

Auerbach's Modernist Schema

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Erich Auerbach is an academic well-known amongst humanities departments across the world. His most widely acclaimed work is the book *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. The book traces the history of literary realism through studies of literature ranging from Homer and the Bible to 20th century modernism. A survey of references to and reviews of the book would likely find that a few of the most common descriptors applied to it include “monumental,” “foundational,” and “massive.” While these terms broadly come across as positive, they don’t say much about the book itself.

My project, at its inception, planned to interrogate the final chapter of *Mimesis*, which is primarily a reading of Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* and Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, to critique Auerbach’s understanding of modern literature. However, it became apparent that a rigorous reading of Auerbach’s conclusion would not be viable without deep engagement with both Auerbach and scholars of his work. Too often, his book is studied through excerpts (the first chapter is a staple in undergraduate humanities syllabi). Accordingly, my research transitioned from a survey of modernist literature alongside Auerbach’s interpretation of it to a study of how Auerbach proposes a method of reading any kind of literature through his own literary studies in *Mimesis*.

After reading *Mimesis*, I had identified Auerbach’s chapter on Dante’s *Divine Comedy* as central to understanding the book’s method of reading. In this chapter, Auerbach argues that Dante represents reality as being split between the earthly and the divine. Events on earth “figure” their “fulfillment” in the afterlife (the life of a sinner figures the sinner’s punishment, which is the fulfillment of their sin). For the most part, Auerbach scholarship began deep engagement with this side of *Mimesis* around 2000. This scholarship argued that the figure/fulfillment relationship actually structures the argument of *Mimesis* itself: each chapter presents a form of literary representation which Auerbach presents as a figure to be fulfilled in later eras. This reading, which has been termed “figural interpretation” informed my thinking during a large portion of my research. As my project turned to Auerbach’s later work, I read scholarship which argued that one particular late essay was an attempt by Auerbach to reformulate his notion of figural interpretation. Instead of the figure/fulfillment relationship, this essay asserts a broader relation by type. Essentially, this removes the sense of progress inherent to figural interpretation, which can result in too heavy an emphasis on fulfillment over figure. Instead, relation by types permits an understanding of, in this case literature, which allows equal value of every scene. To test the strength of this method, I read James Joyce’s “The Dead” as a presentation of typological scenes. This story was particularly apt because of the determinative focus critics tend to give its final pages. Writing a study of the story as a series of types allowed for a reading which could present each page with equal importance. Without moving into a description of “The Dead,” Auerbach’s revision of figural interpretation was a very strong tool in forming an understanding of the story which did not give uneven attention to its end but instead considered how the end functions as a repetition of earlier moments in the narrative. I hope to continue to integrate and further develop Auerbach’s method during my honors thesis.

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References:

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