

Exile and Criticism: Edward Said's Interpretation of Erich Auerbach

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Abstract The literary critic, Edward Said (1935–2003), examined literature in light of social and cultural politics. He analyzed in his words the close connection between history and literature, and exile and history, a subject that occupied much of his life of the mind. Ironically, Said was totally silent about the force, the passion, the drive to write and invest texts *with* history in his approach to the writings of the German-Jewish philologist and literary critic Erich Auerbach (1892–1957). In discussing his works, Said gives no sense of the historical, ideological and philological context within which the famous philologist wrote his works, while nevertheless acknowledging that Auerbach always referred to the “social environment” of a given writer. My goal is not only to illuminate the suspicious absence of historical and ideological context in Said's treatment of Auerbach's works, but also to offer possible answers why he did so. For Said was decisive in creating “narratives of oppression,” and in epitomizing them as well. Thus it seems that his obsession with Western “narratives of oppression” led him to ignore their content and form *within* the West, when another exiled scholar composed them.

Keywords Edward Said · Erich Auerbach · *Mimesis* · Exile · Oppression · Imperialism · Nationalism · Humanism · Philology

Philology itself, the branch of literary studies that most loudly cultivates distance from ideology and engagement with the most arcane details, might instead be an authentically – and repeatedly, in one strong voice after another – political activity.

María Rosa Menocal, *Shards of Love: Exile and the Origins of Lyric*, 1994

Edward Said (1935–2003), who was for many years Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, was a “literary critic who examined literature in light of social and cultural politics.”¹ For example, in his essay “History, Literature, and Geography,” 1995, he analyzed the close connection between history and literature, and exile and history, a subject that occupied much of his life of the mind since the time he was “a graduate student at Harvard in the late [nineteen] fifties.”² Likewise, in the “Introduction: Criticism and Exile” to his book of essays of 2000, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Said emphasized his continuous interest in the close relationship between history and literature, arguing that to “value literature at all is fundamentally to value it as the individual work of an individual tangled up in [specific historical] circumstances.” The “problem for the interpreter, therefore, is how to align these circumstances with the work,” or “how to read the work *and* its worldly situation.”³

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¹ See, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/516540/Edward-Said>

² Edward Said, “History, Literature, and Geography,” 1995, in Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000), p. 453.

³ Said, “Introduction: Criticism and Exile,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, p. xv (emphasis in original).

No wonder that in many works Said accused modern literary critics, such as the historian and literary critic Hayden White, who strove “to escape from experience” in their studies, thus transforming “text” into “something almost metaphysically isolated from experience” and in that way “reduced and in many instances eliminated the messier precincts of ‘life’ and historical experience.”⁴ More specifically, “White is totally silent about the force, the passion, the drive to write and invest texts *with* history.” “Text are, after all,” Said declared, “physical things as well, not just the rarefied emanation of a theory,” such as Semiology or Deconstruction.⁵

Ironically, I would argue, Said himself was “totally silent about the force, the passion, the drive to write and invest texts *with* history” in his approach to the writings of the German-Jewish philologist and literary critic Erich Auerbach (1892–1957). In discussing his works, Said gives no sense of the historical, ideological and philological context within which the famous philologist wrote his works, while nevertheless acknowledging that Auerbach always referred to the “social environment” of a given writer. Hence “Auerbach’s view” does “have to do with the *coexistence* of realms – the literary, the social, and the personal.”⁶

Ample evidence of Said’s approach abound. In the “Introduction: Secular Criticism” of his book *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, 1983, all that Said mentioned in his discussion of *Mimesis* was that Auerbach was “a Jewish refugee from Nazi Europe.”⁷ Likewise, in “Reflections on Exile,” 1984, which probably best reflects Said’s views on exile, he noted only in passing that “Auerbach spent the war years in exile in Turkey.”⁸ Nothing further was mentioned on the possible influence of such an agonizing ordeal of exilic displacement.

The same applies even more seriously to Said’s “Introduction to the Fiftieth-Anniversary Edition” of *Mimesis*, 2003, which merely mentioned Auerbach’s education in Germany and later his exile from Nazi Germany. No attempt was made however to enlighten the reader about possible intrinsic connection neither between *Mimesis* and concrete historical circumstances, nor of German ideological and philological trends, such as Nazism, Fascism and Aryan philology, which could have contributed to the evolution of Auerbach’s masterpiece. The lack of such an important historical and ideological

context may lead obviously to serious distortions of the content and form of Auerbach’s works. Failing to see the intrinsic connection between *Mimesis* and the time and place it was written, Said strangely claimed that this book “is in many ways a mere calm affirmation of the unity and dignity of European literature in all its multiplicity and dynamism.”⁹ As we will see, nothing could be further from the truth.

In Said’s writings on Auerbach, no attempt was made “to align” historical “circumstances with the work,” or “how to read the work *and* its worldly situation.”¹⁰ This stood in clear contrast to Said’s main theme of “Criticism and Exile,” which condemned both White and the philosopher Richard Rorty for “minds” that were “so untroubled by and free of the immediate experience of the turbulence of war, ethnic cleansing, forced migration, and unhappy dislocation.”¹¹ Yet such shortcoming is also apparent in Said’s discussion of Auerbach. In sum, what Said wrote about Bazarov, the prototype of the modern nihilistic intellectual in Ivan Turgenev’s novel *Fathers and Sons*, 1862, is applicable to Said’s portrayal of Auerbach: “Bazarov is given no narrative context;” he “appears briefly, then he disappears.”¹²

In what will follow my goal is not only to illuminate the suspicious absence of historical and ideological context in Said’s treatment of Auerbach’s works, but also to offer possible answers why he did so. The theme of exile was very important in Said writings and resonated in many of his studies because, as he acknowledged, of his exilic displacement from Palestine. Yet one may wonder why Said, who was so sensitive to the suffering and existential state of exile, was not assiduously attending as well to Auerbach’s ordeal and how it may affect his works written in exile, most notably “Figura,” 1938,¹³ and *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (*Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*, 1946). Ironically, as I will argue, in Said’s writing there are few “reflections on [Auerbach’s] exile,” and not much discussion of “the world, the text, and the critic” with regard to Auerbach, to borrow again the title of another book by Said.

The main source for my inquiry into Said’s representation, or indeed misrepresentation, of Auerbach is Said’s *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, 2000, a book of 46 essays, all of which have been chosen by Said himself and published in the series “Convergence: Inventory of the Present,” which he edited for Harvard University Press 3 years before his death

⁴ Ibid., p. xviii.

⁵ Ibid., xix. Emphasis in original. For Said’s discussion of the meaning and significance of texts, see also Said, “Preface,” in *Literature and Society*, ed., Said (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 1–14, and Said, “The World, the Text, and the Critic,” in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 31–53.

⁶ Said, “Opponents, Audience, Constituencies, and Community,” 1982, in Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, p. 140.

⁷ Said, “Introduction: Secular Criticism,” in Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983), p. 6.

⁸ Said, “Reflections on Exile,” 1984, in Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, p. 185.

⁹ Said, “Introduction to the Fiftieth Anniversary Edition” of *Mimesis*, in Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. xvi. See also Said, “Erich Auerbach, Critic of the Earthly World,” *Boundary 2* 31:2 (2004), p. 550.

¹⁰ Said, “Introduction: Criticism and Exile,” p. xv. Emphasis in original.

¹¹ Ibid., p. xxi.

¹² Said, *Representation of the Intellectual* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 41.

¹³ Auerbach, “Figura” (1938), in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), pp. 11–76.

in 2003. Given that Said not only edited this book of his essays, but also chose its name, it will not be far from the truth to view this book of collected essays as a true representation of his life of the mind as a literary critic and not the less as the way Said would like posterity to view, judge and evaluate, his literary studies. Needless to say, I have used other works by Said, such as “Introduction to the Fiftieth-Anniversary Edition” of *Mimesis*, 2003,¹⁴ *The World, The Text, and the Critics*, 1983,¹⁵ *Representation of the Intellectual*, 1994,¹⁶ and more.

Said’s overarching goal in many of his studies is to relate the experience of exilic displacement. “The novelty of our time,” he wrote, is “that so many individuals have experienced the uprooting and dislocations that have made them expatriate and exiles.”¹⁷ He aligned himself with many prominent exiled intellectuals, such as Joseph Conrad (1857–1924), whose writing “wears its author’s existential unsettlement,”¹⁸ or the works of James Joyce (1882–1941), Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1997) and others, who “in their use of language provoked their readers into an awareness of how language is about experience and not just about itself. For if you feel you cannot take for granted the luxury of long residence, habitual environment, native idiom, and you must somehow compensate for these things, what you write necessarily bears a unique freight of anxiety, elaborateness, perhaps even overstatement.”¹⁹

In the “Introduction: Criticism and Exile,” 2000, Said declared that he used his own “exile’s situation to practice [literary] criticism.”²⁰ In fact, he never hid but rather stressed to the utmost the crucial influence of his exilic displacement’s “experience” from Palestine and “how that enters” into “so much”²¹ of his literary works: “But it would be disingenuous not to admit that the Palestinian experience seems retrospectively to have predisposed my own critical attention in favor of unaccommodated, essentially expatriate or diasporic forms of existence, those destined to remain at some distance from the solid that is embodied in repatriation.” Palestine thus provided “affinities with, say, Conrad’s radical exilic vision, or with the lonely exceptionalism of a Foucault and a Melville.”²²

Said admitted that, living in an “age of politics,” he was sometimes engaged in “the politics of knowledge,”²³ as many of his writings revealed. The reason is that “the interchange between politics and aesthetic” is “very productive.”²⁴ One might therefore expect that because both Said and Auerbach shared the experience of exile, Said would be very sensitive not only to Auerbach’s ordeal but would also examine his works in light of “the politics of knowledge” as well as of “the interchange between politics and aesthetics.”

That did not occur. On the contrary, Said had a tendency to strip some intellectual exiles, such as Auerbach or Theodore Adorno (1903–1969), of the historical and ideological context which led to their displacement and profoundly influenced their works written in exile.²⁵ Said thus violated his own belief that “the study of literature is not abstract but is set irrecusably and unarguably within a culture whose historical situation influences, is it does not determine, a great deal of what we say and do.” Said had constant recourse to the phrase “historical experience.”²⁶ The reason is that “words are neither technical nor esoteric but suggest an opening away from the formal and the technical toward the lived, the contested, and the immediate.”²⁷ Accordingly, and more specifically, “experience, and in particular the experience of dislocation, exile, migration, and empire,” therefore leads in the study of literature “to the invigorating presence of a banished or forgotten reality which in the past 200 years has dominated human existence in an enormous variety of ways.” And it is precisely “this general and particular experience” that Said’s “criticism and scholarship” is trying “to reclaim, understand, and situate,”²⁸ though not with regard to Auerbach.

Said rather tended to overlook the historical and ideological reasons for Auerbach’s exile because he tried to fashion him in the role of “the intellectual as an exile and marginal, as amateur, and as the *author of a language that tries to speak the truth to power*.”²⁹ But Auerbach’s aim was not merely “to speak the truth to power,” but rather and more practically to save the Western Judeo-Christian humanist tradition from the menace of Nazi barbarism.

¹⁴ Said, “Introduction to the Fiftieth-Anniversary Edition,” pp. ix–xxxii. This Introduction was later published in Said *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 85–118.

¹⁵ Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

¹⁶ Said, *Representation of the Intellectual* (London: Vintage, 1994).

¹⁷ Said, “Introduction: Criticism and Exile,” p. xv.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xxii.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xxxv.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. xxxii.

²² *Ibid.*, p. xxxiv.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. xxviii.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xxxiv.

²⁵ Said indeed wrote that “Adorno, Benjamin, [Ernst] Bloch, Horkheimer, and Habermas” were “steeped in the experience of fascism in Germany” and hence “erected immense theoretical and formal bulwarks against it in their writings.” But he did not elaborate on this important point. See, Said, “Introduction: Criticism and Exile,” p. xviii. Strangely enough he did not include Auerbach’s works written in exile as part of this general humanist struggle against Nazism.

²⁶ Said, “Introduction: Criticism and Exile,” pp. xxviii, xxxi.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xxxi.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xxxii.

²⁹ Said, *Representation of the Intellectual*, p. xiv (emphasis added).

Historian Saul Friedländer has asserted that Nazism “aimed at eliminating any trace of ‘Jewishness,’ any sign of ‘Jewish spirit,’ any remnant of Jewish presence (real or imaginary) from politics, society, culture, and history.”³⁰ For example, a mass rally organized Nazi Party-style in the Berlin Sportpalast by the *Deutsche Christen*, the Nazi wing of the Evangelical Church, in November 1933 led to the following resolution: “We expect our national Churches to shake themselves free of all that is un-German, in particular the Old Testament and its Jewish morality and rewards”³¹ Likewise, the Godesberg Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in April 1939 asked: “Did Christianity arise out of Judaism being thus its continuation and completion, or does it stand in opposition to Judaism? To this question we respond: *Christian faith is the unbridgeable religious contradiction to Judaism.*”³² This was followed in May with the creation of the “Institute for the Study and Eradication of the Jewish Influence on German Church Life.”³³ Its scientific director Walter Grundmann spoke in the opening ceremony on “The Dejudaisation of the Religious Life as the Task of German Theology and Church,”³⁴ claiming that the “elimination of Jewish influence on German life is the urgent and fundamental question of the present German religious situation.”³⁵

In this broad historical and ideological context, I would argue, Auerbach’s two famous studies written in exile, “Figura” and *Mimesis*, were aimed to restore the centrality of the Old Testament to Western culture and civilization, after Nazi historiography and Aryan philology strove to exclude the Jewish Bible from Christian history in general and German culture and life in particular. This is the reason why both “Figura” and *Mimesis* begin with the Old Testament, thus ensuring that its credibility and validity were fully asserted within the content, form, fabric, and structure of Western humanist civilization. More specifically, “Figura”³⁶ and later

Mimesis draw on the Christian figural interpretation of history – the view that Old Testament events and persons are *figures* or pre-figurations of events and persons in the New Testament – to show that the Old Testament is inseparable from the New Testament and thus is inextricably within Western culture and civilization as a whole.³⁷

“Figura” and *Mimesis* were not mere philological and literary studies but were polemical – the first defending the Old Testament from its elimination by Aryan philology and Nazi historiography, and the second constituting an apology for Western Judeo-Christian humanist culture and civilization against Nazi tyranny and barbarism. Auerbach thus sought to establish a bulwark against the enemies of the Western humanist tradition. “Figura” therefore should not be regarded as a simple “technical essay,” and *Mimesis* should not be understood as a mere “calm affirmation of the unity and dignity of European literature,” as Said suggested.³⁸

A few examples may suffice to show Said’s misunderstanding with regard to Auerbach’s works written in exile. In “History, Literature, and Geography,” 1995, Said wrote that *Mimesis* “makes no concrete attempt to connect the chapters with one another.”³⁹ But in contrast to this claim, *Mimesis* is rather structured along a grand overarching thesis – in which each and every chapter is connected in order to show the intrinsic transformation taking place in the presentation and representation of reality. Further, it should be noted that Auerbach intentionally chose for the title of *Mimesis* an important Hegelian concept – “reality” (*Wirklichkeit*) – which embodied reason, truth, history and rationality, and used it in order to advance the main thesis of his work: reality against myth, rationality against the flight from reason. The author thus attacked Aryan philology and Nazi historiography, which were based on racism, chauvinism, anti-Semitism and the mythologies of *Blood, Volk, and Soil*, or the *Community of Blood*

³⁰ Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), p. xiv.

³¹ “Resolution of the German Christians,” rally at Berlin Sportpalast, 13 November 1933, in Cardinal Michael von Faulhaber, *Judaism, Christianity and Germany* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), p. 35.

³² Peter M. Head, “The Nazi Quest for an Arian Jesus,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, 2 (2004), p. 76 (emphasis added).

³³ Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 67–105.

³⁴ Head, “Nazi Quest,” pp. 76–77.

³⁵ Heschel, “Nazifying Christian Theology: Walter Grundmann and the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life,” *Church History*, 63 (December 1994), p. 591.

³⁶ For an analysis of the ideological, historical and philological, context of Auerbach’s “Figura,” see Avihu Zakai and David Weinstein, “Erich Auerbach and His ‘Figura’: An Apology for the Old Testament in an Age of Aryan Philology,” *Religions* 3 (2012), pp. 320–338. <http://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/3/2/320>

³⁷ Auerbach of course was not alone in his struggle against the völkisch, chauvinist, racist, and anti-Semitic premises of Aryan philology, which eliminated the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, from German culture in particular, and Western culture and civilization in general. Thomas Mann, for example, told the audience in his address in the Library of Congress on Nov. 17, 1942: “some people were inclined to regard ‘Joseph and His Brothers’ as a Jewish book, even merely a novel for the Jews.” And he indeed agreed that “the selection of the old testamental subject was certainly not mere accident; most certainly there were hidden defiantly polemic connections between it and certain tendencies of our time which I always found repulsive from the bottom of my soul; the growing vulgar anti-semitism which is an essential part of the Fascist mob-myth, and which commits the brutish denial of the fact that Judaism and Hellenism are the two principal pillars upon which our occidental civilization rests. To write a novel of the Jewish spirit was timely, just because it seems untimely.” See, Mann, “The Theme of the Joseph Novels,” 1942, in *Thomas Mann’s Addresses Delivered at the Library of Congress, 1942–1949* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1963), pp. 11–12.

³⁸ Said, “Introduction to the Fiftieth Anniversary Edition,” pp. xx, xvi. See also Said, “Erich Auerbach, Critic of the Earthly World,” *Boundary 2* 31:2 (2004), p. 550.

³⁹ Said, “History, Literature, and Geography,” p. 457.

and Fate of the German People,⁴⁰ which glorified the concept of *culture* and rejected the concept of a common, unified humanist European civilization.⁴¹ As wrote Georg Lukács (1885–1971): “Fascist ideology and its pseudo-revolutionary rejection of the past” was “in reality a rejection of culture and humanism.”⁴² And Ernst Cassirer (1874 – 1945), who analyzed in his *The Myth of the State* “the preponderance of mythical thought over rational thought,” claimed that “the myth of the race worked like a strong corrosive and succeeded in dissolving and disintegrating all other values.”⁴³

Auerbach was greatly influenced by Hegel’s idealist philosophy, burnished by the claim that “*What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational*,”⁴⁴ meaning that “reason is an actual (*wirklich*) power in the world working to create the institutions of freedom.”⁴⁵ In this context, Auerbach’s goal in writing *Mimesis*, as the subtitle of this work clearly reveals – *Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* – was nothing less than a grand humanist enterprise to describe

the rise of rational, actual (*wirklich*), historical representation of reality in European literature against barbarism and racism.

What seems important for Said was that Auerbach lived in exile, like Said himself, and less which historical circumstances led to exile and might have influenced his work. In the “Introduction to the Fiftieth-Anniversary Edition,” Said mentioned that in 1935 Auerbach “was forced to quit his position at Marburg” because of “the Nazi racial laws” and that later in 1936 he took a job at “Istanbul State University” teaching Romance Literatures, and that it was there in Turkey that “he wrote and finished” *Mimesis*.⁴⁶ Apparently Said strove to find famous examples, epitomes, of exiles in order to explain his own existential displacement, and was less interested, exactly as he blamed White and Rorty, in Auerbach’s “immediate experience of the turbulence of war, ethnic cleansing, forced migration, and unhappy dislocation.”⁴⁷ This serious neglect distorted his views as a literary critic in general and of Auerbach’s works in particular.

Although Said did not explore the ideological and historical context of *Mimesis*, there is in fact ample evidence in this celebrated work to show how the agonized history of Auerbach’s life and times crucially influenced its content and form. Auerbach wrote in the first chapter: “Let the reader think of the history which we are ourselves witnessing; anyone who, for example, evaluates the behavior of individual men and groups of men at *the time of the rise of National Socialism in Germany*, or the behavior of individual peoples and states before and during the last war, will feel how difficult it is to represent historical themes in general, and how unfit they are for legend.”⁴⁸ This is of course very far from Said’s description of the calmness of *Mimesis*.

Likewise, in discussing “Voltaire’s style in propaganda,”⁴⁹ Auerbach referred to a “*propaganda device*,” which “consists in over-illuminating one small part of an extensive complex, while everything else which might explain, derive, and possibly counterbalance the thing emphasized is left in the dark; so that apparently *the truth is stated, for what is said cannot be denied; and yet everything falsified, for truth requires the whole truth and the proper interrelation of its elements.*”⁵⁰ He then fiercely alluded to contemporary consequences: “[e]specially in *times of excited passions*, the public is again and again taken in by such tricks, and *everybody knows more than enough examples from the very recent past*” in Nazi Germany. Indeed, despite the fact that “*the trick is not at all hard to see through; intense periods, however, the people or the public lack the serious desire to do so.*” As in Nazi propaganda against the Jews, whenever “*a specific form of life or a social group has run its course, or has only lost favor and support, every injustice which the propagandists perpetrate against it is half consciously felt to be what it actually*

⁴⁰ The Nazi, Aryan flight from reason and reality to myths, legends and heroes, can be clearly seen in the works of Alfred Rosenberg, the chief ideologist of the Nazi party. In his infamous book *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts (The Myth of the 20th Century)*, 1930, he argued: “Today, a new belief is arising: the *Mythos* of the blood; the belief that the godly essence of man itself is to be defended through the blood; that belief which embodied the clearest knowledge that the Nordic race represents that *Mysterium* which has overthrown and replaced the old sacraments.” Accordingly, Rosenberg interpreted the German defeat in World War I in light of the dark, legendary, mythical and demonic, powers of Norse mythology, arguing more specifically that the victories of the Allies Powers in that war are evidence of “an age when the Fenris Wolf [‘fame-wolf’] broke his chains, when Hel [giantess and goddess who rules over Helheim, the underworld where the dead dwell] moved over the earth and the *Midgardschlange* [the Midgard Snake, a demonic monster which looped the whole earth with its giant length, whom Thor, the God of the thunder, killed] stirred the oceans of the world. Millions upon millions were ready to sacrifice themselves to attain but *one* result embodied in the phrase: for the honour and freedom of the *Volk*. The world inferno continued to the end; nonetheless, sacrifices were demanded and made by all. All that was revealed, however, was that behind the armies daemonic powers had triumphed over divine ones. Unrestrained, they raged about throughout the world, stirring up new unrest, new flames, new destruction.” See, *Race and Race History and Other Essays by Alfred Rosenberg*, ed. Robert Pois (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 96–7.

⁴¹ In his last work *The Myth of the State* (1946), the German-Jewish philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945), who fled Germany when the Nazis came to power, attempted to understand the intellectual origins of Nazi Germany. He saw Nazi Germany as a society in which the dangerous power of myth is not checked or subdued by superior forces and claimed that in 20th century politics there was a return back to the irrationality of myth, and in particular to a belief that there is such a thing as destiny.

⁴² Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), p. 4. Lukács wrote these words in 1948.

⁴³ Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 3, 287.

⁴⁴ Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, 1821, trans. T. N. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 14 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁵ See Editor’s “Explanatory Notes” # 14 in Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, pp. 326–7.

⁴⁶ Said, “Introduction to the Fiftieth Anniversary Edition,” p. xvi.

⁴⁷ Said, “Introduction: Criticism and Exile,” p. xxi.

⁴⁸ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, pp. 19–20 (emphasis added).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 411.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 402–3 (emphasis added).

is, yet people welcome it with sadistic delight,” and the result is “an ocean of filth and blood.”⁵¹

Another evidence of Said’s suspicious lack of discussing Auerbach’s historical and ideological context can be seen in the choice of the cover illustration to the fiftieth-anniversary edition of *Mimesis*. This cover, depicting the central panel of Max Beckmann’s 1932 triptych “Departure,” with its pagan-like Greek characters sitting on a boat, does not accurately reflect, to say the least, *Mimesis*’s form and content, which began rather with Genesis and clearly criticized the paganism of classical Greek culture in the chapter on “Odysseus’ Scar.” Max Beckmann (1884–1950), the painter who fled Nazi Germany in 1937, explains in his own words the meaning of the central panel: “The King and Queen, Man and Woman, are taken to another shore by a boatsman whom they do not know, he wears a mask, it is the mysterious figure taking us to a mysterious land ... The King and Queen have freed themselves of the tortures of life—they have overcome them. The Queen carries the greatest treasure—Freedom—as her child in her lap. Freedom is the one thing that matters—it is the departure, the new start.”⁵²

Beckmann deals with exile, something that was indeed very dear to Said, but certainly was not the main theme of *Mimesis*, which is the representation of reality. Or more specifically, in Auerbach’s words, the main theme of *Mimesis* is not kings and queens but rather “the rise of more extensive and socially inferior human groups to the position of subject matter for problematic-existential representation.”⁵³ In clear contrast to Said’s choice of the cover illustration, Auerbach’s choice was rather “the Christ of Amiens as the cover illustration,” or the image of Christ in the Amiens Cathedral, 1220–1288, and he “insisted that Christ’s hands should appear in the picture.”⁵⁴

Said surely knew that, in contrast to the common, received view, according to which *Mimesis*’s literary space extends from Homer to Virginia Woolf, Auerbach rather sets his history of European literature “from Genesis all the way to Virginia Woolf.”⁵⁵ This clearly reveals his main aim: classical Greek myths, legends, and heroes did not inaugurate Western culture’s representation of reality. The origins lay in the Old Testament, with its conception of world history, or its “concept of the historically becoming.”⁵⁶ According to this Hegelian concept, the temporal becoming and unfolding of the life of human beings, is meaningful, intelligible, and should be thought of as

an evolutionary progress heading towards a certain goal or end. Auerbach struggled against the premises of Aryan philology and Nazi historiography, which adored Greek culture of legends, heroes and myths. Hence he stressed in *Mimesis*, exactly as he did in “Figura,” the importance of the Old Testament in shaping European vision and conception of history, reality and truth, as evident in “Odysseus’ Scar.” “The reality of the Old Testament,” Auerbach insisted, led to the creation of “universal history,” based on the Jewish mode of historical thought, which “for millennia” underwent “an incessant and active development with the life of the man in Europe.”⁵⁷

Said also strangely overlooked the date when Auerbach began to write *Mimesis*. The year 1942 was crucial in terms of the survival of Western humanist civilization in face of the alarming victories of the seemingly invincible Wehrmacht in Russia and North Africa. In the same year other German-speaking Jewish exiles began writing their grand humanist defenses of Western civilization – Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, and Hans Baron’s *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*, and Thomas Mann conceived his novel *Dr. Faustus*, alluding to the legendary necromancer – a composer, or Germany – who bargains for power with Satan. Such writers struggled to establish their own bulwarks against Nazism.⁵⁸ The year 1942 was a great watershed, or epistemological transformation, in the history of the West.

Auerbach’s *Mimesis* therefore should be considered as one among many attempts by exiles to salvage European humanist culture from Nazism. But among these Jewish intellectual exiles, Auerbach’s fate was the most precarious. Had Rommel overcome the British Army in North Africa, the road to the destruction, not only of Jewish Palestine, but of the haven in Istanbul, would have been open. Had the German Army not been stopped in Stalingrad, the road to Turkey from the north would have been open. In 1942, the Nazism that he had eluded in Germany threatened to engulf him again in Istanbul.

The extent to which he was aware of these critical military threats can be seen in a letter written in summer 1946, when he described in his aloof, reserved way some of the deep fears and anxieties he was suffering 4 years earlier: “Things have

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 15–16.

⁵⁸ It should be noted that in 1942, Stefan Zweig, the Austrian Jewish novelist, playwright, journalist, and biographer, committed suicide in Brazil when he felt that “the world of my own language sank and was lost to me and my spiritual homeland, Europe, destroyed itself.” He concluded, “I salute all of my friends! May it be granted them yet to see the dawn after this long night! I, all too impatient, go before them.” The above words of Stefan Zweig are taken from his suicide letter of February 22, 1942. See Matti Friedman, “70 years later, a handwritten note recalls the end of a literary life,” at <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/israeli-library-uploads-suicide-letter-of-jewish-writer-stefan-zweig-1.414312> See also, Leo Carey, “The Escape Artist: The Death and Life of Stefan Zweig,” *New Yorker* (August 27, 2012), p. 70, and Oliver Matuschek, *Three Lives: A Biography of Stefan Zweig* (London: Pushkin Press, 2011).

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 404 (emphasis added).

⁵² See, <http://www.artchive.com/artchive/b/beckmann/departure.jpg.html>

⁵³ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 491.

⁵⁴ William Calin in a personal letter to the author, August 2, 2013. Calin was Auerbach’s research assistant at Yale during the 1950s. See Calin, “The paperback edition of *Mimesis* came out while I was Auerbach’s research assistant. I remember his speaking on the telephone with the publisher. He wanted the Christ of Amiens as the cover illustration, and insisted that Christ’s hands should appear in the picture. Which was done.”

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 563.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 23.

gone well for us *against all odds*. The *new order* [Nazi German Army] *did not reach these straits; that really says it all*. We have lived in our apartment and *suffered* nothing but small discomfort and fear: *until the end of [19]42 it looked very bad*, but then the clouds gradually withdrew.”⁵⁹ He had more than enough reasons to begin writing his apology for Western humanism in May 1942, when his own personal fate and that of the whole of Europe were endangered.

Another example of how the absence of historical and ideological context may have led Said to distortion of Auerbach’s thought and intention can be invoked in citing Hugo of St. Victor (c. 1096–1141), a monk from Saxony. He wrote about detachment from the world as follows: “It is, therefore, a source of great virtue for the practiced mind to learn, bit by bit, first to change about invisible and transitory things, so that afterwards it may be able to leave them behind altogether. The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong man has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his.”⁶⁰

According to Said, Auerbach “cited this passage as a model for anyone wishing to transcend national and provincial limits.”⁶¹ Said tried to appropriate Auerbach’s thought into a crusade against the evil of nationalism, but nothing could be more far than the truth. Auerbach did not use this passage in a vacuum, or as a means to portray exile’s existential condition against nationalism, as Said wanted us to believe. This long quotation appeared in an essay that Auerbach published in 1952. Immediately following the above passage, Auerbach urged readers to “return, in admittedly altered circumstances, to the knowledge that pre-national medieval culture already possessed: the knowledge that the spirit [*Geist*] is not national.”⁶² *Geist* at its best means culture and civilization, our

humanist tradition, for both Hegel and Auerbach. It was the horrors of National Socialism, not nationalism itself, that Auerbach wanted to disassociate from the Spirit. And here again Hegel is important in understanding Auerbach.

Hegel developed a glorious vision of the progress of the Spirit in history. The “spirit in general is the basis of history,” he wrote, “in which it unfolds itself in the various forms which we call nations.”⁶³ In the shadow of Nazism, Auerbach vehemently protested the appropriation of the Spirit. He was not against nationalism per se, as Said argued, but rather reflected on the terrible impact of a very specific historical movement – National Socialism – on the life and culture of the humanist civilization of Europe. Auerbach thus claimed that no nation should appropriate exclusively the spirit, or embodied reason, as the Third Reich did.

In “History, Literature, and Geography,” 1995, Said indeed acknowledged that *Mimesis* is an “extraordinary work,” animated by its “underlying theme” of the representation of reality. That means “in technical rhetorical terms. . . the various styles, high, low, and mixed, by which western writers since antiquity translate reality into sentences.” Such a reduction of Auerbach’s rich work into a mere stylistic aspect is more than revealing. Moreover, the “core of the book is Dante,” Said argued. But Auerbach never envisioned one chapter in his long history of the representation of reality to serve as “the core of the book.” Nor was “Auerbach’s ambition in *Mimesis*” to “create a historical vision of the secular world incarnated in the language through an unfolding, dramatic interpretation of its entire literature,” as Said would have us believe.⁶⁴ *Mimesis* has a unique historical and specific ideological context – as Auerbach admitted, “*Mimesis* is quite consciously a book that a particular person, in a particular situation, wrote at the beginning of the 1940s”⁶⁵ – and failing to acknowledge the provenance of the book results in a serious misunderstanding of its content and form.

Why did Said so persistently overlook Auerbach’s specific historical and ideological context and its possible influence on his writings? Is it possible that exile from Palestine influenced Said’s literary analysis of a Jewish intellectual? Is it conceivable that Said thought that acknowledging the suffering of Jews in Nazi Germany may provide a justification for or legitimation of the establishment of the State of Israel, whose war of independence eventually caused the exile of Said’s family? No answer is certain. Yet it is interesting to note that when dealing with Auerbach, as well as with Adorno, Said

⁵⁹ Auerbach, “Letter to Dr. Martin Hellweg, 22 June 1946,” in “Scholarship in the Times of Extremes: Letters of Erich Auerbach (1933–46), on the Fiftieth Anniversary of his Death,” eds., Martin Vialon and Robert Stein, *PMLA* 122 (January 2007), p. 757 (emphasis added).

⁶⁰ Auerbach, “Philology and *Weltliteratur*” (1952), trans. Maire and Edward Said, *Centennial Review* 13 (Winter 1969), p. 17. See also Said, “Reflections on Exile,” p. 185, and Aamir R. Mufti, “Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism, and the Question of Minority Culture,” *Critical Inquiry*, 25 (Autumn 1998), p. 97.

⁶¹ Said, “Reflections on Exile,” p. 185. Said expressed the same views in “Introduction: Secular Criticism,” pp. 6–9.

⁶² Auerbach, “Philology and *Weltliteratur*,” p. 17. By “pre-national medieval culture” Auerbach referred to Europe during the High Middle Ages (950–1350), a time in which took place the Europeanization of Europe, “an epoch of economic growth, territorial expansion and dynamic cultural and social change” in “western Europe,” to which historians referred to as “The Making of Europe.” To this new and well-defined European Christian civilization, without nations and nationalities, Auerbach referred to. See, Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change, 950–1350* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 2, 269–91. I would like to thank Ayelet Even Ezra who brought to my attention the pre-national character of the High Middle Ages.

⁶³ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History; Introduction: Reason in History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 209. According to Solomon, “‘*Geist*’ refers to some sort of general consciousness, a single ‘mind’ common to all men.” See, R. C. Solomon, “Hegel’s Concept of ‘Geist,’” *Review of Metaphysics* 23 (June 1970), p. 642.

⁶⁴ Said, “History, Literature, and Geography,” pp. 456–7.

⁶⁵ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 574.

renounced his cherished belief in the close connection between literature and history, text and historical context. This overt self-contradiction should be explained and understood. Two possible answers to this riddle can be offered.

Said vehemently opposed nationalism, by which he meant Western nationalism and imperialism – “nationalism and its essential association with exile”⁶⁶ he bitterly wrote – and it not hard to see that he applied this aversion to Auerbach. Yet, although he was a victim of National Socialism, he did not speak against nationalism. In other words, Said and Auerbach’s historical experience was radically different: for Said the “historical experience of imperialism for the imperialized entailed subservience and exclusion.” Thus, because “the historical experience of nationalist resistance and decolonization was designed for liberation and inclusion,”⁶⁷ Said argued that “exile and nationalism” cannot “be discussed neutrally, without reference to each other.”⁶⁸ This was clearly Said’s historical experience which led to his involvement in the Palestinian National Council, of which he was an independent member from 1977 to 1991.

Auerbach’s historical experience however was radically different. His goal was not fighting nationalism and imperialism but rather to help salvage European humanist civilization. Accordingly, while Said was honing in exile the methods of fighting against imperialism and nationalism, Auerbach was applying in exile the Hegelian concept of “reality” (*Wirklichkeit*), which embodied reason, truth, history and rationality, and was turning the idea against Nazi irrationalism, mythologizing, and the flight from reason. Said’s aversion to Western nationalism, and hence to Jewish nationalism, may be one answer to the puzzle of his misreading of Auerbach.

Another possible answer is that Said was too much occupied with the “narratives of oppression” made by the West that

he did not pay attention to the various narratives of oppressions taking place *within* the West, such as the horror and terror of Nazi Germany. As the British historian J. H. Plumb wrote about Said’s influential *Orientalism*: “It is a pity that it is so pretentiously written, so drenched in jargon, for there is much in this book that is superb as well as intellectually exciting.” Therefore Plumb and “others contended that Dr. Said *made no effort to actually examine the real, historical relations between West and East*, or ‘to sort out what was true in the Western representation’ of the East from what was false and caricatured.”⁶⁹ Likewise, the *Guardian* eulogized Said by noting that “*Orientalism* appeared at an opportune time, enabling upwardly mobile academics from non-western countries (many of whom came from families who had benefited from colonialism) to take advantage of the mood of political correctness it helped to engender by associating themselves with ‘narratives of oppression,’ creating successful careers out of transmitting, interpreting and debating representations of the non-western ‘other.’”⁷⁰

Said was decisive in creating “narratives of oppression,” and in epitomizing them as well. It thus seems that his obsession with Western “narratives of oppression” led him to ignore their content and form *within* the West, when another exiled scholar composed them.

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⁶⁶ Said, “Reflections on Exile,” p. 176.

⁶⁷ Said, “Introduction: Criticism and Exile,” p. xxviii. Said discussion of Imperialism may be found, among others, in *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), and “Yeats and Decolonization,” in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Univ. Press, 1990).

⁶⁸ Said, “Reflections on Exile,” p. 177.

⁶⁹ Richard Bernstein, “Edward W. Said, Polymath, Scholar, Dies at 67,” at <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/26/obituaries/26SAID.html?pagewanted=2> (emphasis added).

⁷⁰ Malise Ruthven, “Edward Said: Controversial literary critic and bold advocate of the Palestinian cause in America,” at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/2003/sep/26/guardianobituaries.highereducation>