

Erich Auerbach and the Philology of World Literature

Abolfazl Ahangari¹

Extended Abstract

Introduction

Erich Auerbach (1892–1957) was one of the twentieth century's most influential German classical philologists and literary theorists whose work decisively reshaped modern literary studies. First acclaimed for his Dante scholarship, he gained global recognition with *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), written in exile in Istanbul after his expulsion from Marburg under the Nazi regime. Across twenty chapters, *Mimesis* traces how Western literature from Homer to Virginia Woolf represents reality, building its case through close, historically sensitive philological readings, rather than a top-down imposition of abstract theory. The book has long been a cornerstone of the field, transforming our understanding of European literary history as a coherent, dynamic whole.

In the postwar decades, Auerbach's reputation grew steadily in the Anglophone world, helped by Edward Said's translations and advocacy. Over the last two to three decades, however, his influence has reached new heights, driven by renewed debates on comparative and world literature and by the new English translation of Auerbach's collection of essays, under the title of *Time, History, and Literature* (2013). Central to this revival is Auerbach's essay, "The Philology of World Literature" (1952)—published six years after *Mimesis* and translated by Edward Said in 1969—which established Auerbach, alongside Leo Spitzer, as a founding theorist of comparative literature. In this essay, Auerbach returns to *Mimesis* to reconsider—and redefine—the three interrelated notions of "philology," "world," and "literature." Through this

1. Postdoctoral Fellow, Tsinghua Institute for Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China (Corresponding translator) ahangari@tsinghua.edu.cn

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theoretical return, he proposes an alternative approach to literary study—one that is rigorously philological and grounded in the concerns of our shared “philological home:” the earth.

Aim

This paper offers five interconnected objectives: first, to show that Auerbach’s “The Philology of World Literature” returns to *Mimesis* to provide a fresh view of it as a project that alters the definition of literature from a matter of form to a historically evolved function; second, to demonstrate how his philology, developed in the context of exile, operates as a creative, individual synthesis grounded in present crisis—one that begins from contemporary urgencies and retroactively composes a coherent historical narrative of a cultural world; third, to trace the dynamics of global homogenization, arguing that nationalism and modernization jointly propel standardization that paradoxically both realizes and negates the Goethean ideal of Weltliteratur; fourth, to extend the domain beyond the Latin-Christian West by sketching how other traditions can reconstitute their own, non-assimilated conceptions of literature (for instance, Persian *adabiyat*) through historical-philological study; and fifth, to contend that philology offers a pragmatic, politically and ethically engaged means of safeguarding cultural plurality, thereby sustaining the preconditions for meaningful human experience and cross-tradition understanding amid accelerating standardization.

Discussion

Auerbach’s “The Philology of World Literature” returns to *Mimesis* and reformulates it as a project that relocates “literature” from the realm of form to that of historically evolved function. This function for Auerbach is nothing but mimesis: a practice of representing human/world reality within concrete socio-political conditions. In *Mimesis*, rather than fixing “representation” in advance, he lets texts—from Homer to Woolf—show how it changes under varying pressures. This inductive method is what he calls philology. Through this philological method, he challenges the dominance of Formalism and New Criticism, insisting that literature’s meaning and value emerge from its role in the unfolding drama of human history.

Auerbach's philology is an individual, creative synthesis forged in exile and animated by an acute sense of crisis—the rise of fascism in Europe and the experience of exile. Writing from displacement—expelled from Marburg and composing *Mimesis* in Istanbul—he argues that the philologist must first intuit the present, then stand imaginatively at a world's (i.e., cultural world) endpoint to identify a starting point for discerning a coherent arc that binds disparate works. The chosen starting point—mimesis, in his case—draws texts into relation without predetermination, yielding not a national inventory but a crafted narrative of a cultural world. Such a narrative makes it possible to recover literature's function in and for that world, undertaken by a single responsible reader writing from fear, urgency, and personal duty rather than institutional mandate.

Drawing on his experience of European fascism and the Kemalist reforms, Auerbach views standardization as the joint effect of nationalism and modernization. His outlook on standardization is bleak: the world contracts, local lifeworlds vanish, diversity declines, and the emergence of a single literary culture—or even a single language—seems increasingly likely, leading to the erosion of historical memory and the spread of global uniformity. The ethical and epistemic costs of standardization are severe: as diversity fades, humanity relinquishes the plural forms of life, being, and thinking through which the human has disclosed itself across centuries, giving rise to meaninglessness, homelessness, and a widespread sense of exile. In this light, Goethe's conception of *Weltliteratur* paradoxically both realizes itself and simultaneously vanishes.

Expanding the domain beyond the Latin-Christian West, Auerbach contends that “literature” is deeply rooted in specific cultural contexts and must be reimagined within the historical-philological frameworks of individual traditions—such as Persian *adabiyat*. This requires identifying a contextually meaningful “starting point” that can organize materials into a cohesive, dynamic whole. Rather than subsuming non-European traditions under Western paradigms, the aim is to establish a federation of rigorously historicized literary conceptions, maintaining their historical uniqueness while fostering dialogue and mutual enrichment to empower these traditions and broaden their horizons. By locating the notion of literature in diverse historical contexts, this approach pushes back against the flattening effects of

global standardization.

Eventually, the paper advocates for philology as a pragmatic, politically attentive, and ethically engaged practice focused on what is possible now: using still-accessible archives, languages, and historical sensibilities to formulate intelligible narratives for defining a particular history and tradition before they fully vanish due to the forces of globalization and standardization. This is not a nationalist project but a personal, love-driven commitment to Earth as our shared “philological home” acknowledging common inheritance while honouring difference. By reconnecting literature with its historical role across traditions, this approach preserves access to the rich diversity of human experience, countering the erasure threatened by the rapid march of standardization.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper’s rereading of Erich Auerbach’s “The Philology and World Literature” shows that world literature is not a unified, Goethean ideal but a mosaic of distinct cultural histories, each requiring philological reading within its own cultural and socio-political horizon. Confronting global homogenization, standardization and the erosion of local traditions, Auerbach recasts literature as a historical function one capable of resisting the thinning of human experience, and the contraction of languages and life-forms. His proposal is to redefine the literary within local-historical frames and to relate these frames within a shared earthly horizon, without reducing them to a single universal mold.

Keywords: Erich Auerbach, literary criticism, literary history, method, philology, world literature

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