Erich Auerbach and the Crisis of German Philology: The Humanist Tradition in Peril

Erich Auerbach and the Crisis of German Philology analyzes the philologist’s works and life of the mind in the wide ideological, philological, and historical context of his time. Auerbach’s struggle as a humanist philologist is examined against the völkisch, chauvinist, racist, and anti-Semitic premises of Aryan philology, based on völkisch mysticism and Nazi historiography, which eliminated the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, from German Kultur and Volksgeist in particular and Western humanist culture and civilization in general. He constructed his Apologia for, or justification of, the Western Judaeo-Christian humanist tradition at its gravest existential moment.

In this broad context, Auerbach’s goal in writing two of his most famous and celebrated works, “Figura” and Mimesis, was not merely philological and literary but polemical. These works equally reject Aryan philology, völkische mysticism and Nazi historiography, which were based on racism, chauvinism, and the mythologies of Blood, Volk, and Soil, or the Community of Blood and Fate of the German people, glorifying the concept of Kultur and rejecting the concept of European civilization. Immediately following the 1933 Nazi Revolution, Auerbach began defending, first, the Old Testament from elimination by Aryan philology and, second, Western humanist culture and civilization against Nazi tyranny and barbarism.

Begun in 1933, “Figura” provides an Apologia for the Old Testament’s validity and credibility. It draws 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 prove that the Old Testament is inseparable from the New Testament and inextricably linked to Western culture and civilization as a whole, contrary to the racist and anti-Semitic claims of Aryan philology, völkische mysticism and Nazi historiography.

In 1942, the most crucial year of World War II, which witnessed the battles of Stalingrad and El Alamein, Auerbach started writing Mimesis, which constitutes a grand Apologia for, or defense and justification of, the Western Judaeo-Christian humanist tradition. Like Saint Augustine and Blaise Pascal, to name only two famous apologists, Auerbach wrote his defense at the moment of greatest challenge. Other German-speaking Jewish exiles began writing their grand humanist defenses of Western civilization that year—Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s Dialectic of Enlightenment, Ernst Cassirer’s 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—here, a composer, or Germany—who makes a bargain for power with Satan. The year 1942 signified a great epistemological watershed in the intellectual history of the West. Hence they all took, in Horkheimer and Adorno’s words, “the cause of the remnant of freedom, of tendencies toward real humanity, even though they seem powerless in face of the great historical trend.”

Spurned by the Nazis as a Jew, an unworthy human being of inferior race, Auerbach exacted perfect revenge. He rescued the Western humanist tradition, based on Judaeo-Christian heritage and the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, in works that have resonated with and illuminated readers ever since. This legacy is his contribution to the Kulturkampf against Aryan philology and Nazi barbarism.