Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* and the Value of Scale

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Abstract Through a reading of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, which readers inside and outside the academy have valued for decades, this essay teases out how literary critical value is often aligned with scale: big claims, minutely close readings, and the ability to move gracefully between them. The essay also identifies and discusses four techniques basic to literary criticism: description, interpretation, explanation, and evaluation. A coda speculates about the links between *Mimesis* and a visual technology introduced into university lecturing a few decades before Auerbach wrote his magnum opus: the slide projector.

Keywords surface reading, Erich Auerbach, description, interpretation, literary theory

What do literary critics value in literary criticism? Scholars of literature have long paid close attention to what we value in literary texts, but what we value in criticism itself often remains tacit even for those writing literary theory or undertaking peer reviews. Through a reading of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, which readers inside and outside the academy have valued for decades, I tease out how literary critical value often aligns with scale: big claims, minutely close readings, and the ability to move gracefully between them. Along the way I identify key aspects of Auerbach's hallmark style, define some techniques basic to literary criticism, and speculate about the links between *Mimesis* and a visual technology introduced into university lecturing a few decades before Auerbach wrote his magnum opus: the slide projector.

Surface Reading as Description

Several years ago Stephen Best and I suggested that literary criticism, not least because of the turn to digital methods, was undergoing a shift from symptomatic reading, which sought to reveal a text's hidden and formative depths, toward surface reading, in which critics placed greater value on texts' more manifest features (Best and Marcus 2009). "Surface Reading" struck a nerve, I believe, not only because it provocatively asked readers to prefer surface to depth but also because it challenged the discipline's most strongly held values about what makes our work worth doing. Those values include the political value we assign to scholarship and the resolutely interpretive status of our scholarly claims, where *interpretive* is taken to mean (as I am not sure that it should) unverifiable or subjective claims made by readers defined by their irremediable blind spots and biases.

Some of the most thoughtful responses to "Surface Reading," both negative and positive, elucidated the stakes of the debates it prompted by moving from metaphors of surface and depth to a vocabulary of description and interpretation (Love 2010; Rooney 2010). As a result, instead of quarreling over the aptness of a particular metaphor, we can address general questions of method and discuss more explicitly what we as literary critics value in literary criticism. For the past several decades, the most celebrated literary critics have tended to value interpretation, connotation, and the figurative over description, denotation, and the literal, arguing that the latter set of terms names operations that are impossible to carry out. Literary critics often rally around the preferred terms by casting them as methodological underdogs in need of defense against an allegedly dominant empiricist positivism that no longer prevails even in the sciences. Although one can count on journalistic diatribes about the humanities to give caricatures of positivism a feeble but persistent lease on life, physicists since Werner Heisenberg have declared that there is no such thing as unmediated access to reality, biologists have asserted that science is driven more by the unknown than by the known (Firestein 2012), and quantitative political scientists have cautioned that data always have to be or always already are interpreted (Gerring 2012). In these respects, many scientists and social scientists now share basic premises with literary critics who argue that description

is always interpretation, that denotation can never be isolated from connotation, and that the literal as such does not exist.

Although Heather Love (2015) is charting the genealogy of descriptive practices in twentieth-century literature and social science and Cannon Schmitt (2012) is writing the history of technical, denotative language in the novel, many scholars of literature continue to belittle "mere description" and to champion interpretation, despite or because they cannot agree whether to interpret a text is to determine its meaning or to reveal the impossibility of doing so. Literary critics tend to value in scholarship what they value in literature itself: wit, ambiguity, connotation, vivacity, figurative language, resistance, transgression, and self-reflexivity about the ways that language and consciousness shape perception and expression.

Might we, however, value description more than we realize? To explore this question, I turn to a critical text that by any measure—longevity, number of translations, appearances on syllabi, citation and commentary by other scholars—has long held a great deal of value for literary critics: Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, first published in German in 1946 and in English in 1953.

The Style of *Mimesis*

For a long time I found *Mimesis* a baffling text. What was Auerbach actually arguing, and how was he arguing it? What grounded his portentous, gently coercive tone, with its frequent recourse to words such as *tragic, rich, deep, problematic,* and *serious*? Why do readers value this book so much that its English translation has remained in print for over six decades?

One way to answer these questions is to identify Auerbach's relatively idiosyncratic inflections of the critical act, the hallmarks of his distinctive style. At this level of analysis, one explanation of the lasting value of *Mimesis* is its scale.[1] Auerbach commands Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Spanish,

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[1] Edward W. Said (2003: ix) remarks on the "amazing staying power" of *Mimesis* and also calls it "by far the largest in scope and ambition out of all the other important critical works of the past half century."

Italian, German, English, and French, and his magnum opus's twenty chapters, occupying 557 pages in the Princeton 1953 paperback edition, span over two thousand years of literary history, from Homer and the Old Testament to Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust, with erudite discussions of almost every epoch in between, including late antiquity and the Middle Ages, periods that rarely receive much attention in studies of realism. Nor is Auerbach concerned only with the big picture. Although *Mimesis* covers territory vast enough to deserve the epithet *magisterial*, it avoids the pitfalls associated with the encyclopedic because of its synec-dochic bent: it focuses on only a few works for each historical period it covers, and often on only one emblematic passage from each work. Because Auerbach examines representative passages rather than entire texts, he quotes less than most critics do, but at the same time he quotes more, since his exempla frequently run two to three pages, far longer than the six- or seven-line extracts standard in most criticism.

Like the literary works he values most, Auerbach moves fluidly between the micro and the macro, zooming in and out from close read-ings to panoramic surveys and back again.[2] A history of "the represen-tation of reality in Western literature" that proceeds almost entirely by close readings: Auerbach's work seems to hold its place of distinction in the critical canon by virtue of its ability to work on disparate scales. Given that *Mimesis* made Auerbach the hero of literary criticism that he remains to this day, it would seem that as a discipline we like to cham-pion David but keep Goliath, too, to toggle between the telling example and big data.

In addition to its virtuosic handling of scale, *Mimesis* may owe its lasting allure to Auerbach's complex relationship to the language of value. Attending to how Auerbach values texts may help us understand

[2] Stephen Greenblatt (1997: 20, 18) refers to Auerbach's "powerful ability to conjure up complex lifeworlds from tiny fragments" and notes that the individual passages in *Mimesis*, like the field-note excerpts that Clifford Geertz reproduces in his essay "Thick Description," seem "expandable" precisely because they are so "com-pressed." Alex Woloch (2014) also notes Auerbach's shift between the macro and the micro (122, 127), his use of juxtaposition (122), and the links between the book's structure and its claims (124). Woloch argues that critics have overlooked Auerbach's contributions to method (113) because they have oversimplified his theories of realism and representation, and equates both method and theory with form, negativity, limits, and contingency (116, 127).

why we value him as a critic. Certain adjectives have consistently positive or negative valences in *Mimesis*: *rich, wide, full, strong, broad*, and *deep* are always terms of praise, while *thin, narrow*, and *shallow* always have negative connotations. Tellingly, Auerbach's values are themselves related to scale; his epithets suggest that he prefers what is large and dense to what is small and empty, the river to the rivulet. But although Auerbach engages in evaluative criticism on almost every page, he refuses to adopt a fixed measuring system that would consistently deem particular literary techniques positive or negative. Hypo- and paratactic sentence structure, mixed versus stratified styles, attention to everyday life and creaturely existence, the arrangement of concrete particulars in an ordered perspective: how Auerbach evaluates any of these "motifs" (his term) varies from one chapter to another and sometimes within his reading of a single passage. For example, in chapter 4 he argues that Gregory of Tours's decision to include a particular anecdote in the *History of the Franks* "shows how narrow [his] horizon really is, how little perspective he has with which to view a large coherent whole" (84), but on the next page the same anecdote shows that Gregory "is directly interested in what people are doing [and] . . . treats even politics . . . humanly" (85).[3] Lack of perspective both prevents Gregory from adequately mastering the representation of reality and accounts for whatever success he has in doing so.

If at times the value that Auerbach assigns to an author's style feels capricious, his avoidance of a fixed value system enhances his charismatic authority as a literary connoisseur who leaves the reader in suspense about his pronouncements: will he approve or disapprove of Dante's hypotaxis (178), Cervantes's vividness (354), Schiller's depiction of commoners (439)? Very often the answer is both, which only reinforces our sense that we are in the hands of a critic so subtle that we could never anticipate or reproduce his judgments, which embody the multifariousness he values so much in literary works.

Four other features define Auerbach's style. One is juxtaposition. Most of the book's chapters compare and contrast two, sometimes three, texts, usually from the same time and place: chapter 2 juxtaposes Petronius, Tacitus, and the Gospel of Mark; chapter 16, Abbé Prévost and Voltaire; chapter 19, the Goncourt brothers and Émile Zola. Another is

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[3] All page citations of *Mimesis* refer to the first Princeton edition (Auerbach 1953).

implicitness. Auerbach deliberately withholds any account of his argu-
ment's stakes and claims until the book's brief epilogue, which offers a
few pages of retroactive signposting.[4] Even there Auerbach refrains from
conceptualizing the category of realism per se. "I have not seen fit," he
writes, "to analyze it theoretically and to describe it systematically" (556).
Instead, *Mimesis* begins in medias res, with no introduction; the book's
first words are, "Readers of the *Odyssey* will remember the well-prepared
and touching scene in book 19, when Odysseus has at last come home,
the scene in which the old housekeeper Euryclea, who had been his
nurse, recognizes him by a scar on his thigh" (3). Throughout *Mimesis*
Auerbach keeps his claims suggestive, closely bound to the specific
works he discusses. Literary works for Auerbach the critic serve a func-
tion analogous to the milieu or "culture-medium" (465) that sustains
Balzac's characters but not Stendhal's. The original German for "culture-
medium" is "Nährboden," or good soil: just as plants cannot thrive if
removed from the earth, Auerbach's readings cannot easily be extracted
from the passages he analyzes.

Auerbach's deliberately gradual unfolding of what never quite
becomes an argument underscores another feature of the book's style:
the demands it makes on the reader's time. Since Auerbach refuses to
define his terms at the outset, we can only piece them together by
reading the book in its entirety. (One reason that I initially found the
book baffling was that my professors assigned it only in excerpt.) In the
first chapter, for example, we encounter this pronouncement: Homeric
style has a "need for an externalization of phenomena in terms per-
ceptible to the senses" (6), which I think sounds kind of good, until I read
a few sentences down that externalization leads Homer to represent
phenomena as "completely fixed in their spatial and temporal relations"
(6), which sounds kind of bad—but why? Only in chapter 12 does
Auerbach start to explain the problem with fixity, while praising Mon-
taigne for capturing the flux and dynamism of history. It then takes a
few more chapters for him to make the case for "historism." Precisely
because Auerbach values flux and dynamism, he refuses to provide
normative guidelines that transcend particular texts, although he does

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[4] Said (2003: xxii) observes that Auerbach "typically . . . does not take time out to
explain his ideas methodologically."

claim predictive validity for the conclusions he draws based on his read-
ings of a "few motifs" in a relatively small "series of texts" (548). Because
Auerbach will not articulate universal rules that hold for the represen-
tation of reality in all times and places, his argument and the values
undergirding it can themselves unfold only over a great deal of time
and space.

In his epilogue Auerbach writes, "It was my endeavor to accom-
modate multiplex data and to make my formulations correspondingly
elastic" (556). Since elasticity and multifariousness also characterize the
works that *Mimesis* discusses, his emphasis on implicitness and duration
seems part of an effort to render his work similar to the representations
of reality that he has analyzed. Here we have a final hallmark of the
book's style: it is itself mimetic of the literary texts it studies. Like the
authors he admires most, Auerbach embeds the particular in the general
and situates the present in both short- and long-term history. Just as he
focuses on writers who present vivid, sensuous, concrete particulars, he
himself selects and presents long exemplary passages that, as he puts it in
the epilogue, "take . . . the reader directly into the subject" and help the
reader "*sense* what is at issue" (556; emphasis added). Auerbach's favored
authors do more than present particulars, however; they organize them
into coherent, layered units, and Auerbach does the same, both at the
level of the sentence and over the course of the book as a whole. He
himself explicitly compares the book's procedure of extracting meaning
from randomly chosen passages to the modernist fiction he discusses in
its final chapter (548). Even the book's title is self-reflexive; mimesis
refers both to literature's efforts to depict reality and to the critic's efforts
to depict literary realism.

Mimesis as Technique

Scale, connoisseurship, juxtaposition, implicitness, and mimesis are
aspects of Auerbach's style that help explain what scholars value in his
text, but *Mimesis* continues to be studied not only for its uniqueness but
also for its exemplarity. Another way to understand its lasting value is to
analyze Auerbach's use of common techniques that the discipline con-
tinues to view as fundamental. To define those techniques, I will take a
page from *S/Z*, in which Roland Barthes engages in text encoding *avant
la lettre* by annotating an entire Balzac novella in terms of five literary

codes: the hermeneutic, the referential, the proairetic, the semiotic, and the symbolic. In place of those literary codes, which when braided together in varying patterns form the network of fictional realism, I will focus on four critical techniques: description, interpretation, explanation, and evaluation. I will define each, then give an example of how they operate in a passage in *Mimesis*.

Description states what things are and how they work; according to *OED2* (www.oed.com, accessed April 26, 2016), the verb *describe* means "to portray in words or by visual representation" and "to give an account of or statement about in speech or writing." While devalued and controversial among literature scholars, description remains a common technique in music and art history, where it is seen as requiring training and erudition. In literary studies, description takes center stage in philology, narratology, poetics, stylistics, bibliography, and book history, as well as in some aspects of the digital humanities, such as ontologies, text mining, and text encoding. Many critics negatively associate description with tautology (see, e.g., Rooney 2010). Description does rely on sanctioned forms of tautology, such as quotation, but description also involves acts of categorization and classification that usually generate a vocabulary more abstract than that of the objects it analyzes. Thus many descriptive statements in literary criticism correlate specific textual features to terms drawn from grammar, rhetoric, genre criticism, narratology, and history.

When humanities scholars ask, "Can anything ever really be just description?," the question is usually rhetorical. Radical skepticism about description stems from a tendency to equate it with the absence of any kind of perspective, viewpoint, hypothesis, or theory. We posit an implausibly austere definition of description, then fault description for being contaminated by its reliance on frameworks, intuitions, perspectives, values, opinions, theories, and prior knowledge. Yet frameworks and perspectives can enhance perception as well as distort it (see Clarke 2005; Fried forthcoming). Susan Glaspell's (1919) play *Trifles*, first performed in 1916, is a classic literary example of how a particular standpoint can produce fuller perceptions and cannier descriptions, in this case of a murder scene.

Interpretation states not what things are or how they work but what they mean. The boundaries between description and interpretation are contested and blurry, and I do not propose to settle them here. In

everyday speech, interpretation is often synonymous with opinions based on beliefs that cannot be proven, on flimsy reasoning or evidence, or on views that are self-servingly biased ("That's just your interpretation"). In literary criticism, there are two common ways to distinguish interpretation from description. One is to align description with statements that claim indisputability and interpretation with statements that avow their partiality. Since most interpretations (even avowals of interestedness) carry truth claims and most descriptions are incomplete or situated, I do not consider this a useful distinction. Instead, I would propose that the two terms exist on a spectrum. We move closest to the interpretive end of the spectrum when we argue that the text means something very different from what it says or when we assert that a text's meaning and import lie in what it does not say, in blind spots and exclusions that only the interpreter can point out.

Although we are most accustomed as literary critics to the argument that every description relies on interpretation, viewpoints, and theories, so too does every interpretation rely on descriptions. Even interpretations that emphasize a text's blind spots usually rely on descriptive accounts of what the text itself cannot or will not say. For example, when Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985: 8–10) interprets *Gone with the Wind* to be as much about the rape of African American women (which the novel does not describe) as about the marital rape of a white Southern woman (which it does), she relies on accounts external to Margaret Mitchell's novel that she treats as descriptive, as saying something about what Southern society was and how it worked. Her point also illustrates how descriptions are not necessarily compromised by being made from a particular perspective or experience. That some descriptions of rape were made from the point of view of those raped does not vitiate their reliability but generates it.

Explanation designates the operation by which literary critics assign causality, though explanation can also signify description and interpretation, as when we "explain" a poem. Literary critics tend to downplay causality—why is not our favorite question—and usually refer the sources of a text's meaning or form to disciplines other than literary criticism, such as history, biography, economics, philosophy, or neuroscience. Thus scholars often relate specific features of literary works to general phenomena such as modernity, capitalism, imperialism,

patriarchy, or the structure of our brains. But because explanation is an undervalued operation in literary criticism, one seen to depend on the kind of literalism that leads many critics to reject description as impossible, the exact nature of the link between general phenomena and specific works often remains nebulous. Literary critics are more likely to posit the relationship between the realist novel and capitalism as one of homology, analogy, or shared commitments (to, say, individualism) than they are to trace a clear line from one as cause to the other as effect.

Evaluation involves assessment, appraisal, and judgment of importance, merit, quality, and social and political effects. Evaluation can tell us why a text is good or bad, succeeds or fails, is worth reading or not. Until the 1960s academic literary critics often engaged in explicit aesthetic evaluation, but since then assessment of texts' readability or worth has migrated primarily to book reviews or to the more implicit operations of canon formation and curriculum production. Evaluation remains a strong force in literary scholarship, however, in the form of critique: disapproval of or dissent from what a text says or means, usually on ethical or political grounds. Critique can easily be knit into description, interpretation, and explanation: one can disapprove of what a text does or does not describe, dissent from what it means, protest its underlying causes, or do all three at once.

To see these techniques at work and to return to the question of what we value in *Mimesis*, consider the following sentences, with each technique tagged in bold:

> Just as the locales and the themes change, so too do the styles [**DESC; EVAL; INT**]. The predominant style is that which corresponds to the grotesque theme which serves as frame—the grotesque-comic and popular style, and in its most energetic form, in which the most forceful expressions appear [**DESC; EVAL**]. Beside it, and mingled with it, there is matter-of-fact narrative, philosophical ideas flash out, and amid all the grotesque machinery rises the terrible creatural picture of the plague, when the dead are taken from the city by cartloads [**DESC; EVAL; INT**]. This sort of mixture of styles was not invented by Rabelais [**DESC; EXPL**]. He of course adapted it to his temperament and his purposes, but, paradoxically, it stems from late medieval preaching, in which the Christian tradition exaggerated the mixture of styles to the utmost [**DESC; EXPL; INT**]. . . . From the same spring, Rabelais, who had been a Franciscan in his youth, drew it "more pure" than anyone else. [**EXPL; DESC; EVAL**] (271)

The passage under discussion focuses on an episode in which Pantagruel takes a tour of Gargantua's mouth, where he finds forests and a man planting cabbages in the giant's teeth, learns that Larynx and Pharynx are the sources of a plague caused by "a stinking and infectious exhalation," and so on, in an extended conceit. Characteristic of this passage and of *Mimesis* in general are the low incidence of strongly interpretive statements and the high incidence of descriptive statements that translate the specifics of the passage quoted into categories and abstractions such as locale, theme, style, popular, grotesque, philosophical, and matter-of-fact, many of which also carry an evaluative charge. Nonetheless I have tagged several sentences as interpretive, because on the page following this passage Auerbach sums up his reading with this claim: "Our analysis has permitted us . . . to recognize an essential principle of [Rabelais's] manner of seeing and comprehending the world: the principle of the promiscuous intermingling of the categories of event, experience, and knowledge, as well as of dimensions and styles" (272). We thus see retrospectively that "change," "mingled," and "mixture" convey a muted interpretive claim, given Auerbach's thesis that realism means capturing historical flux and using a mixed style that treats comic everyday events with tragic seriousness. That interpretive claim remains fairly descriptive, since, rather than speculate about what the "essential principle" means, Auerbach confines himself here to stating how it works (through intermingling) and to evaluating it as "promiscuous"—or, as the German has it, as a "Durcheinanderwirbelns," a rollicking mishmash that on balance Auerbach views as more positive than negative.

Like most critics, Auerbach often combines several critical techniques in one sentence. Throughout the passage quoted above he blends description and evaluation via words such as "energetic," "forceful," and "terrible." The first sentence also does this, more mutedly; it is descriptive because it tells us what happens in the passage, and it is evaluative because elsewhere Auerbach equates good representations of reality with the ability to capture historical dynamism, which also gives "change" a positive spin. The passage blends explanation and description when Auerbach tells us that Rabelais borrowed his mixed style from Christian sermons and adjusted it according to his temperament, and thus identifies two causes of Rabelaisian style: Christianity and Rabelais's unique

personality. Auerbach reinforces Christianity as a causal explanation of Rabelaisian style when he mentions, in another descriptive clause, that Rabelais "had been a Franciscan in his youth."

Interestingly, a critical text we continue to value highly relies heavily on two of the critical techniques we now prize the least: description and evaluation. Unlike critics of realism writing after the 1970s linguistic turn, Auerbach spends little time worrying about description's epistemological pitfalls. Instead, as many philological critics did, he sees himself as engaged in immanent criticism; as he puts it in the epilogue, "For long stretches of my way I have been guided only by the texts themselves" (556). He expresses the hope that he has "seen" the motifs he discusses "correctly" (548) and, aware that he may not have, he hopes that by making his units of analysis small enough, he has "report[ed]" on them "with reasonable completeness" (549). Auerbach's ease with description may stem from his willingness to connect it to interpretation, which he defines in terms of perspective and patterning, as an attempt "to give meaning and order . . . in the past, the present, and the future" (549). Indeed, when writing about Woolf, Auerbach faults her for a failure to interpret that he equates with a failure to describe. He links her narrator's frequent expressions of uncertainty to a confusion about reality that makes it difficult to order coherently, in spatial and temporal perspective, the experiences and thoughts she describes (535, 538).

Connecting description and interpretation does not, however, mean collapsing each into the other, and Auerbach clearly distinguishes between them: description deals with what is in the text itself; interpretation does more. Commenting on what he has just written about a passage in *Don Quijote*, Auerbach states, "I have tried to interpret as little as possible," by which he means that he has endeavored, "insofar as that is still possible, to attain a clear understanding of what the work meant to its author and his contemporaries" (354). A tragic meaning "can be read into the text; it is not there of itself" (358). Precisely because interpretation goes beyond description, the two can be distinguished. Indeed, by confining his analysis to passages that he reproduces in full, Auerbach makes it relatively easy to verify whether his descriptions are accurate. When he offers a paraphrase that does depart significantly from the passage it describes, he says as much:

> As we have here (intentionally) presented it, [all this] sounds sad, bitter, and almost tragic.
>
> But if we merely read Cervantes' text, we have a farce, and a farce which is overwhelmingly comic. (339)

After alerting us to the inaccuracy of his description, Auerbach clarifies that it is not a description at all. "To find anything serious, or a concealed deeper meaning in this scene," he writes, "one must violently overinterpret it" (345). A good interpretation, by contrast, would remain closer to an accurate description.

Scaling *Mimesis*

Although there is more description in *Mimesis* than we might have guessed, I am not suggesting that literary critics' continued affection for it reveals a disavowed attachment to the description that they only pretend to repudiate. Rather, I would speculate that we still value *Mimesis*, despite its reliance on description, because its descriptions so frequently become occasions for Auerbach to display his virtuosic handling of scale. To begin with, consider the very different scales of the book's chief descriptive techniques: quotation and paraphrase. Auerbach famously quotes passages that are often one to three pages long; in the US edition those passages usually appear twice, first in their original language, then in English, occupying so much space that the book sometimes has the feel of an anthology. Direct quotation reproduces, in a one-to-one ratio, the exact scale of the passage itself; its values are accuracy and fidelity. In some instances Auerbach explicitly devalues doing anything other than quote a text. In chapter 11 he writes:

> I consider it a mistake to probe Rabelais' hidden meaning . . . for some definite and clearly outlined doctrine; the thing which lies concealed in his work, yet which is conveyed in a thousand ways, is an intellectual attitude. . . . To describe it in more detail is not a wise undertaking—for one would immediately find oneself forced into competition with Rabelais. He himself is constantly describing it, and he can do it better than we can. (281)

Because nothing can improve on Rabelais's descriptions, Auerbach refrains not only from interpreting them but even from describing them, confining himself instead to whatever self-description Rabelais himself offers.

Long block quotations often set the stage for Auerbach to wrap up his analysis with a masterful condensation. Here the value derives from the difference in scale between a wordy, quite specific literary passage and a pithy but wide-ranging critical statement. For instance, in chapter 19, after a very long paraphrase of an even longer passage from Zola's *Germinal*, Auerbach provides this compressed summary: "Crude and miserable pleasures; early depravity and rapid wearing out of human material; a dissolute sex life, and a birth rate too high for such living conditions, since intercourse is the only amusement that costs nothing; behind all this, at least among the most energetic and intelligent, revolutionary hatred on the verge of breaking out—these are the motifs of our text" (511–12). Auerbach gives us, condensed into a single sentence, an abstract of the quoted passage that also describes the entire novel from which it is drawn, then vaults to the naturalist literary project writ large and to the historical conditions that explain the characters' motivations.

As striking as Auerbach's liberal use of long quotations is his ability to comment on them for pages in analyses that exhibit his talent for elaboration or amplification of the passage under discussion.[5] Auerbach demonstrates how much the critic can say about what a passage is doing, crudely measured as the difference in size between the quoted text and the critic's analysis of it. His discussion of the *Song of Roland*, for example, begins with a long quotation, next paraphrases the passage's plot points along with some earlier ones, and finally provides a second description that aligns plot points and formal features: "The first laisse [strophe] begins with an introduction of three lines, three paratactically juxtaposed principal clauses which describe the early-morning departure of the army" (99). In other instances, Auerbach disaggregates what the text combines, as when he writes of a passage in Montaigne: "We will now discuss these seven points individually. This to be sure is a somewhat meager expedient, if only for the reason that the points intermingle and are hard to keep apart. But it is necessary if one desires to get out of the text everything that is in it" (297). Here Auerbach presents critical description as simultaneously inadequate and enriching to the literature

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[5] See, for example, his treatment of a passage in a Goncourt brothers novel (496).

it describes; it is a "meager expedient" that nonetheless manages to extract everything that Montaigne's juicy text has to offer.[6]

Auerbach thus invests description with one of interpretation's most dazzling features: the power to shift scales.[7] The long passages he quotes at the outset of each chapter represent much larger texts and corpora in miniature. His discussions of those passages shift scale even more dramatically, since his elaborate analyses amplify the small into the large, while his concentrated summaries compress the large into the small. This value, however, comes through in how Auerbach deploys description, not in how he himself describes it. Indeed, *Mimesis* presents an interesting paradox: although Auerbach values description enough as a critical technique to use it liberally throughout his magnum opus, he displays ambivalence about description in literary works.

To understand what Auerbach does and does not value about literary description requires a quick survey of his literary value system. His overarching interest throughout *Mimesis* is literature's ability to invest ordinary people and everyday life, usually the stuff of comedy, with tragic seriousness (282). He therefore demotes writers like Racine and Corneille, who use elevated language to focus on the nobility, and consistently admires what he calls "the mixed style" (41) of authors such as Shakespeare, who blends high and low language; Boccaccio, who uses high language to discuss low subjects; and works such as the New Testament, whose humble language "reaches out far beyond its original domain, and encroaches upon the deepest and the highest, the sublime and the eternal" (72). Auerbach also values "Historism" (443–44), which he defines characteristically late in the book in a page-long sentence that performs the complex coordination of multifariousness it describes. Elsewhere Auerbach defines historism more compactly as "a loving genetic comprehension of evolutions" (465) that sees the past in "perspective," in "historical depth" (321), and conceives "the present as history—the present as something in the process of resulting from history" (480). It follows that Auerbach values literary works that span different scales, that can represent change and flux (28), and that have a sense of their own historical scale, of their place in a long temporal chain.

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[6] Auerbach on Montaigne: "No philosopher of antiquity . . . could write . . . so juicily, so animally and so spontaneously" (295).

[7] On interpretation's association with shifts in scale, see Felski 2015: 61, 62, 70.

Because the dynamic historical forces that structure everyday life are not visible as such, Auerbach valorizes texts that "embed" inner events "in concrete contemporary reality" (72). This is where description comes in, but Auerbach praises the sensory, the visual, the graphic, the random, the particular, and the concrete only when they also figure something higher and deeper. Equally important to Auerbach is that those "deep subsurface layers" are always on the move (45). He thus favors literary works that set random, sensory, concrete particulars in motion, because, like leaves tracing the wind, such details help readers grasp history as a set of invisible but determining "forces" (32). "Real life and living growth" (119), "progressive movement" (118), fullness (118), elasticity (112), freedom (111, 128), and development (159): these represent, as personifications, some of Auerbach's highest aesthetic values.

Left to their own devices, however, the concrete pictorial details that constitute description degree zero can degrade texts and readers; the only exception to this rule is Montaigne, who earns Auerbach's highest praise even though his method "confines itself to pure observation" (299). For Auerbach, the descriptive otherwise acquires value only when it paves the way for the interpretive, not in the sense of uncovering hidden meaning or exposing the limitations of a particular view but in the sense of providing a coherent image. Good description must, like "Dante's figural interpretation" of the inferno, depict a world "ordered, interpreted, and represented as a reality and as a whole" (231); the small must be clearly framed by and positioned within a much larger unity. By contrast, a passage drawn from the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus shows "how much stronger the magical and the sensory has become at the expense of the human and the objectively rational" (53). After underscoring Ammianus's preference for "sensory vividness" (58), the "gestural" (54), the "graphically imaged" (54), and the "pictorial" (57), Auerbach concludes: "In Ammianus the sensory, the perceivable, runs riot. . . . With glittering words and pompously distorted constructions language begins to depict the distorted, gory, and spectral reality of the age" (57). Ammianus's style succeeds at mimesis, since its "effects are as distorted as the reality it represents" (59). But Auerbach, subjecting description to evaluation, ultimately faults Ammianus's writing *and* the reality it represents: "Striking only in the sensory, . . . his manner of

writing history nowhere displays anything redeeming, nowhere anything
that points to a better future, nowhere a figure or an act about which stirs
the refreshing atmosphere of a greater freedom, a greater humanity"
(59–60).

While even this "glaringly pictorial realism" contains the germ of the
mixed style (63) that Auerbach considers the signal marker and achieve-
ment of realism, the message is clear here as throughout: description
alone has no redeeming value.[8] Homer's characters "are splendidly
described" (17), but this turns out to be a demerit; precisely because "the
Homeric poems conceal nothing, they contain no teaching and no
secret second meaning" (13). Auerbach prefers descriptions that lead
to interpretations: "Homer can be analyzed . . . but he cannot be inter-
preted" (13). Description and interpretation must be kept in balance,
however, since too much interpretation unmoors writing from the real,
as in Rousseau, whose emphasis on philosophy and principles means
that "the reality of the social world does not become for him an imme-
diate subject" (466).

If description and interpretation exist on a spectrum, that spectrum
is a scaled one: description, with its enumeration and proximity to par-
ticulars, tends to feel small, where interpretation, with its leaps and
excavations, usually connotes an increase in scope. Description tarries in
the sensory and the particular, while interpretation uses the author's
"intellectually categorizing power" (258) to give those particulars a form
that elicits their connections and carries us to broader, deeper, higher
realms. Auerbach values description most when authors use it to move
from the small, the particular, the visible, and the low to the great, the
general, the invisible, and the universal. His preferred point is where the
common reaches the high and the high meets the common (see, e.g.,
440), and reaching that point almost always also involves not only a

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[8] Auerbach similarly faults Cervantes: "Don Quijote's adventures never reveal any
of the basic problems of the society of the time. His activity reveals nothing at all. It
affords an opportunity to present Spanish life in its color and fullness" (345). He
continues: "In the resulting clashes between Don Quijote and reality no situation ever
results which puts in question that reality's right to be what it is" (345). In Cervantes, too
much realism; in the English novel, too much idealism (520), by which Auerbach means
too much attachment to a fixed moral system instead of a supple one that responds to
historical particularity and flux.

transition from the concrete to the abstract or figurative but also a dramatic shift in scale.

Auerbach is the Goldilocks of literary criticism, constantly assessing whether a work's scale is too big or too small, too interpretive or too descriptive, and almost never finding that any writer gets the balance just right. He is also Alice in Wonderland, vaulting from the tiny to the gigantic and back again. He values description and interpretation not as two sides of the same coin but as distinct operations that attain the highest value when combined. As a good humanist, Auerbach also values, and mimetically models for his reader, a mental and linguistic elasticity that allows author and reader to move freely between description and interpretation, between the small scale of the part and the vast scale of the whole (see 488, 53).

Coda: Auerbach's Slide Table

The choice of as old-fashioned a text as *Mimesis* to think through questions of scale and value may seem perverse, given the urgency with which many literary scholars today are thinking about how new computational methods that can analyze unprecedented amounts of text might transform literary criticism. Comparing what Auerbach does in *Mimesis* to digital methods would require another essay entirely, an exploration of what, if anything, changes when criticism shifts from duration to speed, implicitness to explicitness, exemplarity to large corpora.[9] It is easy to cast Auerbach as the traditionalist in this scenario, not only because he wrote so long ago but also because throughout *Mimesis* he questions the value of "the searchlight device," which "consists in overilluminating 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" (404). Although Auerbach finds the device in antiquity, I am probably not the only one to hear an allusion to Nazi propaganda techniques in the figure of an aggressive "searchlight" that obscures more than it enlightens.

[9] Using Docuscope, Michael Witmore (2016) shows that Auerbach's claims for the passages he quotes in his first chapter continue to hold up if one extends the range of analysis to all the books of the *Odyssey* and the New Testament.

Elsewhere Auerbach uses a related metaphor when he writes of a speaker in the *Satyricon* that "a clear and equal light floods the persons and things with which he deals. . . . What he says can have but one meaning, nothing is left mysteriously in the background, everything is expressed" (26–27). Here the illumination is not selective but total, under "a clear and equal light," yet it produces the same oversimplification, reduction to "one meaning," and has the same connotations of a brutal modernity, from which Auerbach recoils as many initially did from the perceived harshness of electric lightbulbs. Auerbach's disdain for crude, aggressive lighting comes through even when he uses epithets that ordinarily register as quite positive: he prefers the story of Abraham and Isaac to Homer's "orderly, perfectly well-articulated, uniformly illuminated descriptions" (3) and dismisses Cervantes for rendering Don Quijote's madness as if it possessed "a bright equanimity" that "illumines everything that crosses his path" (352). To the harsh glare that makes everything visible, Auerbach prefers shadowy, dappled images that leave something "mysteriously in the background" (26).

Another now obsolete visual tool that was shiny and new when Auerbach was writing *Mimesis* also seems to be at stake here: the 35mm three-color slide projector that, by sending light through glass slides, made the resulting images seem radiantly luminous, suffused with light. In the years when Auerbach was writing *Mimesis*, color slides were the latest thing, pushing out the black-and-white photographic slides that in the early twentieth century had in turn replaced older, hand-painted lantern slides (Widzinski 2010: 359–60). In 1882 art historians at Princeton, Harvard, and Columbia began to use lantern slides in college lectures, contributing to a shift from the supernatural to the scientific, from the magic-lantern slides of traveling showmen and popular lecturers to the scientific microscope—although both uses purported to reveal the unseen (Eisenhauer 2006: 200, 204–5). In Germany the art historians Bruno Meyer and Hermann Grimm paved the way in the 1880s for the magisterial photographic-slide lectures that Heinrich Wölfflin offered in the first decade of the twentieth century (Miyahara 2007: 67; Snow 2002: 5).[10] In the 1940s, when Auerbach was writing

[10] Snow mistakenly names Grimm Heinrich instead of Hermann in her article. The foundational article on the slide projector's role in art history is Fawcett 1983.

Mimesis, color slides were to lantern slides and black-and-white photographic slides what PowerPoint would be fifty years later to the Kodak carousel: the garish new format casting the older one in a nostalgic glow.

One is tempted to imagine Auerbach fulminating against this new technology, which often produced the kind of even, bright lighting he objects to in the examples quoted above, but his signature critical techniques bear some interesting correspondences to what was at the time a relatively new instructional technology. Like a projector that enlarges a small slide into an image that fills a large screen, Auerbach's criticism magnifies passages so that they represent entire texts and historical periods, while treating those passages like the details that slides enabled art historians to isolate from larger images. Like Wölfflin, who pioneered the use of double-slide projectors in the early twentieth century, Auerbach operates by juxtaposition and comparison, placing two texts side by side to highlight their similarities and differences.[11] Finally, like the art historian placing slides on a light table or lining up slides to organize a lecture, Auerbach gives us a history of Western literature in roughly forty textual vignettes. To be sure, this procedure is not purely modern; it also resembles Auerbach's description of the structure of the *Song of Roland*, which "strings independent pictures together like beads," so that each "has as it were a frame of its own" (115), and composes events "into a mosaic of parceled pictures . . . placed side by side paratactically" (116). This resembles not only the relationship between the long extracts that often sit like rectangular slides on the pages of *Mimesis* but also the paratactic relationship between the book's chapters, which rarely explain how or why literature changes from one era to the next. Indeed, the slide projector owes something not only to episodic medieval poetry but also to the medieval cathedral, whose stained-glass windows each resemble freestanding slides but, when viewed collectively and sequentially, tell a story that unfolds like a slide show.

Fawcett and Robert S. Nelson (2000) note that the technique of placing two images side by side, whether as print enlargements or in specially fabricated slide projectors, predated Wölfflin but agree with Anne Friedberg (2006: 196) that "the comparative method of the double-slide projector" was closely associated with Wölfflin, who made it one of his "pedagogical mainstays . . . soon after he began to lecture at the University of Berlin in 1901."

[11] On the history of double-slide projection and for brief comments on the analysis it enabled, see Friedberg 2006: 195–96.

I conclude with this speculative vision of *Mimesis* as a slide table to suggest that new methods of reading, writing, illustration, and printing can inform how we read even when we ostensibly reject them. Awareness of new technologies alerts us to how we take in information and how we express our insights, making us more self-conscious about our descriptive and interpretive techniques. Just as slide projectors created copies that were more accurate than engravings and lithographs (Fawcett 1983: 450) and allowed people to see more in a painting, to focus more on details and to seek out the compositional structures that different canvases had in common, basic computer functions such as word searches allow us to see more in texts. At the end of *Mimesis* Auerbach writes that he chose most of his texts at "random" (556), a term that recalls his description of Stendhal's equally random "method," which he deems "the best for eliminating the arbitrariness of one's own constructions, and for surrendering oneself to reality as given" (462–63). Auerbach does not favor any simple surrender to reality, however, since he criticizes Cervantes precisely for never putting "in question . . . reality's right to be what it is" (345). An attempt to synthesize these apparently contradictory evaluations would go something like this: critics and authors should not accept reality as given, but to understand the reality one might want to change, one must first passionately observe it.

New technologies, from the book to the slide projector to the computer, can improve our observation of sensory particulars, enabling us to see better what is already there, to visualize a previously unseen realm, and to perceive more in a single work or in a vast corpus than we ever have before. Sometimes, however, they might also lead us to see less. John Ruskin agreed that photographs of paintings could direct viewers to see details they might otherwise miss, but he also felt that they were often less successful than sensitive engravings at capturing "certain expressive qualities of the original" (Fawcett 1983: 451). As new techniques and styles of literary analysis emerge, our first impulse is to focus on how they might improve on older ones, yet we can also think of new techniques as incorporating and updating older ones or being informed by them, as renewing our appreciation for the older ones, or as encouraging us to hastily and heedlessly abandon the old in favor of the latest shiny thing. New media, new methods, and new techniques can expand our sense of scale in ways that amplify cultural value. Just as

print enabled multiple copies of books to spread language, images, and ideas faster and farther than manuscripts, and the slide lecture allowed viewers to compare and contrast parts and wholes, so too digital methods are spawning new ways of reading whose potential we have only begun to tap. Yet, as Auerbach's frequent meditations on historical flux remind us, every advance risks loss: our vision of literary criticism's exciting new future will do well to include the shadows that new ways of reading cast on older ones—shadows that dapple, outline, or obscure, depending on how we adjust our vision.

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