received it, and were at rest. Never did anybody look so sad (489).

Mrs. Ramsey’s beautiful face, floating above dark, unfathomable waters, unmistakably recalls the first line of Genesis and the spirit of the biblical God, hovering over the watery depths of a world not yet made. This revelation of a sublime, biblical dimension beneath the beautiful, Hellenic harmony of form – “Greek, blue-eyed, straight-nosed [...] the Graces assembling seemed to have joined hands in meadows of asphodel to compose that face” – produces a play of surfaces and depths that structures Auerbach’s reading of the relation between the various excurses and the framing event of the stocking (490). Whereas in the Homeric text, to which he explicitly compares it, the footwashing scene disappears during the narrative devoted to the scar, in the Woolf passage “das Bild von Mrs. Ramsay’s Gesicht bleibt während des Einschubs ständig gegenwärtig” (502). Whereas in Homer the originating incident and the excursus remain always side-by-side in a single, narrative plane, defined by their relation of contiguity, here the excurses function to rupture the beautiful surface by exerting a vertical, interpretive pressure, to produce “ein Sich-Öffnen des Bildes in die Bewußtseinstiefе,” and thus to transform the face into a potentially meaningful figure – though always, it must be remembered, under the sign of radical undecidability, a face framed by the interpretive disorientation repeatedly expressed in the pervasive “perhaps” (502). From Auerbach’s perspective, then, the most telling moment of all is clearly the one the passage itself most explicitly depicts: the single, individually differentiated tear falling vertically toward dissolution. In the primordial, ahistorical waters that open to receive and assimilate it, at a level far deeper and more powerful than that of the ruptured Hellenic surface, atemporal essence announces itself as the teleological endpoint and apocalyptic annulment-as-Aufhebung of radical, historical particularity. 39 It is therefore highly ap-
appropriate that the tiny passage should be framed by the repetition of the elegiac phrase, “Never did anybody look so sad” (489).