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Late Reading: Erich Auerbach and the

*Spätboot* of Comparative Literature

BEN HUTCHINSON

**Abstract:**

Focusing in particular on Erich Auerbach's seminal essay 'Philology of World Literature' (1952), this essay proposes to re-examine the conceptualization of comparative literature in the post-WWII period not only from the perspective of its philological, but also from that of its historical self-understanding. Its principal concern will be to consider what it means to view this comparative philology *as* historical, which is to say in the context of how it emerges from the particular 'historical perspectivism' of the immediate post-war period. The category that best characterizes this philology, it will be argued, is that of *late reading*, a term that the essay coins as the hermeneutic counterpart to the artistic concept of late style. Characterized by its consciousness of coming at the end of the tradition of European high culture, late reading – at least in Auerbach's understanding of it – makes its very lateness a constituent element of its hermeneutics. Out of this sense of lateness emerges, the essay will argue, a view of comparative literature as defined by its distance from the normative maturity of classical European culture – by what one might term, in Frank Kermode's phrase, its 'sense of an ending'. Auerbach's conception of world philology does not ignore the increasing obsolescence of the Eurocentric perspective, but rather makes this obsolescence the basis of its synoptic purview. As such, it continues to offer a model for how comparative literature may engage with the legacy of high European culture whilst acknowledging the limitations of its perspective.

**Keywords:** Erich Auerbach; late reading; philology; comparative literature; world literature

It is one of the more mordant ironies of modern intellectual history that the Nazi fetishization of 'national' culture should have given such decisive impetus to the development of international modes of criticism.

The terror of the Third Reich forced a number of the most influential European critics – figures of the standing of Theodor Adorno, Erich

Auerbach, Ernst Robert Curtius, Leo Spitzer and René Wellek – to take refuge in exile; as has often been noted,<sup>1</sup> this exile proved to be the pre-condition for the discipline of Comparative Literature as it would emerge after the war.<sup>2</sup> The present essay does not intend to celebrate once again the heroic status of this generation of *Romanisten*; enough has been written on the achievements and idiosyncracies of this remarkable group of German scholars drawn to Romanic – and particularly, French – literature as part of the consciously ‘European’ climate of the 1920s (a climate in which, at least from a German perspective, *Romanistik* often seemed to function as a kind of shorthand for *Komparatistik*).<sup>3</sup> What this essay proposes, rather, is to re-examine the conceptualization of comparative literature in this period from the perspective not only of its philological, but also of its historical selfunderstanding.

Indeed, its principal concern will be to consider what it means to view this comparative philology *as* historical, which is to say in the context of how it emerges from the particular ‘historical perspectivism’ of the immediate post-war period. The category that best characterizes this philology, it will be argued, is neither close nor distant reading, but *late reading*, a term that I coin as the hermeneutic counterpart to the artistic concept of late style. Characterized by its consciousness of coming at the end of the tradition of European high culture, late reading – at least in Auerbach’s understanding of it – makes its very lateness a constituent element of its hermeneutics. Out of this sense of lateness emerges, this essay will argue, a view of comparative literature as defined by its distance from the normative maturity of classical European culture – by what one might term, in short, its ‘sense of an ending’.

That the leading works of comparative literature in this period are all characterized by a keen sense of ‘European Spirit in Danger’ – to adapt the terms of Ernst Robert Curtius<sup>4</sup> – is immediately apparent to anyone familiar with *Mimesis* or *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (to

name merely the two most important studies completed in the 1940s). As Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht has noted, the German *Romanisten* of the midtwentieth century all died in the 1940s and 1950s 'with the feeling – more or less pronounced, more or less lamented – that their lifetime had seen the end of the great period of Western culture'.<sup>5</sup> What has not been fully discussed, however, is the extent to which this valedictory vision of Western culture informs a post-war view of philology as necessarily 'late'. Focusing in particular on the thought of Erich Auerbach, this essay will thus explore the ways in which comparative literature, as it developed in this period, can be understood in these terms as a school of late reading. Triangulated between the adjectives 'European', 'Western', and 'World', the concept of *comparative* literature – conspicuous by its absence in Auerbach's thought – will emerge as a function not only of the historical, but also of the hermeneutic lateness of Auerbach's generation.

I have explored elsewhere the idea that modern European literature as a whole can be considered late.<sup>6</sup> If the notion of 'late style' emerged as a by-product of the Romantic emphasis on organic metaphors and biographical subjectivity – especially, but by no means exclusively, in the German-speaking world – it is by the same token coterminous, historically speaking, with the literature that we generally understand as 'modern'. This is *a fortiori* the case for modernist literature, wherever one sets the limits of this term. Modernism as theorized by Germanic thinkers on both sides of the political spectrum – including, but not limited to, Theodor Adorno, Gottfried Benn, Ernst Bloch, Hermann Broch, and Oswald Spengler – functions as an 'Avantgardismus der Greise',<sup>7</sup> to cite a phrase of Thomas Mann's picked up by Adorno, that is to say as the 'avant-garde' of an ageing modernity. Viewed from an Anglo-Saxon perspective, the modernist attempt to 'make it new' derives from the attempt to articulate a 'weariness more highly energized', to stay with Pound's own terms.<sup>8</sup>

The Adorno/Mann axis provides a pertinent point of entry for a methodological consideration of comparative literature, in the midtwentieth century, as a philology of lateness. Writing to Mann in 1951 about his novel *The Holy Sinner (Der Erwählte)*, Adorno praises Mann's prose in terms that point, beyond the achievement of a single artist, towards the conceptualization of lateness as the paradigm for an emerging 'European' literature:

The boldness and modernity of these things is, if we except Joyce, quite unparalleled, but no less striking is the careful way in which you have managed to suspend the whole 'German' element. It often sounds as though, at a certain decayed level of language, at the level of emigrant German, you had somehow disclosed the latent possibility of a truly European language, one which was formerly obstructed by national divisions but now, at the end, shines forth as a primordial stratum [*eine Urschicht*] precisely by virtue of its latest character [*kraft des Spätesten*].<sup>9</sup>

If Adorno makes aesthetic modernism – in the form of Mann and Joyce – a direct expression of epochal modernity, he does so in terms that consciously transcend 'national divisions' in order to posit the idea of 'a truly European language'. The key move in his argument is to suggest that this language emerges explicitly as a function of lateness, indeed of *latestness*: Adorno's superlative has both syntactical and semantic force; it is both grammatical category and aesthetic evaluation. Precisely because Mann's novel is, historically speaking, a late work – a *latest* work – it points towards the possibility of a broader, international language beyond national restrictions. 'But it is quite uncertain in what language I write', states the 'Spirit of story-telling' (*Geist der Erzählung*) in the opening chapter of *The Holy Sinner*, 'whether Latin, French, German, or Anglo-Saxon, and indeed it is all the same'.<sup>10</sup> Lateness emerges, in short, as the Latin of modernism, the *lingua franca* of an international idiom.

That Adorno can describe Mann's 'decayed level of language' as 'emigrant German' underlines the specific political context of their correspondence. Writing to Mann in California in 1951, Adorno makes

an aesthetic virtue out of his historical contingency; 'at the end' of the European high culture so cherished by the German intelligentsia, the broader, supranational perspective becomes possible. One might even go so far as to speak of wish-fulfilment: Adorno mobilizes the pathos of the 'European' in order to transcend the discredited German idiom. The late sublime, such as he here constructs it,<sup>11</sup> represents a way of wresting back hermeneutic control from historical circumstance.

The context of geographical and linguistic exile, as well as the sheer timing of Adorno's letter to Mann, makes it possible to compare it to one of the key documents of what one might term –with reference to Adorno's category of 'emigrant German' – emigrant philology.

Auerbach's essay 'The Philology of World Literature' was first published in 1952, which means that he was writing it at almost exactly the moment in which Adorno was writing to Mann. Mann in fact cites from *Mimesis* in *The Holy Sinner* (he borrows a few lines from the twelfth-century Christmas play *Mystère d'Adam*), justifying his citation with the statement, in a letter to Auerbach of October 1951, that 'what was required was a stammering babble that would be partly or completely incomprehensible to the average reader'.<sup>12</sup> Mann's insistence on the importance of 'stammering' (*Gestammel*) strikingly recalls Adorno's interpretation, in a letter to Mann written just three months earlier in August 1951, of the concept of 'mumbling' (*das Murmelnde*), a concept which can be understood, according to the philosopher, as 'a particular linguistic stratum [*Sprachschicht*], namely that in which linguistic borders are blurred'.<sup>13</sup> The primordial *Urschicht* re-emerges, from the perspective of late modernity, as a composite *Sprachschicht*.

The search for a transnational language that underlies this hermeneutic triangle of the early 1950s suggests the common concern of Auerbach, Adorno, and Mann to find ways around a discredited national tradition. One way to do this, of course, is to obviate the whole problem by returning to the medieval period, at a safe distance from the nationalist

excesses of modernity. Both Mann, in *The Holy Sinner*, and Auerbach, in *Mimesis*, consciously take this route to an always already comparative Middle Ages – as, of course, did Curtius, who memorably outlined the appeal of the period in an unpublished letter of 1944: ‘it doesn’t seem to have dawned on anyone how nonsensical the modern division of labour is between national languages, national literatures, and national philologies. What would one think of a medieval historian who only wrote about German events and who only made use of German-language sources?’<sup>14</sup> Auerbach’s essay of 1952 poses exactly this question of the modern philologist. ‘We must now return, albeit under different conditions, to what the pre-nation-state culture of the Middle Ages already possessed, to the knowledge that the human spirit itself is not national.’<sup>15</sup> Auerbach’s seemingly incidental concession in the middle of this statement is crucial. The modern critic may strive to return to the supranational spirit of the medieval mentality, but it can only be a return, ‘under different conditions’; the belated perspective of modernity must remain a constituent element of these conditions. Adorno’s appreciation of *The Holy Sinner* as an expression of the *Spätteste* is based on precisely this premise, namely that the modern novelist’s return to the time of Pope Gregorius necessarily remains anchored in the (late) modernity from which he writes.

Yet if Adorno sees lateness as the *lingua franca* of a new European language, Auerbach takes the argument a step further. Where Adorno’s model of comparative literature is Europe, for Auerbach the model – at least in this 1952 essay – is the world. For all its current prestige as the paradigm for comparative literature in the twenty-first century, world literature as Auerbach understands it is a profoundly ambivalent concept. A diversity of languages – what Auerbach terms the ‘*felix culpa* of the division of the human race into a profusion of cultures’ (PWL, 253) – constitutes the precondition for comparative literature; as every comparatist knows, there can be no fruitful comparison without

difference. Yet the post-war concept of the 'world', observes Auerbach, militates against this difference, reducing it to a 'standardized',<sup>16</sup> one-size-fits-all model of human culture. As Auerbach astutely remarks, if this model were taken to its logical conclusion, 'the idea of world literature would simultaneously be realized and destroyed' (PWL, 254). What remains, then, of *comparative* literature? Do the homogenizing forces of mid-twentieth-century culture allow for a hermeneutics that would be neither restrictively national nor reductively global? Auerbach's answer to this question is to sketch out (what I am terming) a school of late reading, a school that is predicated on the fact that he never uses the term 'comparative' –whether *vergleichend* or *komparativ* –but rather repeatedly writes of the 'synthesis' that his late perspective makes possible. Before exploring this conception of late reading in more detail, however, it is worth pausing to place his essay back into its original publication context. This is almost never done – the essay has long since become a staple of anthologies of both Auerbach's work and 'world literature', and so is rarely read in its initial place of publication – but it is surprisingly revealing with regard to the contemporary relevance of his argument. 'Philologie der Weltliteratur' first appeared in a volume of essays entitled simply *Weltliteratur*, edited by Walter Muschg and Emil Staiger and published in 1952 as a Festschrift for the Goethe scholar Fritz Strich. A number of essays included in the volume – which opens with the words 'The Literary Historian and Time – this should probably be the subtitle of this volume'<sup>17</sup> – respond, either implicitly or explicitly, to the perceived lateness of the modern critical perspective. The essay immediately following Auerbach's explores 'the development of World Literature as a process'; its author, Anni Carlsson, examines the history of *Weltliteratur* as 'a cross-section of intellectual and world history more generally'.<sup>18</sup> This historicization of the concept leads to a consideration of the modern poet as 'cut off from his sources, an epigone tangled up in his own nets';<sup>19</sup> he can only bemoan, in Schillerian terms, the lost 'naïvety' of



an earlier phase of history. Yet this epigonal lateness, Carlsson concludes, can also be interpreted positively:

The epigone cannot recreate the gods of mankind's childhood, for his world view has changed. Yet this does not mean that the energy that once created gods has been lost to him. [. . .] The conscious underwater perspective [*bewusste Unterwasserperspektive*], which illuminates the tides and deposits of history in every event, teaches literature a corresponding force of perspective.<sup>20</sup>

The modern conception of world literature, then, gains as much from its belated epistemology as it loses, since it is thickened by the accrued sediment of the past. This 'underwater perspective', crucially, is fully *conscious* ('*bewusst*'): since the sentimental poet – to use Carlsson's Schillerian terms – cannot undo his sentimentality, he must embrace it and turn it to his advantage.

A striking variation of Carlsson's marine metaphor recurs in one of the editors' own contributions to the volume. Emil Staiger's essay 'Das Spätboot' ('The Late Boat') is not explicitly about the concept of *Weltliteratur*, but rather the poetry of Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, or more specifically a particular cluster of poems by Meyer, all centred on the image of a boat floating out across the water by night. The key poem that gives Staiger's essay its memorable title is 'Im Spätboot', an allegorical sonnet describing the poet's symbolic encounter with death ('Spätboot' was also the original title of another poem by Meyer subsequently renamed 'Tote Freunde' ['Dead Friends']). Staiger parses the poem in the following terms: 'When the poet boards the late boat and the black smoke billows from the stacks, and when the boat turns towards the darkness, he begins a journey unto death [*Todesfahrt*].'<sup>21</sup> Crucially, however, neither 'Im Spätboot' nor 'Tote Freunde' describes the landing of the boat, nor indeed its wreckage: 'To land would be to return to recalcitrant reality, where people and things are too clear, too palpable and frighteningly close. To go under would be to die in death, which would undermine the whole symbolism.'<sup>22</sup> Meyer's late boat is

captured, in other words, in the moment of its final journey, in the pathos of departure.

What can we infer from these essays with regard to Auerbach's own understanding of philology? Carlsson's underwater epigone and Staiger's *Spätboot* mark out the hermeneutic coordinates within which we can locate Auerbach's essay. What characterizes both models is the modulation from an ostensibly negative interpretation of lateness – as epigonal or dying – to a positive inflection of lateness as plenitude and poise. Staiger concludes his essay with the reflection that 'Meyers *Spätboot* might one day emerge as the herald of new poetic possibilities',<sup>23</sup> and it is here that Auerbach's contribution finds its cue. Indeed, the opening sentence of the essay immediately following these words, Karl Viëtor's 'German Literature and the Crisis of European Culture', suggests – albeit in what we would now consider dated, colonial language – the juxtaposition with the post-war perspective that characterizes Auerbach's thoughts: 'The events that have been unfolding before our eyes for some thirty years now, the vast tragedy in the motherlands of white civilization [*im Mutterkontinent der Zivilisation der weissen Völker*], what else is it than the decline of the last great cultural achievement, of the culture of the third estate, the bourgeoisie?'<sup>24</sup> Out of the editorial context of the volume emerges, then, a composite sense of lateness as the precondition for world literature – both its undertaking and its understanding – in mid-twentieth-century Europe.

Auerbach's philology of world literature – to return now to his own essay – engages with this school of late reading through its determination to make a hermeneutic virtue out of historical necessity. Historical selfawareness becomes the crucial pre-condition for any meaningful cultural criticism. 'We appear to be living [. . .] at a decisive moment in the evolution of hermeneutical history writing', observes Auerbach in a key passage; 'what we are we have become in the course of our history, and it is only in history that we can remain what we are, and develop' (PWL,

256). Auerbach's precise understanding of his historical position – and of the concomitant 'task of the philologists of the world' – emerges out of the interplay between his terminology and his sources. In the original German, his word for 'decisive moment' is simply 'kairos' – *Wir leben in einem Kairos der verstehenden Geschichtsschreibung*<sup>25</sup> – an ancient-Greek term signifying the sacred time of revelation understood as a pivotal, punctual instant, in contrast to the *chronos* of everyday, unfulfilled time. The term was notably brought into modern conceptual currency by Hermann Fränkel's essay of 1931, 'Die Zeitauffassung in der archaischen griechischen Literatur',<sup>26</sup> and recurs elsewhere in Auerbach's work in his investigations of Dante, in the trope of 'figura', and in the notion of 'fulfillment' (*Erfüllung*) in *Mimesis*. Within English-language criticism, perhaps the most influential invocation of the term is to be found in Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), where Kermode defines *kairos* as 'charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end'.<sup>27</sup> Auerbach's 'decisive moment' in the history of hermeneutics, in other words, echoes with eschatology.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, given the context of *The Holy Sinner* explored above, one might usefully compare Auerbach's invocation of *kairos* to Mann's reduction of languages to *language*, where *Sprache* as a hypostasised concept assumes a plenitude comparable only to God: 'the tongues [. . .] run all together in my writing and become one – in other words, language [. . .] language itself, which sets itself as absolute and does not greatly care about idioms and national linguistic gods. [. . .] God is spirit [*Geist*], and above languages is language.'<sup>29</sup> If Auerbach's philological *kairos* resembles Mann's linguistic *Geist*, it is striking for our purposes that Auerbach immediately links the philological possibilities of *kairos* to Adalbert Stifter's novel *Der Nachsommer* (1857), citing a sentence from this novel that is typical of Stifter's – highly ambivalent – poetics of lateness: 'It would fulfil my highest desire if after we leave this mortal sphere our spirit could survey and embrace the entire artistic

expression of the human race from its beginnings to its end' (PWL, 256). Auerbach makes the philological apprehension of his post-war *kairos*, then, contingent on a very specific season, namely the 'Indian summer' of Biedermeier aesthetics (such is the English title of *Der Nachsommer*). Stifter's novel constitutes one of the great documents of cultural lateness in the nineteenth century, 'a catalogue of last things' (in the words of W.G. Sebald)<sup>30</sup> comparable to Karl Immermann's *Die Epigonen* (1836) of a generation earlier, and a text pointedly commended by Nietzsche, the major theorist of modern lateness, as one of the few German prose works worthy of attention.<sup>31</sup> Stifterian lateness, crucially, is ambivalent: the novel's aesthetic may be that of a diminished, belated era – after the summer of Weimar Classicism, the late summer of the Biedermeier – but precisely this belated perspective makes possible a synoptic, 'synthetic' view. Indeed, Auerbach's choice of extract desiderates a perspective that is almost *sub specie aeternitatis*; in combination with his use of the term *kairos*, Auerbach's reference to Stifter suggests an attempt to confer metaphysical pathos on historical contingency – to create, in short, a late sublime.

It is at this point, then, that Auerbach's defensive posture begins to pivot into productive potential. His consciously late historical position offers a new horizon of philological possibilities: 'we have reached an end point that is also a turning point, one from which we will nevertheless also be permitted an overview [*Überschau*] that has never been possible before' (PWL, 256). This overview, in a word, is Auerbach's conception of comparative literature. It captures a discipline in its 'last productive moments of variety and difference' (*im Endstadium einer fruchtbaren Mannigfaltigkeit*), the very lastness of which is what makes it philologically productive. To paraphrase Adorno, it is as though, at the level of emigrant German, Auerbach had somehow disclosed the latent possibility of a truly world language, one which was formerly obstructed by national divisions but now, at the end, shines forth as a

primordial stratum precisely by virtue of its latest character. Perhaps at this point, indeed, one might even speak of *latest* reading.

Yet to compare Adorno's model of lateness in 1951 with that of Auerbach in 1952 is to raise the question of the relationship between the former's 'European language' and the latter's 'World literature'. Auerbach's remarks in the introduction to *Literary Language and its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*,<sup>32</sup> posthumously published (in German) in 1958, give an unambiguous sense of his relationship to 'European' culture:

At an early date, and from then on with increasing urgency, I ceased to look upon the European possibilities of Romance philology as mere possibilities and came to regard them as a task specific to our time – a task which could not have been envisaged yesterday and will no longer be conceivable tomorrow. European civilization is approaching the term of its existence; its history as a distinct entity would seem to be at an end, for already it is beginning to be engulfed in another, more comprehensive unity.<sup>33</sup>

If 'European' philology is a task specific to the age, then, it is because the age is a *Kultur im Spätstadium*;<sup>34</sup> from here and only from here can such a methodology be envisaged. The emergence of a 'more comprehensive unity' – namely, *world* literature – sharpens Auerbach's consciousness of the 'European possibilities', but it does not supersede them, since the logic of *Weltliteratur* as theorized in the 1952 essay tends to homogenization, not to the celebration of productive difference. This, then, is the task of comparative literature as late reading: the exploration of diversity within a common framework (the 'European' model), rather than of commonality within a diverse framework (the 'World' model).

Auerbach's view of world literature as it emerges from his later work bears comparison with Ernst Troeltsch's view of world history. In language that uncannily anticipates twenty-first-century debates about Eurocentrism and the possibility of a 'world' perspective, the historian Troeltsch –with whom Auerbach studied in Heidelberg and

Berlin – argues in the third volume of *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (1922) that the paradigm of ‘world history’ is so ambitious, so all-encompassing, as to be meaningless. In its place, European scholars would do better to concentrate on a more modest sphere of comparison: ‘For us there is only the world history of the European [*eine Weltgeschichte des Europäertums*]. The old idea of world history must take on new and more modest forms. We must renounce the oppressive monism of a way of thinking that forces everything into a single perspective; we must renounce the exaggerations of the European ego.’<sup>35</sup> Troeltsch’s warning against the ‘monism’ of world history anticipates Auerbach’s fears about the homogenizing effect of world literature; to suppose that European scholars can command the whole of world history is in fact hubris, Troeltsch suggests, a subtler – because displaced – version of what he terms *Europäerhochmut*.<sup>36</sup> Intriguingly, Troeltsch also emphasizes how modern – which is to say, how late – the whole idea of a ‘world history of modernity’ is, ‘how in truth the expansion of the “European” across the planet only occurred surprisingly late’.<sup>37</sup> The aspiration to a comparative perspective – whether European or ‘World’ – itself represents, in other words, a manifestation of lateness. In an essay in which he cites Troeltsch by name, Auerbach makes a similar observation about historical perspective more generally. ‘One might easily pose the question why the West – indeed, why the human race in general, so far as I can tell – came so late to a recognition of genetic perspectivism.’<sup>38</sup> The methodology of ‘historical perspectivism’ – which Auerbach also calls ‘hermeneutical perspectivism’ – emerged out of the idea of the ‘national spirit’ [*Volksgeistgedanke*] developed by the Romantics, an idea that serves, for Auerbach, as the precondition for international comparison, since it ‘allowed us to enlarge our understanding of how to orient ourselves in the historical world in ways not unlike those in which Copernicus’s discovery allowed us to find our place in the astrophysical world’.<sup>39</sup> The comparison to the Copernican

revolution implies the same repositioning of the European, humanist perspective as in Troeltsch's argument (Auerbach mentions Troeltsch by name in the following sentence, along with Croce and Meinecke): what seems like anthropocentric ambition is in fact modesty, since it places the modern scholar at the end of history, orbiting an all-powerful past. Moreover, just as Carlsson argues, with Schiller, that the modern 'epigone' must embrace his late perspective – since there can be no return – so Auerbach insists that there is no going back to a preperspectival mentality. The modern scholar's task is to become as conscious as possible of his historical contingency, not to seek to overcome it; 'it is better to be consciously than unconsciously timebound', 40 observes Auerbach in his remarks in defence of *Mimesis*.

Despite the vertiginous historical scope of *Mimesis* in particular, Auerbach's understanding of philology is thus anything but timeless. He holds, rather, that the critic can only survey the past from a very specific *Ansatzpunkt* – which in his case, as we have seen, is the late European. His understanding of the necessary historicity of philology derives in large part from his reading of Giambattista Vico, undoubtedly the most important influence on his historical thinking. In essay after essay Auerbach explores the resonance of Vico's theory of historical knowledge for the development of modern criticism, and indeed his *Nachlass* (held in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach) attests to the enduring importance of the Neapolitan philosopher for his work. From an early notebook in which he has scribbled detailed comments on *La Scienza nuova* – 'first the arts, then philosophy: and only then the Sensual – later criticism'<sup>41</sup> – to a late typescript version of the introduction to *Literary Language and its Public* entitled 'Vico's Contribution to Literary Criticism',<sup>42</sup> Auerbach returns time and again to Vico's conception of 'philological philosophy or philosophical philology' (LL, 16). Vico's idea of *il mondo delle nazioni* provides the basis for an historical understanding of differing epochs and traditions, articulating

what Auerbach calls a 'radical relativism' that is, crucially, 'relative in two respects – of the material and of those who are striving to understand it' (LL, 12).<sup>43</sup> The philologist, in other words, is beholden to the perspective of his own time, however much he may look back to earlier eras. For unlike the philosopher, who deals with timeless truth or *verum*, the philologist investigates the *certum*, which is 'subject to historical change' (LL, 16). In Vico's terms, this coincides with the division of history into the three stages of gods, heroes, and men:<sup>44</sup> where true poetry, in his view, is limited to the early or 'primordial' period – a view that anticipates Herder and the Romantics – 'late periods are overwhelmingly dominated by an unpoetic rationalism' (the typescript has 'antipoetic rationalism') (LL, 15).<sup>45</sup> The conception of philology that Auerbach learns from Vico is the natural task, then, of a late period.

'But how, in practice, can this task of synthesis be performed?' asks Auerbach. If it can readily be seen, as he himself claims, how well his Vico-inflected understanding of philology 'falls in with the European "mission"' (LL, 16) of the post-war *kairos*, this understanding is nonetheless not without its practical difficulties. In attempting to articulate the hermeneutic position of the mid-twentieth-century philologist – as opposed to his Viconian counterpart in the early eighteenth century – Auerbach identifies the principal hermeneutic challenges facing him as the profusion of material and the proliferation of methodologies. Late reading implies problems, in other words, as well as privileges; the sheer mass of material at the disposal of the modern critic – *spät*, in German, being the precipitate of that which has been *aufgespart* or stored up<sup>46</sup> – risks being overwhelming. But problematic is exactly what 'world literature' should be, in the twentieth century as in the twenty-first. As Franco Moretti noted when proposing his model of distant reading: 'World literature is not an object, it's a *problem*, and a problem that asks for a new critical method; and no one has ever found a method by just reading more texts.'<sup>47</sup> Piling ever more books



into the *Spätboot* of world literature will only make it sink; what would be required is rather a 'lightened' philology – not in the sense in which Emily Apter<sup>48</sup> has Leo Spitzer deploy the term in his critique of Curtius's 'solid philology',<sup>49</sup> but in Auerbach's Stifterian sense of late levitation, of a 'spirit [that] could survey and embrace the entire artistic expression of the human race from its beginnings to its end'. This aspiration to totality – or rather, to its discerning distillation – must, of course, remain a mirage; no such encyclopaedic mind exists. But in theory – in both the metaphorical and literal senses of this phrase – it would represent the true manifestation of world literature as seen from its vanishing point, the *Ansatzpunkt* that emerges from the lateness of European culture in the post-war period.

What the notion of late reading offers, finally, is a multi-dimensional model of comparative literature, one that exploits its privileged hermeneutic position in order to construct comparisons not only synchronically, across nations, but also diachronically, across time. The key difference from the models of close or distant reading, in other words, is that the force of late reading is chronological, not geographical; this means that it is in a position to practise both close and distant criticism, since it is not beholden to either. *Mimesis*, with its investigation of 'the representation of reality in Western literature', provides an apposite example of this late reading in action, since the comparative insights that it offers are contingent on the belated perspective from which it is written – in historical terms, the Nazi bonfire of European culture; in stylistic terms, the supersession of realism by modernism. In the final chapter of *Mimesis*, Auerbach evokes the 'atmosphere of universal doom' that pervades the major modernist works. He insists, however, that his philological method is 'not only a mirror of the decline of our world',<sup>50</sup> since – the modern philologist being *mutatis mutandis* akin to the modernist author, as Auerbach himself remarks – it seeks to disclose a plenitude of meaning within any given textual instance. Late reading,

in other words, is in a position to combine the advantages of both close and distant reading.

One might conclude, then, by adapting Nietzsche's celebrated preface on the art of 'slow reading': if Auerbach is a philologist still, he is a teacher of late reading. His approach to comparative literature, like Nietzsche's preface, is 'late but not too late';<sup>51</sup> poised like Meyer's *Spätboot*, Auerbach's critical perspective is predicated on the pathos of departure, not arrival. Such an understanding of philology can only function in these terms as late, however, if the critic is prepared to include both his geographical and historical perspectives as constituent elements of the comparative project. '[I]n the end I asked: How do matters look in the European context? No one today can see such a context from anywhere else today than precisely from the present.'<sup>52</sup> Auerbach's conception of world philology, in short, does not ignore the obsolescence of the Eurocentric perspective, but rather makes this obsolescence the basis of its synoptic purview. It seeks to recuperate (negative) cultural lateness as (positive) critical licence, as the prerequisite for pursuing a 'synthetic historical philology aspiring to encompass the cultural destinies of Europe' (PWL, 17). As such, it continues to offer a model for how comparative literature may engage with the legacy of high European culture whilst acknowledging the limitations of its perspective.

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#### NOTES

1 See, for instance, Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Vom Leben und Sterben der grossen Romanisten: Karl Vossler, Ernst Robert Curtius, Leo Spitzer, Erich Auerbach, Werner Krauss* (Munich: Hanser, 2002).

2 This is obviously not to claim that Comparative Literature did not exist before this period, but simply to focus on the very specific character of its emergence from the mid-twentieth century. Conceptualizations of 'world literature' alone go back

at least as far as Wieland – and, obviously, Goethe – in the early nineteenth century. As René Wellek notes (citing Spitzer), ‘comparative literature arose in the romantic period, “the age when there was felt the need for a *Weltliteratur*, a *cosmopolitisme littéraire*”’. See René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism*, vol. 7 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 146.

3 On the status and appeal of *Romanistik* in the mid-twentieth century, see alongside Gumbrecht Harry Levin, ‘Two *Romanisten* in America: Spitzer and Auerbach’, in *The Intellectual Migration: Europe and America, 1930–1960*, edited by Donald Fleming and Bernard Bailyn (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1969), pp. 463–484; Peter Jehle, *Werner Krauss und die Romanistik im NS-Staat* (Hamburg: Argument Verlag, 1996); Emily Apter, ‘Global *translatio*: The “Invention” of Comparative Literature, Istanbul, 1933’, *Critical Inquiry*, 29.2 (2003), 253–281, republished in *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

4 In 1932, Curtius published a study entitled *Deutscher Geist in Gefahr* (‘German Spirit in Danger’).

5 Gumbrecht, *Vom Leben und Sterben der grossen Romanisten*, p. 20. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

6 See Ben Hutchinson, *Lateness and Modern European Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), as well as the ‘Afterword’ to *Late Style and its Discontents*, edited by Gordon McMullan and Sam Smiles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

7 See Sandro Zanetti, *Avantgardismus der Greise? Spätwerke und ihre Poetik* (Munich: Fink, 2012).

8 Ezra Pound, ‘Ferrex on Petulance’, *The Egoist*, 1 January 1914, p. 9.

9 Theodor Adorno to Thomas Mann, 25 August 1951, in Thomas Mann and Theodor W. Adorno, *Correspondence 1943–55* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), p. 65 (in German in Theodor W. Adorno/ Thomas Mann, *Briefwechsel 1943–55* [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003], p. 87).

10 Thomas Mann, *The Holy Sinner*, translated by H. T. Lowe-Porter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 10.

11 Adorno's construction of aesthetic lateness is, of course, certainly not limited to this intervention, and goes back at least as far as his seminal essay of the mid-1930s on Beethoven's late style. For further discussion, see Hutchinson, *Lateness and Modern European Literature*, Chapter 14.

12 Thomas Mann to Erich Auerbach, 12 October 1951, in DLA Marbach, A: Auerbach, M20; my translation. For discussion of Mann and Auerbach's correspondence regarding *Der Erwählte*, see Petra Boden, 'Philologie als Wissenschaft', in *Erich Auerbach. Geschichte und Aktualität eines europäischen Philologen*, edited by Karlheinz Barck and Martin Tremml (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2007), pp. 125–152, especially pp. 149–152.

13 'Eine bestimmte Sprachschicht, die des Verwischens der Sprachgrenze'. My translation. Adorno/Thomas Mann, *Briefwechsel 1943–55*, p. 87.

14 'Der ganze Unsinn der modernen Arbeitsteilung nach Nationalsprachen, Nationalliteraturen und nationalen Philologien ist noch niemandem aufgegangen. Was würde man von einem mittelalterlichen Historiker denken, der nur deutsche Vorgänge berichtete und nur deutschsprachliche Quellen verfolgte?' My translation. Ernst Robert Curtius to Karl Eugen Gass, 18 May 1944, unpublished, cited from Anna Kraume, *Das Europa der Literatur* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), p. 18. Much of Curtius's published work is of course predicated on this sentiment; see both *Deutscher Geist in Gefahr* and *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. On the relationship between the modern and the medieval periods, and between Auerbach and Curtius, see Robert Stockhammer, 'Weltliteratur und Mittelalter: Auerbach und Ernst Robert Curtius', in *Erich Auerbach. Geschichte und Aktualität eines europäischen Philologen*, pp. 105–124.

15 Erich Auerbach, 'The Philology of World Literature', in *Time, History, and Literature: Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 253–265 (p. 264). Cited hereafter in text as PWL.

16 On Auerbach's understanding of 'standardization', see Ursula Link-Herr, "'Die sich vollziehende Standardisierung der Erdkultur" – Auerbachs Prognose', in *Erich Auerbach. Geschichte und Aktualität eines europäischen Philologen*, pp. 307–322.

17 Walter Henzen, 'Geleitwort', *Weltliteratur. Festgabe für Fritz Strich*, edited by Walter

Muschg and Emil Staiger (Bern: Francke, 1952), pp. 7–9 (p. 9).

18 Anni Carlsson, 'Die Entfaltung der Weltliteratur als Prozess', in Muschg and Staiger, eds, *Weltliteratur. Festgabe für Fritz Strich*, pp. 51–65 (p. 58).

19 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 64. In the original German: 'Der Epigone kann die Götter der Völkerkindheit nicht wieder erschaffen, sein Weltbild hat sich geändert. Das besagt nicht, dass ihm die Kraft, die einst Götter schuf, verlorengegangen sei. [. . .] Die bewusste Unterwasserperspektive, die in jedem Geschehen auch den Unterstrom seiner Geschichte und die Ablagerungen vorangegangenen Geschehens aufhellt, lehrt die Literatur eine entsprechende Perspektive der Gestaltung.'

21 Emil Staiger, 'Das Spätboot', in Muschg and Staiger, eds, *Weltliteratur. Festgabe für Fritz Strich*, pp. 117–136 (p. 119).

22 *Ibid.*, p. 120.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 136.

24 Karl Viëtor, 'Die deutsche Literatur und die Krise der europäischen Kultur', in Muschg and Staiger, eds, *Weltliteratur. Festgabe für Fritz Strich*, pp. 137–154 (p. 137).

25 See Erich Auerbach, 'Philologie der Weltliteratur', in Muschg and Staiger, eds, *Weltliteratur. Festgabe für Fritz Strich*, pp. 39–50 (p. 41).

26 See Hermann Fränkel, 'Die Zeitauffassung in der archaischen griechischen Literatur', *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, 25 (1931), 97–118.

27 Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 49.

28 For a discussion of Auerbach's understanding from a theological perspective – especially as it compares to the 'occidental eschatology' of Jacob Taubes – see the chapter entitled 'Auerbach's Welt-Theology' in Emily Apter, *Against World Literature* (London: Verso, 2013).

29 Mann, *The Holy Sinner*, p. 10.

30 W. G. Sebald, 'Bis an den Rand der Natur – Versuch über Stifter', in *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1994), p. 23.

31 For an influential discussion of Nietzsche's debt to Stifter, see Ernst Bertram,

*Nietzsche: Versuch einer Mythologie* (Berlin: Georg Bondi, 1918), translated by Robert E. Norton as *Nietzsche: Attempt at a Mythology* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

32 Auerbach's work on late antiquity represents an important aspect of his philology of lateness – not only in as much as it indicates the full historical span of his interests, but also in as much as the very concept of lateness derives its conceptual resonance from the implied juxtaposition of late antiquity with late modernity. Of particular note in this regard is the tradition of ascribing the first coinage of the adjective *modernus* to late antiquity, since it suggests the dialectical relationship between 'modern' and 'late' that recurs in the twentieth century. For discussion, see Hans Robert Jauss, 'Literarische Tradition und gegenwärtiges Bewusstsein der Modernität', in *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), pp. 11–67, especially p. 16.

33 Erich Auerbach, *Literary Language and its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, translated by Ralph Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 6. Cited hereafter in text as LL.

34 Gumbrecht, *Vom Leben und Sterben der grossen Romanisten*, p. 170.

35 Ernst Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1922), p. 708.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 707.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 713.

38 Erich Auerbach, 'The Idea of the National Spirit as the Source of the Modern Humanities', in *Time, History, and Literature*, pp. 56–61 (p. 60). The original German text 'Der Volksgeistgedanke als Wurzel der modernen Geisteswissenschaften' remains unpublished; see DLA Marbach, A: Auerbach, MO6, p. 7: 'Man mag die Frage stellen, warum das Abendland – und so viel ich weiss die Menschheit überhaupt – so spät zur Erkenntnis des genetischen Perspektivismus gelangt ist.'

39 *Ibid.* Original German: 'sie hat die Moeglichkeit uns in der geschichtlichen Welt zu orientieren ebenso ungeheuer erweitert wie die kopernikanischen Entdeckungen unsere Orientierungsmoeglichkeiten in der astrophysikalischen Welt' (MO6, p. 6).

As Auerbach makes clear in the opening paragraph of his methodological introduction to *Literary Language and its Public*, the Romantics were not so much interested in ‘the spirit of their own nation’ [‘der eigene Volksgeist’] as in ‘the common substrate of classical and Christian civilization’. See *Literary Language and its Public*, p. 5.

40 Erich Auerbach, ‘Epilegomena to *Mimesis*’, translated by Jan M. Ziolkowski, in *Mimesis*, translated by Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 559–574 (pp. 573–574). First published in German in 1953.

41 ‘Erst die Künste, dann die Philosophie: und da zuerst das Sinnliche – später Kritik’. See the folder in the DLA Marbach under A: Auerbach, M08: ‘Verschiedenes: Reisetagebuch und Notizbuch’.

42 See DLA Marbach, A: Auerbach, M05. See also the typescript of his foreword to an edition of the *Scienza nuova*, held in M06.

43 In the typescript version, Auerbach writes that ‘historical relativism has a twofold aspect: it refers to the understanding historian as well as to the phenomena to be understood’ (A: Auerbach, M05, p. 9).

44 See Vico’s preface to *The New Science* outlining the ‘Idea of the Work’, in which he repeatedly circles around this tripartite division of history.

45 For the typescript, see DLA Marbach, A: Auerbach, M05, p. 13.

46 *Duden* suggests that *spät* derives from the middle-high German *spæte*, old-high German *sp̄ati*, that it means *sich hinziehend* (dragging on), and that it is probably related to *sparen* (to save, to economize): <http://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/spaet>.

47 Franco Moretti, ‘Conjectures on World Literature’, *New Left Review*, n.s., 1 (Jan–Feb. 2000), 55–67 (55).

48 See Apter, ‘Global *translatio*: The “Invention” of Comparative Literature, Istanbul, 1933’.

49 See Leo Spitzer, Review of *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, in *American Journal of Philology*, 70.4 (1949), 425–421 (p. 426).

50 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, translated by Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 551.

51 See the preface to Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 5.

52 Auerbach, 'Epilegomena to *Mimesis*', p. 573.