

undeserved leadership in the late Roman world. Any emperor who showed loss of self-restraint was considered to be deficient in imperial virtues, so Humphries describes various attacks of Christian authors on enemies of Constantine who are accused of lack of decorum, while someone like Julian, on the contrary, blames Constantine himself for exceeding the just measures. Informative and readable as the article may be, it does not throw much light on the possible differences between humour, ridicule, and vituperation. High rank had a particularly comic value in the Ancient World. Julian might have exploited this in a comic approach, while that is harder to believe of Lactantius.

H.'s essay, on late antiquity as well, deals with the comic device of incongruity applied to images of barbarians versus those of civilized people. He realizes, of course, that description of incongruity is not always done with comic intent, so he looks for helpful cues. He convincingly argues about the intentionally funny remarks of Sidonius, but is less sure in the case of Ammianus, and he presents an interesting discussion from the same point of view of the work of Procopius, arguing against the serious interpretation of Averil Cameron. He concludes that in the late Roman period there is a lot of comic playing with accepted stereotypes of, and attitudes towards, barbarians. To him, these jokes originated from insecurity in a fast-changing world and were meant to enhance the teller's own cultural identity.

Cues for humour are central too in the article of Ross Balzaretto, about the tenth-century author Liutprand of Cremona. Liutprand, obviously, was an exception at the Ottonian court being so crudely and intentionally humorous.

The last three essays, by Matthew Innes, Martha Bayless, and Paul Kershaw, deal with humour in the Carolingian world. They seem to confirm its scarcity. The extensive and interesting discussion of the riddles of Alcuin by Bayless does not give any certainty to humorous intent, any more than the riddles of the *ioca monachorum* do. The ninth-century author Notker the Stammerer is one of the very few contemporaries who seems to appreciate the central relationship between humour and humanity, but he too praises the self-restraint of Louis the Pious, who never laughed—not even at the occasion of special feasts. Innes rightly analyses this attitude in the light of contemporary cultural codes. Kershaw considers Notker a counterpoint and a variation on the more solemn themes of other Carolingian authors.

The articles are preceded by a good and clear introduction by H. Although the book, or some of the articles, does not offer very much at a theoretical level, at a documentary level it is a very interesting and worthy contribution to the study of the history of humour.

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AUERBACH'S *MIMESIS* FIFTY YEARS ON

E. AUERBACH: *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Fiftieth Anniversary edition. Translated by W. R. Trask. With a new introduction by E. W. Said. Pp. xxxii + 579. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003 (first published in German 1946; first English edition 1953). Paper, £12.95. ISBN: 0-691-11336-X.

The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, the subtitle of Auerbach's *Mimesis* (first published in German in 1946, and translated into English in 1953),

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might seem a red rag to a bull in these postmodernist and postcolonialist times. To make matters worse, A. fails to interrogate any of these much-contested signifiers, proceeding rather by way of close analyses ‘guided only by the texts themselves’ (p. 556). What, then, accounts for the book’s extraordinary survival, which has prompted Princeton University Press to issue this anniversary edition, together with a new introduction—sadly to be one of the very last things he wrote—by another great, influential, and widely read humanist writer, Edward Said, as well as ‘Epilegomena to *Mimesis*’, in which A. answers his critics (rather testily, in the case of the greatest of them, E. R. Curtius)? After all, most books about literature are forgotten within twenty years at most, yet this one is hailed today as an evident classic by critics as diverse as George Steiner, Terry Eagleton, and A. D. Nuttall. Part of the answer lies in the power of the philology that is central to A.’s comparative method (he refrains from discussing Russian texts precisely because he lacks the linguistic expertise—something that we might ponder as more and more of our courses abandon Latin and Greek); but it is a philology much broader than that usually defended by conservative classicists, one ‘conceivable in no other tradition than in that of German romanticism and Hegel’ (‘Epilegomena’, p. 571), and one that might be regarded, Said suggests, as ideologically underpinned by the Christian idea of Incarnation. The method is seen at its best in the analysis of the famous episode of Farinata and Cavalcante from Dante’s *Inferno*, where A. shows how grammar, syntax, and vocabulary (including an admixture of the sublime and the vulgar, not to mention ‘the dramatically arresting “then”’, which Dante used ‘more radically than any other medieval writer before him’, p. 181) are put under contribution ‘to discover the world anew’ (p. 183). Such a philology, far from being narrow or pedantic, knows how much is at stake in such minute linguistic particulars. At one point, A. rebukes Goethe, Schiller, and other German writers for their lack of interest in ‘the emerging modern structure of life’ that is central to his idea of realism (p. 452), something which in his view helps to explain why Germany—in contrast to its principal opponent, France—failed to be properly integrated into European modernity, with the consequences we all know. A. understands as well as the later Wittgenstein that the forms of our language are the forms of our life.

Minute particulars, for A., are thus linked to issues of the broadest moment. Postmodernists urge us to prefer ‘little narratives’ (not that most classicists need much urging). But a second source of the power of *Mimesis* is surely that it offers a truly grand narrative, whose author has the courage to articulate his wider beliefs and give them convincing rhetorical form (the book was accused *inter alia* of promoting socialism). He was partly able to do this because, as a Jew (‘I am a Prussian and of the Jewish faith’), he had sought safety from the Nazis through scholarly exile in Istanbul. As he himself observes (p. 557), had he had a better library, he might never have written *Mimesis*, which eschews footnotes and extended discussions of the views of other commentators—there is surely another moral here for contemporary classicists. For A., the full achievement of what he calls, for shorthand purposes, ‘realism’, that is, the serious and potentially tragic treatment of ordinary events and persons, which reached a *telos* in the nineteenth-century French novel, required the jettisoning of the separation of styles that held sway in classical antiquity (which thus produced only unserious comic realism like that found in Petronius). By contrast, Peter’s denial, as narrated in the Gospels, afforded a simple fisherman tragic respect: ‘It was the story of Christ, with its ruthless mixture of everyday reality and the highest and most sublime tragedy, which had conquered the classical rule of styles’ (p. 555: ‘ruthless’, as Polonius might say, is good). This concept of realism is linked, in A.’s account, with a particular

way of doing history, one that sees individual actions against the background of what he calls a 'concrete and constantly evolving total reality' (p. 463) of socio-economic, political, and other factors, which again is an achievement of the nineteenth century. (A., while recognizing that 'modern realism' has 'developed in increasingly rich forms, in keeping with the constantly changing and expanding reality of modern life' [p. 554], in practice is much less comfortable with the products of literary modernism.) The articulation of this grand narrative is achieved by the use of two dominant tropes. The first is synecdoche, so that the reality of the part stands in for the reality of the whole, the whole being not only whole works but whole epochs. Synecdoche is akin to metonymy, and interestingly the linguist Roman Jakobson argued that 'it is still insufficiently realized that it is the predominance of metonymy which underlies and actually determines the so-called "realist" trend' (quoted by Pam Morris, *Realism* [London and New York, 2003], p. 103). The second is appropriately *figura*, the subject of another of A.'s books, a mode of presentation whereby a historically real person or event prefigures, and is in turn fulfilled by, a later one, as the sacrifice of Isaac is a figure of the Crucifixion. This at any rate is the claim of a fine essay by Hayden White, 'A.'s Literary History' (*Figural Realism* [Baltimore and London, 1999], Chapter 5): 'For him, the representative literary text may be at once (1) a fulfillment of a previous text and (2) a potential prefiguration of some later text, but also (3) a figuration of the author's experience of a historical milieu, and therefore (4) a fulfillment of a prefiguration of a piece of historical reality' (W., p. 93). As a result, in this narrative, 'The history of Western literature displays an ever fuller consciousness of Western literature's unique project, which is nothing other than the fulfillment of its unique promise to represent reality realistically' (W., p. 88). Only those who believe that language can transparently reflect a pre-existing 'reality' will conclude that A.'s brilliant configurations of literary history are on this account *merely* a matter of rhetoric.

Three of the twenty chapters of *Mimesis* are devoted to classical antiquity, and include memorable discussions of passages from Petronius, Tacitus, Ammianus, and Augustine, which deserve more attention than they have received. Classicists ought perhaps also to scrutinize anew A.'s argument that the separation of styles and the 'limitations of antique historical consciousness' (p. 40) severely restricted the scope of ancient literature (Regenbogen and Edelstein made a start). But it is the opening chapter, 'Odysseus' Scar', that most classicists know, and which has become a *locus classicus* of the comparative method, though A. himself was not altogether satisfied with it, and even considered its omission. Here I find myself parting company with A.'s characterization of both Homer and Genesis, texts which are made to stand, synecdochically, for the classical and Biblical traditions, and whose comparison is in one sense a stroke of genius. I can accept the contrast between a Homeric timeless plenitude with its perpetual foreground of richly described detail and a more vertical Biblical world of time and historical change in the Old Testament (though if we substituted the *Aeneid* for the *Odyssey*, we would get a very different result). But is it true that Homer seeks 'merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours' (p. 15) or that his work cannot be interpreted or allegorized? Just as A.'s Homer is the Homer of Goethe and Schiller and German Romanticism, so his Biblical world is very much a Lutheran and Kirkegaardian one of fear and trembling before 'a hidden God' (p. 15), a world in which we must constantly interpret what we read and apply it to our own lives. A.'s comparison emphasizes difference; if, instead, we foreground similarity, we might find in both ancient texts a sense of trust in how things are which is very much at odds with the condition of modernity with its hermeneutics of suspicion, together with

a sense of communality in which the reader may share, as opposed to the private experience of alienated modern subjectivities. As always, methods of enquiry determine results.

The important thing about a classic of criticism is not whether you agree with it, but whether it prompts you to fresh thought, including productive disagreement. As A. himself acknowledges ('Epilegomena', p. 574), '*Mimesis* is quite consciously a book that a particular person, in a particular situation, wrote at the beginning of the 1940s'. Like Curtius, with his *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (English translation, London and Henley-on-Thames, 1953), he wrote it from a passionate conviction about the integrity of democratic European values then under such grave threat, hoping that it might 'contribute to bringing together again those whose love for our western history has serenely persevered' (p. 557). Perhaps for that very reason it has endured wind and weather.

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HEL(L)ENISM?

M. GUMPERT: *Grafting Helen. The Abduction of the Classical Past*. Pp. xiv + 338. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001. Paper, US\$21.95. ISBN: 0-299-17124-8 (0-299-17120-5 hbk).

Grafting Helen is a long, often turgid, but learned and provocative study of Helen of Troy. Its contents: Helen in ancient Greek (95 pp.), French (150 pp.) and modern Greek literature (10 pp.); a conclusion (10 pp.), footnotes (35 pp.), and bibliography (20 pp). The book is a revised Harvard dissertation written under Margaret Alexiou, Barbara Johnson, and Gregory Nagy.

Who is Helen of Troy? The question is complex—'Which Helen? Her origins, parentage, marriage, her very identity are all subjects of speculation and indeterminacy' (p. 11). And so, too, is the answer, not least because the book is driven by post-structuralist theory (esp. Derrida's early work on writing). Hence the cryptic table of contents: Part I: Helen in Greece—Mimesis, Anamnesis, Supplement, Speculation, Epideixis, Deixis; Part II. Helen in France—Idolatry, Translation, Genealogy, Cosmetics, Miscegenation, Prostitution. These twelve chapter titles (all variations on *graft*) are organized not by chronology or genre but by particular strategies for reading the past into the present, for recuperating the past and for concealing that act of recuperation (p. xii). Given the constraints of space and the primary audience of this journal, I will focus only on Part I. (The France of Part II is chosen because 'from the early medieval era it had always defined itself as the privileged scion of the Greco-Roman past', p. 254.)

Gumpert attempts to demonstrate that the history of Western literature perpetually re-enacts Homer's *teichoskopia*, the desire to gaze upon Helen, like the Trojan elders atop the wall, longing to embrace and plotting to expel her seductive/destructive beauty. Whereas more specialized books (Clader 1976, Suzuki 1989, Austin 1994) read Helen as a mediation between designated antitheses, Gumpert interprets her as a metaphor for ambivalence itself. But why '*Grafting Helen*'? Because, like Helen, *graft* signifies back-and-forth vacillation, always pointing towards an improper union, an illicit trade (p. xii). And why '*Grafting Helen*'? Because Helen is 'always elusive, always a graft, more than one thing at a time' (p. xiii). Helen is never at home (Sparta, Troy, Egypt) even when at home (p. 21). If, on the one hand, the rape of Helen constitutes

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