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The Realism of Erich Auerbach

NATHAN A. SCOTT, JR.

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The Realism of Erich Auerbach

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Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature. By Erich Auerbach. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953. 563 pages. \$7.50.

The Princeton University Press has recently given students of the history of literature and culture one of the handsomest gifts which it has been their good fortune to receive in many years. It is Mr. Willard Trask's translation of Erich Auerbach's remarkable book *Mimesis* which, in the years since the first appearance of the German edition in 1946, has become well-nigh a modern classic and which it is now a blessing for American readers to have available in English.

Mr. Auerbach's book should have a tonic effect upon us for more than one reason. To read an interpretation of some of the great moments of the Western tradition in literature that is as penetrating and as richly filled with fresh insights as this is, of course, to have the mind wonderfully stretched and to be furnished with fascinating new perspectives upon ancient and modern writers—like Homer and Petronius, Dante and Rabelais, Balzac and Stendhal, the Goncourts and Virginia Woolf—with whom one would already doubtless have wanted to claim familiarity. And to have the old and the familiar revived and given new urgency is always to have had a service rendered to our cultural life. But the importance of this book has just now, I believe, still another dimension. For, in those who are reading it, it is reinstating—at a time when this badly needs to be done—a sense of the true greatness of the vocation of literary criticism, when that vocation is taken up with sobriety and good faith by a man of great gifts of intellect and sensibility. This has, of course, been a great age of criticism, and we still have, on the American scene particularly, many critics of great distinction whose names we all know and whom we therefore need not mention individually here. But they are, most of them, men who are now in their fifties and early sixties, and though many of them continue to grow, their younger followers have too frequently used their masters' texts as authoritative concordances and have too frequently hardened their originally fresh insights into authoritative dogma—so that they themselves often strike us today as being mere academicians, in the worst sense of that word. They study with enormous thoroughness their Eliot and their Faulkner and ignore the *Odyssey* (except as it is to be referred to in their study of Joyce) and the *Canterbury Tales* and *War and Peace*. They patronize those writers whose work does not seem easily to lend itself to analysis in terms of *irony* and *myth* and *symbol*; and they condescend to their colleagues in criticism who do not choose to use this particular critical apparatus. The characteristic tone of their published work is that of a grim and humorless captiousness, and this is doubtless something of what Mr. Malcolm Cowley had in mind when he recently referred to our present period in criticism as an "Alexandrian" age.

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But Mr. Auerbach's recent book presents us with the example of a man who has obviously, first of all, felt it necessary to acquire an enormous amount of learning in stylistics and philology and in social and intellectual history before setting up as a critic, and who then, in order to carry out his task, has felt it necessary to study the whole of Western literature—not a single national literature, not a single period, not a single major figure, but the entire tradition. And thus it is that, standing in the modern tradition of Vossler and Spitzer and Ernst Curtius, he exemplifies a kind of literary scholarship that has few representatives today in the English-speaking world. And when one thinks of those breathless, nervously written little volumes of precious essays—so often unsupported by really sound learning or indeed by anything else other than temperament and ill-humor—that Criticism, Inc. is beginning to give us at the present time, one cannot but be grateful for the broad, humane scholarship of this distinguished European man of letters that requires for its expression not a thin little volume of essays but a tremendous book of almost 600 pages, that has to take as its subject nothing less than "The Representation of Reality in Western Literature," and that yet expresses Andrew Marvell's sigh on the epigraph page, "Had we but world enough and time . . ."

Mr. Auerbach's method involves an intensive analysis, in the order of their chronological succession, of a great number of selected passages from literature which he regards as crucial instances of "the great tradition." He begins with the famous scene in the XIXth book of the *Odyssey* in which Odysseus, after twenty years of being buffeted about by the wind and the waves and the caprice of the gods in his effort to get back home, finally returns to Ithaca, presents himself at the palace in disguise, and is recognized by his old nurse Eurycleia, who, in bathing his feet, discovers the scar on his leg which she knows her long-lost master has borne since boyhood. And the final chapter is devoted to two passages: the first is a narrative passage from the fifth section of the first part of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, in which Mrs. Ramsay, in anticipation of an expected trip with her six-year old son James to a lighthouse not far from the Ramsays' summer home, is measuring against little James' leg a brown stocking which is among some clothing which she is preparing as a gift for the lighthouse-keeper's little boy. And the second passage is that occurring toward the close of the first section of Volume I of Proust's *Le Temps retrouvé* in which the narrator recalls an evening during his childhood when, his mother not being able to put him to bed with the usual good-night kiss because there was a guest for supper, he couldn't get to sleep without the usual ceremony and indeed remained awake in a state of hypertension till, following the guest's departure, as his parents were preparing to retire for the night, they became sensible of the child's distress, and his father, departing from his customary severity, bade his wife spend the night in the little boy's room to calm him down.

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Between these two extremes of ancient and modern literature to which the first and final chapters are devoted, Mr. Auerbach, in the eighteen intervening chapters, gives us the full text of selected passages from major figures in the tradition like Tacitus, Dante, Boccaccio, Rabelais, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Molière, Voltaire, Schiller, Stendhal, Balzac and Zola; from minor figures like Ammianus Marcellinus and Antoine de la Sale, writers known perhaps only to specialists; and from books such as Augustine's *Confessions*, Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks*, the *Chanson de Roland*, the *Arthurian Romances* of Chrétien de Troyes, the twelfth-century Christmas play, the *Mystère d' Adam*, and the *Mémoires* of Saint-Simon. And he ranges all the way from classical antiquity to early medieval Latin literature and from Biblical literature to the French Enlightenment and on down to the great realists of the French nineteenth century. He does not confine himself to the major *genres* of imaginative literature—to poetry, drama, and the novel; but, instead, he works also with passages from memoirs, essays, histories, theological texts, and many other types of literature. For what he desires to give us is not literary history in the strict sense, but, rather, a history of European personality of which the historian or the theologian may well provide documentation as relevant as that furnished by the poet or the novelist.

Now what is done with this anthology of passages? Mr. Auerbach's way of working, it can first of all be said, involves the closest kind of analysis of texts with which he chooses to deal. The kind of inspection to which he submits his texts is, however, not quite of the sort to which the critical practice in recent times of men like Cleanth Brooks and R. P. Blackmur or William Empson and F. R. Leavis in the English-speaking world has accustomed us. He does not concentrate upon *irony* and *texture* or upon verbal ambiguities and symbolic patterns. He works rather in the tradition of stylistic analysis called *Stilforschung* which has been influential in modern German criticism, and he is primarily attentive to grammatical and syntactical structures and to diction. And upon the basis of this dimension of a literary text he infers an author's "attitudes" toward human life and the stratagems which he employs by way of expressing them. Then this leads him on to essays in social and intellectual history whose purpose is to draw a circle of definition around the periods and cultures and ideological atmospheres against the background of which a given writer's work is to be comprehended.

The title which Mr. Auerbach has given to his book, of course, immediately puts us in mind of the whole Aristotelian doctrine of art as imitation, and this in turn may lead us to suppose that he is purporting to offer us a history of realism in the development of Western literature. But, obviously, when as knowledgeable a literary scholar as Mr. Auerbach does nothing with Chaucer or with the great English realists of the eighteenth century, barely anything at all with the great Russians, and nothing with the traditions of realism and naturalism in twentieth-century British and American fiction, he is not interested in giving us a history of literary realism—at least not as "realism" was understood by the author of

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Le Roman Expérimental or by many of its major modern theorists. What he wants rather to do is to look at those moments in the Western tradition in literature when the everyday scene of human life was viewed with tragic seriousness and to ask what it was that made this possible. And his inquiry into this question leads him to the conclusion that the Western imagination has, historically, been enabled in literature to weave around ordinary, everyday reality the graces and glories of high tragedy only when it has abandoned the classical doctrine of levels of style. That doctrine—which was a chief bequest of the Greeks to the ancient world and to all subsequent ages giving birth to a revival of the classical spirit—held that there are distinct levels of literary representation that are determined by the stations of life from which a writer draws his human materials. There is, ancient theorists held, a high style and a low style, the former being reserved for the heroic personages and sublime events of epic poetry and tragic drama and the latter being reserved for realistic depictions of ordinary life which fell, they thought, in the province of comedy. Indeed, wherever realistic depictions of ordinary life appear in the literature of antiquity the effect is intended to be comic.

This rigoristic doctrine of stylistic levels was, however, broken by Christianity, whose ingression into the Western tradition made possible, for the first time really in European literature, a tragic realism. For the archetypal human drama related by the Biblical narrative was by no means enacted exclusively by persons of high rank and station. It is, indeed, precisely at this point that the Old Testament narrative, for example, differs so sharply from the traditions of Greek literature. And just here Mr. Auerbach, in his first chapter, establishes with great penetration several significant contrasts between Homeric poetry and the Old Testament. Homer was, of course, far removed from the hierarchical doctrine of the separation of styles which was later to gain almost universal acceptance throughout the ancient world—and yet, Mr. Auerbach's point is that, he was very much closer to it than the Old Testament. He is not, to be sure, afraid to mingle occasionally the realism of daily life with the sublime and the tragic—and Mr. Auerbach cites, as a case in point, the famous recognition scene in the *Odyssey* of the foot-washing and the discovery of Odysseus' scar by his old nurse Eurycleia. But, even so, "the great and sublime events in the Homeric poems take place far more exclusively and unmistakably among the members of a ruling class; and these are far more untouched in their heroic elevation than are the Old Testament figures, who can fall much lower in dignity (consider, for example, Adam, Noah, David, Job); and finally, domestic realism, the representation of daily life, remains in Homer in the peaceful realm of the idyllic, whereas, from the very first, in the Old Testament stories, the sublime, tragic, and problematic take shape precisely in the domestic and commonplace: scenes such as those between Cain and Abel, between Noah and his sons, between Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, between Rebekah, Jacob, and Esau, and so on, are inconceivable in the Homeric style" (p. 22). The Old Testament heroes are, to be sure, the "bearers of the divine will," and yet "the pendulum swing of their lives" is much wider than that of the Homeric heroes:

they are "fallible, subject to misfortune and humiliation. . . . There is hardly one of them who does not, like Adam, undergo the deepest humiliation—and hardly one who is not deemed worthy of God's personal intervention and personal inspiration. Humiliation and elevation go far deeper and far higher than in Homer, and they belong basically together" (p. 18). So it is no wonder, then, says Mr. Auerbach, that the great figures of the Old Testament—Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Job—have about them a kind of concreteness, a kind of directness, a kind of historicity, that the major figures of the Homeric world do not have, for the Hebraic mind is controlled by no impulse to segregate the noumenal from the contingencies of existential reality such as that which captured the Greek mind as early as Homer and which finally resulted in the emergence of the classical doctrine of stylistic levels. And, of course, the "realism" of the Biblical tradition, in Mr. Auerbach's view, gains its consummate expression in the New Testament account of the most sublime occurrence of human history—the scene of which is not a magnificently appointed palace but a lowly manger in Bethlehem and a lonely hill on Calvary.

Now it is this "realism" of the Biblical tradition, Mr. Auerbach argues, which was a chief formative power in the Christian culture of the Middle Ages and which re-emerged in the mysteries and moralities and allegories of the time. And he finds the clue to medieval realism in the old Christian concept of *figura*, a term which put us in mind of the early convention in Biblical exegesis, dating from the late patristic period, of viewing the events and characters of the Old Testament as anticipatory or *prefigurative* of those of the New. These early methods of Biblical study have, of course, long since been dismissed by modern scholars as "biblical alchemy" (the phrase, I believe, is Harnack's), because of their highly un-historical and rationalistic character. But what was important in them was a certain way of looking at reality: what was involved in the figural interpretation of Old Testament characters and episodes as phenomenal prophecies of the characters and events of the New Testament was a sense of the essential unity of the human story—a story whose beginning was God's creation of the world, whose climax was Christ's Incarnation and Passion, and whose conclusion will be Christ's second coming and the Last Judgment. "In principle, this great drama contains everything that occurs in world history. In it all the heights and depths of human conduct and all the heights and depths of stylistic expression find their morally or aesthetically established right to exist; and hence there is no basis for a separation of the sublime from the low and everyday, for they are indissolubly connected in Christ's very life and suffering. Nor is there any basis for concern with the unities of time, place, or action, for there is but one place—the world; and but one action—man's fall and redemption" (p. 158).

Thus it was that the ordinary reality of everyday was enabled to become a vital element of medieval Christian art and particularly of the Christian drama; and thus it was that the great tragic realism of Dante's *Commedia* became possible.

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The theonomous unity that had sustained a Dante was, of course, destined to be broken with the advent of the autonomous humanism of the Renaissance which progressively obscured the figural quality of experience. And in Boccaccio and Rabelais, in Shakespeare and in Cervantes we come upon writers who do not, characteristically, make any effort to envisage man as related to transcendent reality. The great personages of Shakespeare's tragic world, for example, are, as Paul Tillich has remarked of the figures in Rembrandt's portraits, "like self-enclosed worlds—strong, lonely, tragic but unbroken . . . expressing the ideals of personality of a humanistic Protestantism." These writers were still, to be sure, shaped by the Christian conscience, but it was not any longer their habit to regard man's relation to transcendent reality as giving a meaning and a center to personal life. They tended rather to regard the experience of life, with all of its tragedy and its hope, as determining the meaning of existence, and they found the clue to human fulfillment not in man's dependence upon transcendent grace but rather in the fullest actualization of the humanity latent in each individual.

Then in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there came a rebirth of classicism—and, with an inflexibility and a rigor that would doubtless have been regarded as excessive even in classical antiquity, the hierarchical doctrine of style was reestablished in literary theory. The consequences (particularly in French drama of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and in the sentimental bourgeois dramas and novels of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century German literature) of the highly rigid proscriptions with respect to style and the representation of reality which neo-classicism enforced upon the writers of the period are well known. And Mr. Auerbach reminds us of them again in order to confront us with the major crisis in the history of realism that occurred at the beginning of the modern period and from which "the great tradition" of realism was redeemed, this time not by Christianity but, by the advent of modern historicism, or rather what he refers to as "historism."

The modern movement of historicism was, of course, really a consequence of the Romantic protest against the Age of Reason: it was in part, that is, an expression of the Romantic protest against the static mechanism of the Newtonian *Weltanschauung*, and a protest which was itself made in behalf of a geneticist view of the universe as a process of growth and evolution. It was in the age of Goethe that this movement first reached its maturity, that time and history first began to assume fundamental importance for the modern mind. And the key figure in this development was Herder. Herder was himself doubtless greatly influenced by that strange genius of the early eighteenth century, Giovanni Battista Vico, but it is in him, and especially in his brilliant *Philosophy of History*, that we find a main source of the modern idea of history. It was Herder who taught the modern mind to be cognizant of the problem of time, and Hegel's remark in his *Aesthetik* (which was later to be taken over by Taine) that "Every work of art belongs to its time, its people, and its environment" was really an appropriation from him. Indeed, Herder is the starting-point of that whole tendency of modern historicism,

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as represented by such thinkers as Hegel and Ranke and Taine and Marx, to regard history as a special kind of reality, as the sphere of purely relative events, all of which are woven into one general pattern and all of which are exhaustively explicable by reference to purely immanent forces. And it is Mr. Auerbach's contention that it was this movement that prepared the ethos in which the dead weight of the neo-classical past could be lifted in the nineteenth century and in which the resurgence of an authentic realism in European literature could again become possible. For apart from this ethos, he feels, the radically *realistic* determination to represent man "as embedded in a total reality, political, social, and economic, which is concrete and constantly involving" (p. 463) could not have taken hold of writers like Stendhal and Balzac and Flaubert and the Goncourts and Zola, to the analysis of whose work he devotes many of his finest pages.

Then, finally, he gives us an account of twentieth-century realism in his last chapter which is devoted to Virginia Woolf, Proust, and Joyce. And here his feeling seems to be that we are now by way of entering into a new crisis in the history of realism, for the stream-of-consciousness method exemplified in these representative writers of our period Mr. Auerbach is inclined to regard as a "symptom of the confusion and helplessness, . . . a mirror of the decline of our world" (p. 551). Particularly in Joyce's last works and in many of the other important novels of our day "which employ multiple reflection of consciousness," he declares, "There is often something confusing, something hazy about them, something hostile to the reality which they represent. We not infrequently find a turning away from the practical will to live, or delight in portraying it under its most brutal forms. There is hatred of culture and civilization, brought out by means of the subtlest stylistic devices which culture and civilization have developed, and often a radical and fanatical urge to destroy. Common to almost all of these novels is haziness, vague indefinability of meaning: precisely the kind of uninterpretable symbolism which is also to be encountered in other forms of art of the same period" (p. 551). Once again, it appears that there are signs of an approaching debilitation in literature of the capacity to represent the common life of mankind on earth.

Here, then, is the design of a book with which it is to be hoped that great pains will be taken by those who are interested in the problems that it explores. And great pains it must be, if any fruitful use is to be made of it at all, for otherwise its purpose is likely to be misunderstood. This is so primarily because the extreme tenuity with which Mr. Auerbach elaborates his fundamental theoretical conceptions may well conceal the fact, except from the most careful reader, that his book is not simply a descriptive account of the fortunes and misfortunes of realism in the history of European literature. It is, of course, that too, but it is also something more than that, for, when it is scrutinized closely, it appears actually to be putting forth a kind of thesis. The thesis is nowhere highly schematized: indeed, it is only hinted at here and there and again, for Mr. Auerbach shares with many other literary men a certain skittishness about running the risks that must be in-

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curred when we enter the arena of philosophic discussion, where ideas have to be handled with a kind of severity and rigor which are not of the sort usually cultivated by the man whose personal culture is literary rather than philosophic. But, nevertheless, when we examine his book carefully, it does gradually become clear that, beyond his desire to describe certain of the main successes and failures of literary realism in the European tradition, he wants also to put forward a normative conception of realism in literature. He seems to be saying something of this sort, that literature of the greatest depth and intensity exhibits a special kind of realism: the nature of this realism is, however, adequately defined neither by the properties of comedy nor by those of tragedy—neither by the comic moralism say, of Molière nor by the aristocratic humanism of Shakespeare. The trouble with Molière is that, though he achieved “the greatest measure of realism which could still please in the fully developed classical literature of the France of Louis XIV” (p. 365), he yet “seeks the individually real only for the sake of its ridiculousness, and to him ridiculousness means deviation from the normal and customary” (p. 362). His approach to the common life is “entirely moralistic; that is to say, it accepts the prevailing structure of society, takes for granted its justification, permanence, and general validity, and castigates the excesses occurring within its limits as ridiculous” (p. 365). And the trouble with Shakespeare is that all those characters whom he “treats in the sublime and tragic manner are of high rank. He does not, as the Middle Ages did, conceive of ‘everyman’ as tragic” (p. 314). Neither the middle nor the lower classes are ever rendered tragically. “His conception of the sublime and tragic is altogether aristocratic” (p. 315). Nor does Mr. Auerbach have any very high regard for the English novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And in the great Russians of the nineteenth century he finds a predilection for a kind of rhetorical didacticism which is not to his taste. Indeed, as Professor René Wellek has remarked in this connection of his work, it appears that only certain “passages in the Bible and Dante and, among the moderns, in Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert and Zola fulfill Mr. Auerbach’s implied definition of realism.” And that definition calls for a mode of organization of the human story in literature that combines tragic depth with the empiricist concreteness of historicism—which, curiously enough, in the whole tradition, he seems to find most satisfactorily embodied in Stendhal and Balzac.

My own feeling is that Mr. Auerbach’s program for literature is not very far removed from that which M. Jean-Paul Sartre has put forward in his doctrine of *la littérature engagée*. There are, of course, many unfortunate excrescences that attach to Sartre’s manner of formulating this doctrine and that cannot be gone into on this present occasion: yet the notion that literature, if it is to be vital and serious, must remain in close contact with the world and that the writer must always seek to enter into untrammelled engagement with the full life of his time—this is a notion for which many of us surely can command considerable sympathy at a time when all is “in pieces, all coherence gone,” when the fire is put out and the sun is lost and when the writer, if he is to claim our attention at all, must sug-

gest a way of reading the human condition and a counterpoise to chaos. So, insofar as Mr. Auerbach's doctrine of realism involves this kind of demand, it certainly represents a proposal to which the serious reader will want to be attentive.

Yet there is still difficulty, for the tradition whose authority he invokes in behalf of this doctrine is hardly one which seems capable of giving it the strongest support. That is to say, he tends rather oddly to find, as has already been noticed, the best expressions of a tragic realism in the modern tradition in Stendhal and Balzac; and it is, in fact, the general movement of nineteenth-century literary realism, particularly on its French side, that seems to claim his deepest sympathies, because of its historical and "atmospheric" quality, because of its strongly historicist bias. Now it is true, of course, that the profound concern with the temporal predicament of man which is the absorbing preoccupation of Stendhal and Balzac and Flaubert and Zola gives to their literature the kind of violent power which we are once again finding today so compelling. And yet when we look at certain of their naturalistic heirs in the twentieth-century situation—at Theodore Dreiser, say, or the Dos Passos of U.S.A.—in whom their historicism has been reduced to its most radical premises, we begin to wonder how compatible is the outlook of a secular historicism with the depth of tragic vision.

The names of Dreiser and Dos Passos are, of course, amongst those which put us in mind of that current in our recent literature which has wanted to give us the illusion of history by eradicating the distinction between life and art and by giving us so large a slice of the crude, raw stuff of life as to make us forget when we read their books that we are reading fiction. And thus by banishing themselves from their books and muffling their own voices, in the manner of the good photographer or reporter, they have only reinforced, as Professor Lionel Trilling has said, "the faceless hostility of the world and have tended to teach us that we ourselves are not creative agents and that we have no voice, no tone, no style, no significant existence," that we are simply automatons of the historical process.

Had not Mr. Auerbach what one feels to be a certain temperamental aversion to philosophic formulations of the issues with which he is dealing, he might well have more nearly apprehended the ultimate antinomy between the tragic vision and a secular historicism by recalling the nature of Kierkegaard's objection to Hegel—who remains perhaps the great philosophic spokesman for the modern historicist temper. And that objection was simply based upon Kierkegaard's profound distaste for the kind of outlook that he found in Hegel which threatened completely to engulf man in some objective system of historical circumstance of which the human subject could only be another insignificant unit. He found such a denial of selfhood utterly incompatible with his own tragic vision, and I should suppose that his acute dissatisfaction with Hegel and all that he represented would be shared by many other great tragic realists in both the literary and philosophic traditions—though expressed, to be sure, in many different ways. For the greatest tragedians have not only seen man as a creature thrown into the world and "caught in a temporal web," but also as a creature having links with a reality transcending his

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temporal history. And it has, indeed, been upon this Janus-faced character of the human situation that they have chiefly dwelt. They see man as a creature who participates in the historical process not merely as an item of it but also as an agent—whose freedom and vitality are, however, qualified by the structures of nature and of human society. Theirs has, that is to say, very often been the problem of freedom and necessity—but a problem which cannot be arrived at, at least in one of its aspects, upon the basis of the kind of deterministic historicism that constituted an aspect of the philosophical *Weltanschauung* possessed by those nineteenth-century realists from whose legacy Mr. Auerbach would derive a normative conception of tragic realism. A doctrine of man, in other words, that immerses the person in the social continuum, however much it may encourage the imaginative writer's attentiveness to the concrete details of man's historical existence, must inevitably obscure those dimensions of the human problem with which the tragedian is characteristically concerned and which come into the circle of our awareness only when the distinctiveness of the human spirit is seen as consisting in its capacity to transcend the historical process and even to transcend itself for the sake of contemplating the meaning of its existence—or for the sake of deceiving itself about that meaning.

To suggest that Mr. Auerbach's fundamental point of view is to be scrutinized critically is not, however, by one iota to discount the truly monumental greatness of this book. With an astounding erudition he has passed in review the major literary ideals of Western culture, and, in the process, has given us a history of the representation of reality in European literature which no responsible student of literature and the history of ideas can afford to overlook. It is, indeed, I believe, a book that is destined to become (if I may use a phrase of Mr. Van Wyck Brooks, without at all having in mind his special meaning) a part of the "primary literature" of our period.