

## DANTE

### *Poet of the Secular World*

ERICH AUERBACH (1892–1957) was born in Berlin, educated at the Universities of Heidelberg and Greifswald, and served in the German army during World War I. A professor at the University of Marburg, Auerbach fled Hitler's Germany in 1933 for Istanbul, where his encyclopedic knowledge of literature allowed him to compose his great study of realism, *Mimesis*, largely from memory. In 1947 he moved to the United States, where he taught at Pennsylvania State and Yale Universities.

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*Poet of the Secular World*

**ERICH AUERBACH**

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*Introduction by*

**MICHAEL DIRDA**

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## INTRODUCTION

Erich Auerbach (1892–1957) is best known for his magisterial, and majestic, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (published in German in 1946; English version, 1953). This volume of connected essays opens by contrasting the ancient Greek and Hebrew worldviews, as revealed in the *Odyssey* and the Old Testament. It ends with a close reading of a passage from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. In the five hundred or so pages in between Auerbach offers searching analyses of short, illustrative extracts from Petronius, Gregory of Tours, Chrétien de Troyes, Dante, Boccaccio, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Rabelais, Saint-Simon, Schiller, Stendhal, and others. Building on the stylistic quirks, lacunae, and emphases in his carefully chosen authors, Auerbach reveals the underlying suppositions about what art should do and how people and events can be represented in prose at a specific moment in history. As a work of literary scholarship, *Mimesis* has been deeply and widely admired, occasionally criticized, and never equaled.

Despite his great breadth of learning, Auerbach regarded himself primarily as a student of romance languages, and of medieval literature in particular. He had been brought up in a well-to-do Jewish family in Germany, taken a law degree at Heidelberg, fought in World War I, and finally decided to devote himself to what was then called romance philology. After

earning his Ph.D. with a dissertation on the early Renaissance novella, the young scholar first worked as a librarian, in part so that he could spend another half-dozen years or so just reading. Eventually he began to write the occasional scholarly review, then translated Vico's *New Science* into German, and finally accepted a professorship at the University of Marburg. Only in 1929, in his late thirties, did he bring out his first real book, *Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt*. Though well received from the beginning, this important study was nonetheless only translated into English—as *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*—in 1961, doubtless because of the high regard for *Mimesis*. It is arguably the best, if not the easiest, short introduction to Dante and his artistry.

What does Auerbach mean by calling the celebrated pilgrim through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven a poet of the secular world? In essence, he insists that Dante is our first great realist author, and perhaps our greatest. He was the first to configure

man, not as a remote legendary hero, not as an abstract or anecdotal representative of an ethical type, but man as we know him in his living historical reality, the concrete individual in his unity and wholeness; and in that he has been followed by all subsequent portrayers of man, regardless of whether they treated a historical or a mythical or a religious subject, for after Dante myth and legend also became history.

In the centuries since, we may have lost our eschatological focus, but Dante continues to make us see that individual destiny isn't meaningless, but is necessarily tragic and significant. He is at the birth of all modern self-portraiture in lyric poetry, fiction, and memoir.

Of course, we commonly regard Dante as a religious poet, a medieval visionary drawing on vast theological learning. Auer-

bach wouldn't deny this. But he stresses that Dante is far more than a dreamy mystic or a versifying schoolman. He truly is a "poet of the secular world," of our fallen earthly realm where people laugh and conspire, love and hate, sin and triumph over sin. Even though the people in the afterlife are technically disembodied spirits, they address the poet as distinct, fully human individuals. In fact, these shades reveal themselves with a vitality and purity of being only possible because they are dead. The dross has been burned away and what remains is the essential character. Of these myriad souls, Auerbach writes, "though the concrete data of their lives and the atmosphere of their personalities are drawn from their former existences on earth, they manifest them here with a completeness, a concentration, an actuality, which they seldom achieved during their term on earth and assuredly never revealed to anyone else." What's more, "The passion, which, either from diffidence or from lack of occasion to speak, tends in temporal existence to hide, bursts forth here, all in one piece, as though moved by the awareness that this is its one and only opportunity to express itself." In short, Auerbach asks us to regard this great poem not just as a divine comedy but also as a *comédie humaine*.

Less explicitly, perhaps, he also adds his voice to the reevaluation of Dante that marked the period between the two world wars. Many readers in earlier times had regarded the poet as simply "the man who had traveled to Hell." This romantic, even Gothic-sounding Dante versified a gruesome tour of the afterlife's torture cells, with snapshots of Ugolino devouring his sons, of Betran de Born carrying his head like a lantern, of the adulterous lovers Paolo and Francesca fastened together for all eternity. But in the twenty years between the late 1920s and the late 1940s, one important writer after another argued strongly for Dante—even above Shakespeare—as the central figure of European literature, the linchpin of the great classical and Christian tradition of learning and culture. This is the era

of T. S. Eliot's important essay *Dante* (1929, the same year as Auerbach's study), Osip Mandelstam's "Conversation about Dante" (1933), and Laurence Binyon's magnificent rendering of the *Commedia* into English terza rima, partly under the guidance of Ezra Pound (1933 and following). Recall, too, the important 1940s essays by C. S. Lewis, his fellow Inkling Charles Williams's book *The Figure of Beatrice*, and Dorothy Sayers's collected "papers on Dante," as well as her popular translation of the poem. To this varied company one needs to add Auerbach's scholarly paean to the *Commedia* as the crowning literary achievement of European civilization.

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To show Dante's originality, Auerbach opens his book with a concise history of imitation in antiquity, pointing out how Plato's dialogues—"shot through with movement and actuality"—bring their participants to vivid life in "their innermost individuality." He notes, too, that Virgil's *Aeneid* is "for the European literature of love, a basic model. Dido suffers more deeply and poignantly than Calypso, and her story is the one great example of sentimental poetry known to the Middle Ages." Dido lives on the page with an anguished, heart-piercing reality.

For Auerbach, Christ stands as a turning point in artistic as well as religious history. While the ancient philosophical ideal of ataraxia counsels a stoic indifference to life's vicissitudes, Christianity asks each of us to engage intensely with this world. Just as God's son had subjected himself to an earthly destiny and was willing to submit to creaturely suffering, so our own lives, our own "wrestling with evil," have now become "the foundation of God's judgment to come." Our consciousness of sin further encourages focused attention on our unique, individual self and our specific vices and virtues. The Christian world, consequently, throngs with distinct souls, each finding or losing

his way to God. This revolution accounts for the sheer diversity of the characters and personalities shown in the *Commedia*.

Following this historical background, Auerbach turns next to the impact of Provençal poetry and its Italian analogue, the *dolce stil nuovo*, on Dante's conception of love. Whereas the troubadours and their followers sang of wispy, symbolical ladies, their erstwhile disciple Dante instead emphasizes the sheer actuality of Beatrice. Throughout the memoir-like *Vita Nuova* (The New Life), concrete events replace flowery rhetoric and vague allegorizings. Dante's verse is simple, sharp, and clear, a relentless zeroing-in on the experience itself, leading to an intensity that can modulate into the mystical. Yet even when Beatrice is "transfigured and transformed," she nonetheless preserves her distinct earthly form. For Dante, says Auerbach, each of these early poems "is an authentic event, directly set forth in its unique, contingent, and ephemeral this-worldliness." Nonetheless, "from personal experience it expands into the universe . . . to become an immutable vision of reality in general, earthly particularity held fast in the mirror of a timeless eye."

By now, it should be evident that Erich Auerbach, despite his sometimes abstract Germanic prose and commanding scholarship, is also writing straight from the heart. Periodically, he reveals his awe before the beauty of Dante's imagery, the variety of his characters, the wisdom of his understanding, and the artistry that is able to hold together Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. Only after establishing the poet's distinctive genius does Auerbach devote the remainder of his book—roughly the last two-thirds—to the *Commedia* itself, focusing first on its subject, then on its structure, and last on specific scenes and images.

Auerbach points out that Dante started the poem when he was in exile from both his country and a place in its government and so relegated to a life of poverty. On a personal level, the *Commedia* would allow him to "correct and overcome that

disharmony of fate...by taking account of historical events, by mastering them and ordering them in his mind." Formally, though, the structure of the poem and the richness of its *dramatis personae*—the work's character as a *summa vitae humanae*—reflect the influence of Thomas Aquinas.

Aquinas insisted upon individuality and diversity as a theological tenet. Since the world was made in God's image, no one species of created things is adequate to reflect the likeness of God. You need them all. In terms of psychology, every soul possesses its own particular, gradually acquired *habitus*,

an enduring disposition which enriches and modifies the substance; it is the residuum in man's soul of his soul's history; for every action, every exertion of the will toward its goal leaves behind a trace, and the modification of the soul through its actions is the *habitus*. In the Thomist psychology diversities of *habitus* account for the diversity of human characters; it is the *habitus* which determines how each empirical man will realize his essence. It illumines the relations between the soul and its acts.

But the *habitus* only reveals itself over time. As a result, no matter what one's precise earthly station, each human being must necessarily be a dramatic hero.

Thus when Dante the pilgrim meets various shades in the afterlife, each presents himself "in the attitude and gesture which most fully sum up and most clearly manifest the totality of his *habitus*." Even though these souls have already been judged and occupy the places slotted for them in eternity (except for those ascending the mountain of Purgatory), they are "not divested of their earthly character. Their earthly historical character is not even attenuated, but rather held fast in all its intensity and so identified with their ultimate fate." In fact, Auerbach continues, "the situation and attitude of the souls in

the other world is in every way individual and in keeping with their former acts and sufferings on earth.” In short, “their situation in the hereafter is merely a continuation, intensification, and definitive fixation of their situation on earth,” even as “what is most particular and personal in their character and fate is fully preserved.”

Consider, as an example, Dante’s encounter with Farinata and Cavalcante, both spending eternity in fiery chests for the sins of heresy and atheism. In *Mimesis* Auerbach carefully analyzes this passage. Farinata speaks with lofty pride and disdain for his infernal surroundings and is only interested in discovering the current state of his country; Cavalcante tenderly reveals how much he misses the sweetness of light and the company of his son, the celebrated poet Guido Cavalcanti. Though both these souls suffer the same torments, each remains wholly himself, true to his unique identity. Whatever symbolic import they may carry, it never replaces their sharply individual personalities.

In his chapter about the structure of Dante’s great poem, Auerbach discerns three underlying systems. The Ptolemaic blueprint of the universe accounts for the general ordering of the underworld, the mountain of Purgatory, and the celestial spheres of Heaven. However, the ethical grading system governing the three realms naturally varies in each: Hell is organized by sinful acts and appropriate punishments, while Purgatory is arranged according to evil impulses in need of extirpation and expiation. In Heaven the souls “are ordered according to their good, unperverted dispositions, their just and measured love.” Auerbach neatly observes that the “higher Dante rises, the more universal and impersonal become the souls that appear” (which partly accounts for the striking vividness and individuality of the damned). In Paradise, the main gesture of the saved is to “shine with greater or lesser brightness.” Yet Auerbach pointedly insists that “their words encompass their gestures and

preserve the character of the earthly man who lived in them and still lives.” In a particularly clever demonstration of the supra-human love coursing through the celestial hierarchy, the Dominican St. Thomas sings the praises of St. Francis, while the Franciscan St. Bonaventure speaks admiringly of St. Dominic.

Along with these physical and ethical systems, Dante also employs a political-historical one, based on the notion that Rome and the Roman Empire possess a special earthly mission. This mission is, more or less, to be a terrestrial mirror of the divine order. Alas, Imperial Rome has fallen, while Papal Rome has grown corrupt and venal and more eager for temporal than spiritual power. That these two institutions have fallen away from God’s purpose explains Dante’s often lacerating remarks about the contemporary Church and his hope for its reform, as well as his obsessive interest in Italian politics and the possibility of a renewed secular Rome. It suggests, too, why Cato the Younger, rather than a major saint, oversees the door of Purgatory. He is the historical Cato, yes, but in his life he stood as a guardian of Rome and so may appropriately figure here as a guardian in the afterworld.

In his final chapters Auerbach discusses some of the individual scenes and characters in the poem, emphasizing again that it is at heart

a long series of self-portraits, which are so clear and complete that concerning those men, who have long been dead and who lived under such very different conditions from ourselves or who perhaps never lived at all, we know something which often remains hidden from us in our thoughts about ourselves or those with whom we are in daily contact: namely, the simple meaning which dominates and orders their whole existence.”

Nearly always, he discovers, that self-revelation builds on the rec-

ollection of some definite act or event, and “it is from this act or event that the character’s aura arises.”

Dante’s instinct for particularity is further demonstrated by those metaphors, similes, and images that imbue the *Commedia* with so much of its poetic vitality. As Auerbach says, every aspect of earthly life is here, if only in the concentrated power of the poet’s similitudes: “croaking frogs in the evening, a lizard darting across the path, sheep crowding out of their enclosure, a wasp withdrawing its sting, a dog scratching; fishes, falcons, doves, storks; a cyclone snapping off trees at the trunk; a morning countryside in spring, covered with hoarfrost; night falling on the first day of an ocean voyage; a monk receiving the confession of a murderer; a mother saving a child from fire; a lone knight galloping forth; a bewildered peasant in Rome,” and on and on. Nearly every line writhes with energy and exertion. “Dante’s poetry is a constant struggle with the object and the form it demands, a contest of hard with hard.” In sum, “reality and superhuman will, order and compelling authority” generate the substance of the *Commedia*’s style.

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In the years after he published *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, Auerbach was to deepen his understanding of the *Commedia*, chiefly through his studies of typology. This is the interpretative practice by which events in the Old Testament prophesy or prefigure those in the New. “The first signifies the second, the second fulfills the first.” Thus Jonah in the belly of the whale for three days represents Christ during the three days between his crucifixion and resurrection. In his most famous single essay, “Figura” (1944; collected in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, 1959), Auerbach stresses that both elements of a figure remain historical and real, fully themselves. He never retreats from this position, which certainly lies at the

core of *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*. When we meet the Old Testament Rahab in Heaven, she is unquestionably herself—the harlot who helps Joshua’s spies, then marks and safeguards her house with a scarlet cord when the Jews overwhelm and destroy Jericho. But she is also a figure of the Church. As Auerbach writes in “Typological Symbolism in Medieval Literature” (1952), “her house alone, with all its inhabitants, escapes perdition, just as the church of the faithful will alone be saved when Christ appears for the last judgment.” That scarlet cord is, of course, the sign of Christ’s redeeming blood.

Both *Mimesis* and “Figura” were written during Auerbach’s twelve-year tenure at the University of Istanbul. In 1935 the Nazis deprived Jews of their academic posts and Auerbach was forced to find a job outside the Reich. (Interestingly, he competed for this Istanbul position against Victor Klemperer, author of the famous diary of life in Germany during the Nazi era, *I Will Bear Witness*.) In the late 1940s Auerbach emigrated to America, eventually taking a position at Yale as a professor of romance philology. Harvard Professor Harry Levin remembers him then as “slight and dark, gentle to the point of diffidence, yet lively and engaging in conversation.” During his last years, he largely occupied himself with early medieval literature, some of his researches being published in *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages* (1965).

In his introduction to that last, and ultimately posthumous, book, Erich Auerbach offers something of a personal credo: “To grasp the special nature of an epoch or a work, to perceive the nature of the relations between works of art and the time in which they were created, is an endless problem which each of us, exerting the utmost concentration, must endeavour to solve for himself and from his own point of view.” Opening with a grand ambition and closing on a more modest sense of what can actually be accomplished, this statement of purpose sounds characteristic of Auerbach and his own assessment of his life’s

work. For it is hard to overlook the elegiac tone in so much of the scholarship, inevitably a reflection of the century's dark middle decades. In this little book of 1929 Auerbach recorded something of what European civilization had accomplished just before the barbarians overwhelmed the city of man and God. In still later years, this great humanist grew increasingly convinced that "European civilization is approaching the term of its existence; its history as a distinct entity would seem to be at an end."

That seems, for good or ill, more true than ever. Nonetheless, for many ordinary readers as well as learned scholars, Dante continues to stand at the summit of whatever we mean by European civilization and art. Looking back at the poet's masterpiece, Erich Auerbach rises to his own ecstatic vision of wisdom and beauty:

Thus in truth the *Comedy* is a picture of earthly life. The human world in all its breadth and depth is gathered into the structure of the hereafter and there it stands: complete, unfalsified, yet encompassed in an eternal order; the confusion of earthly affairs is not concealed or attenuated or immaterialized, but preserved in full evidence and grounded in a plan which embraces it and raises it above all contingency. Doctrine and fantasy, history and myth are woven into an almost inextricable skein. . . . Once one has succeeded in surveying the whole, the hundred cantos, with their radiant *terza rima*, their perpetual binding and loosing, reveal the dreamlike lightness and remoteness of a perfection that seems to hover over us like a dance of unearthly figures.

—MICHAEL DIRDA

Here Auerbach, thought by many to be the greatest of twentieth-century scholar-critics, makes the seemingly paradoxical claim that it is in the poetry of Dante, supreme among religious poets, and above all in the stanzas of his Divine Comedy, that the secular world of the modern novel first took imaginative form. The Structure of the "Comedy" V. The Presentation VI. The Survival and Transformation of Dante's Vision of Reality Notes Index. Here Auerbach, thought by many to be the greatest of twentieth-century scholar-critics, makes the seemingly paradoxical claim that it is in the poetry of Dante, supreme among Erich Auerbach's Dante: Poet of the Secular World is an inspiring introduction to one of world's greatest poets as well as a brilliantly argued and still provocative essay in the history of. Here Auerbach, thought by many to be the greatest of twentieth-century scholar-critics, makes the seemingly paradoxical claim that it is in the poetry of Dante, supreme among religious poets, and above all in the stanzas of his Divine Comedy, that the secular world of the modern novel first took imaginative form. Download Now. saveSave E. Auerbach, Dante. Poet of the Secular World For Later. 1.2K views. 0Up votes, mark as useful. 0Down votes, mark as not useful. E. Auerbach, Dante. Poet of the Secular World. Uploaded by. conu oblomov. Documents Similar To E. Auerbach, Dante. Poet of the Secular World. Carousel Previous Carousel Next.