



Dante: Poet of the Secular World

Erich Auerbach , Ralph Manheim (Translator) , Michael Dirda (Introduction)

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Erich Auerbach's *Dante: Poet of the Secular World* is an inspiring introduction to one of world's greatest poets as well as a brilliantly argued and still provocative essay in the history of ideas. Here Auerbach, thought by many to be the greatest of twentieth-century scholar-critics, makes the seemingly paradoxical claim that it is in the poetry of Dante, supreme among religious poets, and above all in the stanzas of his *Divine Comedy*, that the secular world of the modern novel first took imaginative form. Auerbach's study of Dante, a precursor and necessary complement to *Mimesis*, his magisterial overview of realism in Western literature, illuminates both the overall structure and the individual detail of Dante's work, showing it to be an extraordinary synthesis of the sensuous and the conceptual, the particular and the universal, that redefined notions of human character and fate and opened the way into modernity.

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Dante: Poet of the Secular World Details

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From Reader Review Dante: Poet of the Secular World for online ebook

B. Hawk says

Auerbach's book gives a nice introduction to reading and thinking about Dante, especially the *Divine Comedy*. Less a biography than an essay on Dante's works, the book offers insight and interpretation of both the poet and his literature within the Western literary tradition. Throughout the book, Auerbach especially stresses his central thesis that Dante's work surpasses the mimetic art of previous authors (from the Classical period through the Middle Ages) in his "testimony to the reality that is poetry, to the modern European form of artistic mimesis which stresses the actuality of events" (174); essentially, Auerbach argues that Dante's mimesis captures the concept of realism previously unattained in the mimetic art of literature. In this sense, Dante's work "was both old and new, rising from oblivion with greater power and scope than ever before" (178)--and in these words we see Auerbach's point as well as his high elevation of Dante to the most essential poet of the Middle Ages, even the most essential in Western literature.

The book approaches Dante and his work in six parts. In the first, Auerbach outlines the history of mimesis and literary conceptions of humanity before Dante, beginning with the Classical tradition and moving forward to give the literary context for Dante's work. He traces the literary image of character from Homer through to Christianity, into the "Hellenistic melting pot" in which the traditions converged (15), into the spiritual atmosphere of the medieval period when portrayals and conceptions "lost [their] literal meaning" and "the concrete reality was lost" (18), leading to his insistence that Dante recovered and perfected the portrayal of realism.

The second part approaches Dante's early works (esp. the *Vita nuova*) and Dante set apart from the Provençal poets and contemporaries in "his fame as a poet" (29) even as a young man. Furthermore, Auerbach emphasizes what he relates as Dante's sophisticated style in that "Dante's poems spring less from a feeling or an idea than from an event" (41), rooting his poetry in the naturalism of "concrete historical reality" (42). Throughout this section and the next, Auerbach also emphasizes the "examples of true loftiness" (51) that Dante upholds in contrast to his contemporaries. Indeed, Auerbach emphasizes such loftiness throughout his study--and if there is one criticism of Auerbach's book, it is that he often praises such lofty work with his own style of waxing too lofty and eloquent at times, raising Dante beyond mere mortal and speaking of him subjectively as the supreme poet.

In the third, fourth, and fifth sections, Auerbach turns to discuss Dante's greatest work, the *Comedy*. The third chapter focuses on the "systematic synthesis" created in the work, as "Dante tried to reconcile the Thomist system with the mystical ideology of the *cor gentile*"--a feat about which Auerbach insists "Only a poet could effect a concordance of that kind" (71). Thus Dante merged the "rational" philosophical tradition with that of the "sensuous and poetic" work of artists (71), merging it with the need for a public "noble vernacular" (77) in the form of what Dante himself "refers to it by a new term of his own coining as 'the sacred poem,' *il poema sacro* or *lo sacro poema*, or simply as 'the vision'" (92). And, Auerbach writes, in this synthesis and new form, "the noble style in which the poem is written is a harmony of all the voices that ever struck his [Dante's] ear" (97).

The fourth chapter primarily deals with the worldview that Dante imparts into his great work: three "interwoven systems" which are "a physical, an ethical, and a historicopolitical system" drawn from the Ptolemaic philosophy "as adapted to Christian dogma by Christian Aristotelianism" (101). Herein, Auerbach charts the course that Dante travels--through the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*--as well as the essential order and system of thought infused within this journey, especially emphasizing the human "freedom of choice, a power compounded of intellect and will... which enables him during his lifetime on earth, to love in

the right or wrong way and so decide his own fate" (105). This, of course, is essential for the reality that Dante portrays: the conception of human choices on this material plane carrying over as one's final characteristic destiny in the afterlife

In Auerbach's chapter on "The Presentation" of the Dante's *Comedy*, he specifically traces the realism that Dante creates through the journey, in characters, setting, images, and psychology within the work. Tracing specific instances, Aurbach also offers general unifying elements of the poem and its interpretation, foremost emphasizing the role of memory in the text: for through the memory of the characters, Dante "captures the essence not only with greater intellectual precision but also more concretely and completely than do temporal events with their uncertainty and ambiguity" (143)--it is the memorial characteristics and essence of the images provided--"the individual, concrete qualities" (142)--in the *Comedy* that give it the sense of a concrete reality. From this argument, Auerbach moves his analysis to the final chapter, a short reflection titled "The Survival and Transformation of Dante's Vision of Reality." Here Auerbach discusses not only how Dante's mimesis "stresses the actuality of events" (174) but also how such a mimetic work ushers in a new literary tradition for European culture, one in which, with Dante, "the historical individual was reborn in his manifest unity of body and spirit," giving way to the new art, in which "Modern mimesis found man in his individual destiny" (178).

Working through Dante's literary moves and contextualizing the *Comedy* within the larger literary culture as well as the poet's own work, this introduction offers a stunning view of Dante the poet and the man. As with many scholars, Auerbach does get drawn into the cult of the author he discusses, and sometimes his veneration of Dante overshadows his intellectual approach. In his analyses, however, Auerbach offers not only his theses about the poet and his works but also important discussions, explanations, and interpretations of how to read the *Comedy* in order to better understand its place in the Western tradition.

John says

I admire Auerbach's "Mimesis" more than any other work of literary criticism that comes to mind. This book contains a brief discussion of one episode in Dante's epic - quite illuminating, I think.

So I decided to read his slender volume on Dante, whom Auerbach admired more ardently than any other writer in the history of the West. A wonderful supplement to Barbara Reynold's biography of Dante.

I just finished Auerbach's book, which is a triumph of literary criticism. Auerback offers a coherent, thoroughly considered description of Dante's perspective on the world and his experience, and Auerbach shows convincingly how that perspective (in addition to poetic genius) enabled the production of the Divine Comedy. No doubt there are many other critics who offer other/different views on the contents of Dante's mind, but I expect that only a very few can express their views so pithily and convincingly as Auerbach.

Justin Evans says

For chapters 1, 3 and the conclusion alone, I'd give this book 5 stars, but sadly 2, 4 and 5 are a little tedious. That said, it'd be a great book for anyone who's interested in Dante, but hasn't read him, and I'm probably being overly harsh on chapter 2.

Chapter one sets out Auerbach's slightly odd philosophy of literary history in a highly condensed form. The

essence of this is: literature can either present human beings as human beings, a combination of body and soul; or it can present them as merely one or the other. His preference is clearly the combination view, and that makes sense. Add to this some particularly dubious periodization (epic/tragic/Christ arrives! We care about the body!/dark ages (we forget the body)/Dante liberates us all! Yay!) and you have the general historical argument of the book.

I'm harsh on chapter 2 because it's about Dante's forebears and his early poetry, which is essentially coterie work. Historically important, yes. Worth 40-odd pages, not so much. Chapter 4 is a textbook account of the physical, ethical and historical/political theories that go into the *Commedia*, combined a little bit with the overall structure of the poem. It's good, it's just that you'll get the same knowledge by reading, um, the *Commedia* and a few of Hollander's notes thereto. Chapter 5 is a series of close readings of lines which spirals out of control into a kind of rapturous nineteenth-century praise criticism. Auerbach did much better in 'Mimesis.'

That leaves the great bits, chapter 3 and the conclusion, summed up I think in Auerbach's claim that Dante "transforms Being [i.e., scholastic philosophy and Christian theology] into experience." I don't so much recommend that you read chapter three of this book, as demand that you do so immediately. And then the conclusion, which tops off chapter 3 three nicely.

Two complaints: first, Auerbach's argument that Dante's greatness lies in his attention to and valorisation of individuality can't deal with the increasing abstraction of the *Paradiso*. He confronts this problem, and suggests that the saints and so on aren't as individualized because their stories are well known- the kind of ad hoc explanation that Auerbach rightly dismisses elsewhere. Second, he argues, correctly, that "the subject and doctrine of the *Comedy* are not incidental; they are the roots of its poetic beauty," but also suggests in his conclusion that the doctrine is dead and only the poetic beauty and vision of body+soul together remains. Maybe you could make those statements consistent, but it would be difficult at best. There's no need to say that the doctrine is dead, of course; we might not be Thomists, but a good number of people still possess an ideal of, say, a united world at peace, which isn't so much different.

Hermioneginny says

"Letto" saltando parole, righe, pagine...era troppo noioso!!!

Jackson Cyril says

I believe it was Nadia Boulanger who once declared that Monteverdi was the first to set human emotions to music-- in that sense there is a direct line of influence from "L'Orfeo" to "La Traviata" and "West Side Story". Auerbach, in similar lines, argues that it was Dante who was the first intensely 'secular poet'-- and there is little indeed that separates "Anna Karenina" (or even "Lady Chatterley") from the story of Francesca and Paolo ("Inferno", Canto V). This thesis, in Edward Said's words, has a ring of "Nietzschean audacity" about it-- considering the overwhelmingly sacred tenor of Dante's "Comedy". But Auerbach's reading is thorough and (of course) well backed-up. That this reading could be such a respectable one, yet elude readers for seven centuries also, I think, attests to the remarkable fecundity of Dante.

Nell says

I haven't nodded so vigorously and so often at a book in a long time! Now I know why I have trouble explaining why I like Dante so much; it took Erich Auerbach about 150 pages to say what I try to sum up in 2 minutes. What's more, they are 150 lucid pages. He could be a little effusive at times, but I'll leave it to somebody else to fault him for that. It was exciting to read what I have often wanted to say but couldn't verbalize. Also, this was the most readable translation I've read in a while. Brilliant from top to toe.

Jon says

Amazing. And very difficult. Auerbach had sensitivities and insights that you find nowhere else--and he managed (later) to combine them into a complete theory of western literature. This is an early work of his (1929), but it's the best thing I've read so far in helping me try to formulate in my own mind what makes Dante unique, and an author I keep coming back to, even if only in translation.

Garrett Peace says

Rating: 4.5

Auerbach repeats himself a few too many times, and I'm convinced this could have been cut down a little, and the section on Dante's early poetry and the Provençal poets is kind of a slog, but when Auerbach really gets going, it's some of the best writing about writing you've ever read.

Ilya says

It may be more complicated than Dante, but it is still a great introduction to the Divine Comedy and its role as a bedrock of the Western mimetic and -- yes -- secular literary tradition.

Nathan says

Difficult and abstract, but worthwhile. Auerbach gives rather short shrift to the sheer magnitude of the *Commedia* by trying to reduce it to a single theory of literature, but that single theory itself holds a surprising amount of water, even though I disagreed with it in the end. Overly reductive, but a challenging, unique and worthwhile addition to the usual body of Dante criticism.

Jeffrey St. says

Literary critics are not generally known for their courage. Erich Auerbach is the exception. Born in Berlin to a family Jewish intellectuals, Auerbach survived the trench warfare and mustard gas raids of World War I. After the war he turned his intention to a study of Dante, a poet once conceived of as an intracably religious writer. After WW I, however, religion seemed to have no relevance to the shattered world of the new Europe. Auerbach's lucid study of the *Vita Nuova* and *Commedia* redeem Dante for the modern world, showing through a close textual exegesis of the poems that Dante was ferociously political poet, a voice of

the secular world, a grandfather of the modern sensibility. After the publication of his Dante book, the chill shadow of Nazism descended upon Germany and soon all of Europe. Auerbach fled for his life to a difficult exile in Istanbul, leaving behind his books. In a small room in Istanbul he began to compose the greatest volume of literary criticism of the 20th century, *Mimesis*, a study of narrative strategies beginning with the Homeric poems through Dante and Cervantes to Flaubert and Joyce. The book is stuffed with close readings of quotations from these masterworks, all quoted from memory. The centerpiece is his study of the Florentine poet. Come back Dante, we need you.

Bryan says

I can think of no other book in recent memory I both wanted and expected to like as much as this one, yet which I found didn't live up to my hopes. *Mimesis* was, I thought, just a stunning work of criticism, and its chapter on *The Divine Comedy* did more to illuminate the entire work through the examination of one section of one canto than did several readings (without benefit of any study guide) of the entire *Inferno*--in fact, I'd nearly given up on ever really being able to penetrate Dante's work at all; it was *Mimesis* that gave me the idea that I didn't have to abandon all hope.

So when I found out that Auerbach had written a single work devoted to Dante, I expected dramatic things. And they may be in here, but it isn't written on a level that's plain enough for me to pull them out. But my biggest mistake was assuming that this book was primarily concerned with *The Divine Comedy*--this is, rather, an examination of what made Dante an original. The title of the book is actually pretty clear on that--but when I read 'Dante', the only thing I think of is the *Comedy*, and thus my confusion.

So...in his study of ~~*The Divine Comedy*~~ **Dante**, Auerbach begins with Homer, and the classical conception of man and his destiny. The first chapter moves through the ages to show how later periods either modified or enlarged this conception, culminating in the second chapter, and the tradition in which Dante came of age. Here Auerbach compares Dante to his contemporaries, and it isn't until chapter III that we get to the *Comedy*...sort of. Actually, while the title to this chapter is *The Subject of the "Comedy"*, a better description would be how the state of the world and Dante's own past history led him to conceive of the subject of the *Comedy*. For those looking for insights into the poem itself, they may find some help in chapters IV and V, which deals with its structure and the presentation, but it really depends on what sort of insights they are looking for. Auerbach analyzes Dante's use of language to illustrate how he was able to so forcefully portray the reality of the individual in a literary realm, and it is there, according to Auerbach, where Dante's true legacy lies: Dante created an individual where there had only been abstraction before.

Auerbach's conclusion is conveniently summarized in his last few pages, but it is the proofs that he provided to reach that conclusion that were often beyond me. I think the reader would need to be much more heavily immersed in Auerbach's subjects to follow along and have the ability to appreciate his arguments or dispute a point. All I could do was try to keep my feet under me as he raced along. Given that this book was published in 1929, and *Mimesis* 1946, it's entirely possible that, as a friend of mine suggested, Auerbach became more adept at getting his point across, or it may be that he intended the two books for different audiences. Either way, I doubt I'll ever get to a point where I'd need to revisit this one (although *Mimesis* is a candidate someday.)

Chris Coffman says

This neglected and almost unknown work, to which we have access only thanks to the New York Review of

Books' quixotic and impeccably chosen list of forgotten classics, is the most fundamental metaphysical defense of literature ever written.

And the great thing is that it is totally practical, an inspiration for the working writer. Since Plato, imaginative literature has had a bad conscience, and in English words like "fiction" don't even bother to disguise the association of imaginative literature with lies, deception, and mere tales.

Of course this is frustrating for those of us who believe that literature tells human truths that cannot be revealed by any other method. But there it is.

Actually, however, Erich Auerbach cracked the conundrum many years ago, right in the middle of the robust, high-coloured good health of the Scientific Age (ie before all our supposedly neutral and quasi-divine scientific knowledge had produced nuclear weapons) and he set forth in this book, which he wrote out of a unique understanding and an intimate love of Dante's work, the ultimate defense of literature and the truth of literature.

Auerbach starts out with the pre-Socratic Heraclitus (thereby neutralising the later Plato's critique in THE REPUBLIC) and his dictum "A man's character is his fate." Auerbach elaborates this insight to show how each of us, each actual human being, attracts characteristic sorrows, challenges, and other experiences the way a magnet attracts iron filings. And out of our decisions and actions in confrontation with these characteristic experiences, which are unique to each of us in the historical drama of our individual life, our inner being is revealed. Nietzsche had a very similar insight when he observed "If one has character one has one's characteristic experience which recurs again and again."

But Auerbach then generalises this insight to account for the selection process required by practicing writers to create literature. A novel can only have so many characters, so many incidents, and so many details, and these must be rigorously selected from the vast richness of life and incorporated into the limited space of a work of art. And to do so an artist must possess some principal for making this selection, an understanding of the inner working of reality which is embedded in the underlying plot and which reveals itself in a fully satisfying work of art. Auerbach shows how the basis for literature, from its very beginning, is an evolutionary interaction between a sentient being and its environment, an interaction which is unique and which changes both the creature and its environment (ie the bee adapts towards the flower and the flower adapts towards the bee). The premise for this is a deep cultural belief in a living order of reality which adapts and changes, not in some deterministic and mechanistic way, but uniquely and unpredictably, simultaneously following the laws of nature while reserving the mystery of an inviolate virgin contingency in every pristine new moment of the constantly arriving present, and this change occurs as a result of the passage through life of each living being and the interaction of that being with its surrounding historical reality.

Of course, modernism was committed to chaos and randomness and therefore it literally lost the plot . . . but Auerbach shows us how to return to the plot, by rebuilding its philosophical base from the ground of the unconscious back up into the light of a fully realised artistic work.

This is only one of the many treasures contained in this brief work. In the same chapter Auerbach shows how the example of Jesus--told in a new kind of story with a surprising plot in short books we now call The Gospels--detonated the foundations of the classical ideal of the Gentleman. By destroying the gentleman as an ideal of a civilised life this new kind of story jumped the rails of historical development and set the world in motion towards an entirely new destiny. These 400 words--and that is about all they amount to--should be required reading in the high schools of the civilised world.

And then, and only then, does Auerbach begin his brilliant discussion of Dante.

Honestly, reading this book left me breathless. Turning the pages was like watching a new galaxy come into

view. It is one of the most important books I have ever read. Literature will begin a new, not necessarily golden, but certainly less dross-like age, if more writers read this book, and it is not too much to suggest that the world would be a better place, if poets and other artists truly are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind, and if they read this book and then went forth and did likewise, as Auerbach suggests that Dante did.

He has certainly shown us what to do . . . the rest is up to us.
