Part I

Roadmaps
A call for papers for a conference on comparative literature in 2009 names the following as possible topics: comparative literary history; literature and the languages; world literature, translation, and globalization; colonial and post-colonial literatures; deconstruction and its legacies; hermeneutics; gender, sexuality, and eroticism; drama, theater, and performance; the history of the discipline; philosophy and religion; psychoanalysis, trauma, and testimony; visual arts and architecture; technology, media, audio-visual culture; sociology, anthropology, and political economy; history and historiography; geography, geology, and ecology (Figure 1.1). Although seldom discussed by way of Louis Althusser’s well-known essay on ideology, a call for papers is, it seems fair to say, a mode of interpellation. What kind of subjection is in play? Since the occasion is a matter of academic practice, the notion of the subject at stake is, arguably, double: it is both a respondent to the call who consents to participation as a comparatist, and the matter at hand, namely, what comparative literature is/does.

The open-ended nature of the list brings to mind another famous moment: Michel Foucault’s invocation, at the beginning of The Order of Things, of Jorge Luis Borges’ Chinese encyclopedia, that fantastic agglomerate of incommensurate things. Foucault’s point, we recall, is precisely that the agglomerate defies all probable logic of similarity and comparability in Western thought. For him, Borges’ invention functions not only as a representation of an exotic order of things but also as a means to make visible the West’s conventional way of organizing knowledge, itself an artificial grid of intelligibility that, because it is taken for granted, tends to remain invisible. With good humor, Foucault finds in the Chinese encyclopedia the intimation of an impending epistemic abyss, in the light of which the hitherto assumed certitude of Western reason crumbles. From this glimpse of the void, Foucault goes on to give an account
What does it mean to practice comparative literature? When we speak of a discipline that is intrinsically interdisciplinary, how do we understand its limits, articulate its purpose, and constitute its objects? These very questions apply to the humanities in general—itself a heterogeneous constellation of disciplines, each representing not only its own knowledge but its own way of asking questions. From what position can this multiplicity of knowledges comprising the humanities ask the increasingly urgent question of its self-definition?

"Constellations" aims to negotiate this critical task of self-definition by bringing the questions of comparative literature and the humanities together. We hope to produce well-informed perspectives on comparative literature within the broader context of the humanities. But we also hope to ask the question of the humanities from within the fold of comparative literature itself—not only because it is one of several loci in the humanities where interdisciplinary work is done, but because its emphasis on language has produced strategies for negotiating between opposed, even irreducible forms of thought and knowledge.

This call for papers invites all who have a stake in these questions to report on their projects and participate in the on-going conversation about what comparative literature and the humanities are or should be. Of course, we also welcome the arrival of unexpected guests.

Abstract Submission Deadline:
May 15, 2009; 300-500 words

Email submissions to Armaando Mastrogianni, ammastro@emory.edu

Figure 1.1 Comparative literature conference call for papers. (Reproduced with permission from the graduate students in the Department of Comparative Literature, Emory University)
of the history of modern Western knowledge practices, a history replete with the
limits that accompany the appearance of that historical figure, “Man.” Is our present
moment, characterized as it is by a hyper-fluidity and interchangeability of informa-
tion (as is evidenced in this well-intentioned call for papers), a replay of the moment
of Foucault’s encounter with Borges’ imaginary artifact?

The two moments bear a resemblance, of course, simply because of the infinite
multipliability of data suggested by the list. Although many of the topics named by
the conference organizers are familiar to comparative literature practitioners, the act
of piling and bulleting indicates that many more items can be added and that this is
a potentially endless and fenceless field, for which no attempt at self-delineation and
self-limitation will suffice. To this extent, comparative literature may be said to be
undergoing a process of subject de-formation, a process that has been copiously
debated, for instance, in the series of discussions accompanying the reports issued by
the American Comparative Literature Association in response to multiculturalism and
globalization (Bernheimer, 1995; Saussy, 2006). But while Foucault’s reflections his-
toricize the emergence of Man, a figure who, as he predicts at the end of his book, is
about to fade like a face drawn in sand by the edge of the sea, many current discus-
sions of comparative literature seem to head in a quite different direction. As the
subject (matter) of comparative literature undergoes de-formation, a new type of
subject formation seems simultaneously to be taking place, alongside a new type of
agenda.

To probe these linked events of subject de-formation and subject re-formation, it
will be instructive to return briefly to Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis: The Representa-
tion of Reality in Western Literature*, which for many of us remains an authoritative founding
text in our post-Second World War (and largely North American) academic disci-
pline. Whether or not we agree with Auerbach’s analyses, his book stands unparal-
leled in its range of erudition, attention to minutiae, and generosity of spirit. I have
elsewhere approached this work in terms of the problematic of forgiveness and mercy,
a problematic that is silently but evocatively inscribed in Auerbach’s detailed discus-
sion of the Biblical narrative of Abraham’s near-sacrifice of his son Isaac in the Book
of Genesis Chapter 22 (Chow, 2009). By placing his reading of that episode at the
beginning of *Mimesis*, I propose, Auerbach is making the crucial gesture of arguing a
fundamental shift in the conceptualization of the human in the Western literary
canon. Since *Mimesis* and *The Order of Things* were published within two decades of
each other (1946 and 1966, respectively), and since both may be described as postwar
reconfigurations of the status of Western knowledge, their disparate conclusions about
the human are worth a closer examination.

Being a philologist by training, Auerbach focused primarily on style, even though
style, much like categories to which the contemporary critical reader is more accus-
tomed, such as race, class, and gender, is first and foremost about the hierarchical
arrangement (that is, the politics) of social differentiation. The focus on style allows
Auerbach to establish significant differences between the Hellenic and Hebraic ways
of writing – specifically, the contrasts between Homer’s elaborate narration of Odysseus’
homecoming in *The Odyssey* and the Bible’s reticent account of the near-slaughter of Isaac (in Chapter one). As may be surmised in the remarks Auerbach made in response to the early critics of *Mimesis* who complained that he had been unfair in his treatment of the Greeks, there is a strong sense of ethical purpose on his part. “I considered for a moment letting the Homer chapter fall entirely by the wayside,” he wrote. “For my purposes it would have sufficed to begin with the time around the birth of Christ” (Auerbach, 2003: p. 560).

It is quite clear to me with what great justification, for example, early Christianity can be regarded as the product of late antiquity [...] But the task that my theme imposed on me was a different one: I had to show not the transition but rather the complete change. (Auerbach, 2003: p. 562)

What kind of complete change? This is an important question in and of itself, but to raise it in the context of comparative literature is to ask how such a question is instrumental in shaping the orientation of the discipline as a whole – how, in other words, it functions as a type of call.

With the emphasis on the Judeo-Christian narrative tradition, Auerbach is not simply demonstrating a cultural difference but also negotiating an alternative inception of the Western canon. As I have argued, the choice of a scene about divine mercy is critical here. As Auerbach shows by following the elliptical and withheld style of the Biblical story, the nature of divine mercy remains entirely mysterious to the human characters involved and, by implication, to the reader. For him, therefore, the Hebraic narrative style lays claim to a powerful kind of truth – the sacred – that cannot be conflated with historical realism. The ineffability of this claim to truth is what distinguishes the Judeo-Christian manner of storytelling from that of the pagans. If a Greek author such as Homer tends to digress into picturesque details, the Biblical narrative leaves much to the reader’s speculation and interpretation. (Abraham may hear God’s voice and respond by gesturing upward toward God, but we are not told exactly where that voice is coming from.) Above all, Auerbach describes this claim to truth in absolute terms, as:

> tyrannical – it excludes all other claims [...] All other scenes, issues, and ordinances have no right to appear independently of it, and it is promised that all of them, the history of all mankind, will be given their due place within its frame, will be subordinated to it. (Auerbach, 2003: pp. 14–15)

The logic of a certain spiritual progression may thus be inferred from Auerbach’s book. It goes something like this: the Judeo-Christian style, with its hallmark emphases on humble, earthly, and mundane contents, and its liberal mixing of genres and idioms, embodies a distinctive paradigm of what it means to experience alterity. That alterity is originally named God. As we follow Auerbach’s chapters through the centuries, however, God has been representationally displaced onto the plurality of the human world. By the time we reach Virginia Woolf, the notion of God has become
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so thoroughly dethroned from the place “up there” that even the authority of a novelist or her narrator (who used to be a stand-in for the divine maker) must be understood to have made way for a linguistic/stylistic multiplicity, comprised not only of different human characters’ exchanges but also of a Babel of articulate and inarticulate voices, marked by techniques such as the stream of consciousness, free indirect speech, interior monologue, and so forth as well as by direct speech and dialogue. In a novel such as Woolf’s To the Lighthouse, “The writer as narrator of objective facts has almost completely vanished; almost everything stated appears by way of reflection in the consciousness of the dramatis personae” (Auerbach, 2003: p. 534). Although Auerbach is ostensibly concerned with style, style in his reading is nothing less than a historical symptom of the remake of God’s (mysterious) voice in human language. This remake means that the inscription of alterity, originally understood in terms of a tyrannical and ineffable divinity, has been brought up to date. Alterity is now experienced non-trancendently, as human polyphony.

If my reading of Auerbach’s interpretative trajectory of de-sacralizing and (re)humanizing alterity is at all acceptable, his radical gesture of using a Biblical story about mercy to inaugurate this interpretative trajectory would seem poignantly motivated. In the story Auerbach tells, it is the Judeo-Christian tradition that is credited, in a state of exceptionalism, with the agency of laying the foundation for modern Western – and by implication, global – democratic thinking. (Again, instead of our contemporary identity-politics terms such as race, class, gender, agency is defined in terms of writing.) Central to this democratic thinking is a benevolent gaze, one that includes everybody, especially the lower classes and common folk whose varied and impure languages/voices, as Auerbach’s various chapters demonstrate, have helped (authors) transform the stylistic genealogy of the Western canon. By referring to what he is doing as a “complete change,” Auerbach intends nothing less than a reconceptualization of literature on the basis of a common humanity. As he writes, what he wishes to foreground is:

a world which on the one hand is entirely real, average, identifiable as to place, time, and circumstances, but which on the other hand is shaken in its very foundations, is transforming and renewing itself before our eyes. (Auerbach, 2003: p. 43; my emphasis)

Hence his startling observations toward the end of the book:

The more numerous, varied, and simple the people are who appear as subjects of such random moments [as depicted by modern writers like Woolf], the more effectively must what they have in common shine forth. In this unprejudiced and exploratory type of representation we cannot but see to what an extent – below the surface conflicts – the differences between men’s ways of life and forms of thought have already lessened. The strata of societies and their different ways of life have become inextricably mingled. There are no longer even exotic peoples. A century ago (in Mérimée for example), Corsicans or Spaniards were still exotic; today the term would be quite unsuitable for Pearl Buck’s Chinese peasants. Beneath the conflicts, and also through them, an economic and cultural leveling
process is taking place. It is still a long way to a common life of mankind on earth, but the goal begins to be visible. (Auerbach, 2003: p. 552; my emphasis)

In such a foundational change in thinking about humanity, Judeo-Christianity, notwithstanding its status as religion, is reborn as the origination site of secularism, understood as an enlightened overcoming of the boundaries imposed by religion, culture, and language – in sum, of ethnocentrism. Indeed, in ways that resonate with the long-established scholarly interest in the legacy of the Apostle Paul, who founded the Christian Church, Auerbach associates the missionary spreading of Christianity with a gradual detachment from the specificities of the Jewish tradition and steady adaptation to the preoccupations of a wider, global audience, whose conversion to the faith is made possible by the introduction of a new covenant (or contract) lifting the prohibitive constraints as stipulated by the Old Testament. The more recent collective turn among contemporary critical theorists such as Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, and Slavoj Žižek to the figure of Paul can perhaps be explained in part by way of this investment in the Janus-faced resilience of Christianity as both a religious and a secular enterprise – one that alternately signifies divine grace, ontological infinity, sacrifice and love, revolution, and institution building – despite such thinkers’ ostensible avant-garde philosophical and/or Marxist-Leninist sympathies, and remoteness from Auerbach’s type of philological orientation. That said, it is Auerbach’s reading, with its meticulous attentiveness to writing style, that offers a most remarkable clue to the paradoxical nature of this investment.

What bears repeating is Auerbach’s observation that the sacred’s claim to truth is tyrannical. Such a claim, he emphasizes, “excludes all other claims” in such a way as to subordinate to itself the history of all mankind (Auerbach, 2003: pp. 14−15). The sacred claim to an ineffable truth, in other words, is absolute because it is grounded in an originary act of exclusion. What this implies is that when the embrace of/with alterity devolves – from the realm of the sacred into the realm of the secular, as it were – the exclusionism that is constitutive of that claim, that is structural to its enunciation, is also being transmitted in the same process, becoming part and parcel of a new experience of alterity based in the human world. Instead of being forsaken, this exclusionism is henceforth (re)coded as the polyphonicity of a common humanity. Paradoxical though it may sound, then, the form assumed by exclusionism is now none other than an all-inclusionary, universalist humanism, a new uni-form that supposedly has the power to let us start afresh, imagine and instigate a new kind of collective life, emancipated from past (ethnic and linguistic) boundaries and conflicts.

Understood in these terms, the secularizing of Christianity would be less a matter of doing away with God per se than with a demand for an egalitarian, cosmopolitan approach to human languages and cultures. This demand, which may be viewed retrospectively as the ambitious ethical proposition of Auerbach’s book, was in turn consolidated as the premise of comparative literature. The discipline’s efforts at self-reform, in recent years, from its previous Europe-dominant foci to “world,” “global,” or “planetary” literatures, with compellingly argued emphases on distant reading,
circulation, translation, postcoloniality, subalternity, and world republicanism (see Moretti, 2000; Damrosch, 2003; Apter, 2006; Melas, 2007; Spivak, 2003; Casanova, 2004), are, in this respect, the latest corroborations of this spiritual lineage. In comparative literature’s increasingly democratized setting, a setting aptly dramatized by the list of possible conference paper topics to which I alluded, what kind of subject is being summoned into being? – a subject whose humanity is reconstituted by civility, the ability to coexist peacefully with others across classes, cultures, and languages; in sum, a tolerant subject.

The place occupied by Auerbach around 2011, the time of the present chapter, is thus quite thought-provoking. When poststructuralism emerged on the scene during the 1960s to the 1980s, the universalist humanism espoused by Auerbach’s literary vision seemed to have gone out of fashion. Foucault’s attempt to historicize Man, for instance, was simply one instance of an entire intellectual movement, shared by thinkers such as Derrida, Barthes, Lacan, Deleuze, Irigaray, Cixous, and their contemporaries, that sought to radicalize Western thought by overturning the centrality and continuum of an entrenched anthropocentrism. During this period and well into the 1990s, in North American universities at least, comparative literature departments became the home of “theory,” and comparative literature practitioners adopted a broad and flexible, because cross-national, notion of literary production and reception as opposed to the more restrictive, nationalistic way of studying literature. But the enthusiastic pursuit of theory, which to more old-fashioned literary scholars is more akin to philosophy than to literature, also marked the beginning of the end of comparative literature. Theory led to the relativization of the literary as such, with the status of literature being gradually analogized (some would say “demoted” or “reduced”) to one type of discourse among many. This is followed, in tandem with Western consciousness-raising as spurred by US civil rights movements and other historical events of decolonization, by the relativization of subjects, identities, nations, cultures, and lifestyles. Ironically, this momentum of relativization also – inevitably perhaps – prompted the interrogation of the Eurocentrism of poststructuralist theory itself and its anti-humanistic modes of critique, together with an increasingly liberalized approach to academic study, in particular in the humanities. If a secular, universalist humanism had lost favor among comparativists in the heyday of high theory, the signs today are that this kind of humanism is back in full swing, with a self-conscious and tyrannical mission of tolerance.

What happens when a categorical (or hypothetical) imperative such as tolerance is placed on an academic discipline? This question can obviously not be answered within the space of this chapter, though some difficulties are readily apparent in the context of comparative literature. Let me raise them briefly:

**Timelines**

Whose and which chronologies should define and delineate the temporal layout of the field of knowledge? The familiar grid of periodization, more or less following the
signposts of antiquity, medieval, Renaissance/early modern, the Enlightenment/the long eighteenth century, Victorian/Realism/nineteenth century, modern, and contemporary is increasingly unsatisfactory because it is provincial. The challenge posed by tolerance is obvious here: how can a discipline attempt to be inclusionary when a specific national or regional timeline of literature continues to dominate? If, as Auerbach claims in the mid 1940s, even Pearl Buck’s Chinese peasants have lost their exoticness, can other timelines be included in comparative literature without being simply peripheralized or subsumed under the more conventional signposts? For instance, as we become engaged with the currently trendy notion of world literature in Euro-America, part of this engagement should involve not simply adding non-Western samples to the familiar Euro-American timeline for variety but also finding out what world literature means or has already meant in other world situations, other literary and cultural timelines.

Questions regarding linguistic multiplicity

Whose relation to languages (native and foreign) should determine how linguistic multiplicity is defined? As the knowledge of different languages is so obviously valuable, it is easy to forget that language is not necessarily a countable unit and that plurality resides within single languages as well as among different, enumerable national languages. For comparativists, the question posed by tolerance is perhaps not so much the additional languages that should be learned (since that is a disciplinary given) as it is the condition of monolingualism: how are we to include, rather than exclude, monolingualism within the comparative study of literature? And, in a discipline that is explicitly committed to translingualism and translation, how could the principle of tolerance help us rethink the tendency to fetishize and privilege linguistic nativism, wherein native speakers’ linguistic abilities and skills tend to be presumed to be naturally superior to those of non-native speakers?

Discourse networks

How to continue studying literature when it has become entirely possible, and for some logical, to view literature as one type of discourse in a generative network of discourses? Can literature still be defined and defended in terms of what is specifically or authentically literary, or should it be regarded simply as writing, text, technology, medium, with a kind of specificity that is always constituted in relation to, relative to …? As Bruno Latour (1993) writes in We Have Never Been Modern (in a manner that once again evokes Foucault’s reflections on the fantastic Chinese encyclopedia), although certain discourses make perfect sense when understood separately, their being brought into proximity with one another can render them unintelligible or nonsensical. To push Latour’s logic to its extreme, might it not be precisely the unintelligibility or nonsense that results from such proximity – itself an increasingly inescapable condition in the age of digitization – that could help reinvigorate the
debate of the literary? Conversely, as the literary is by turns studied alongside science, ethnography, visual culture, religion, and other kinds of discourses, is tolerance, finally, simply a matter of (ap)proximate, neighborly discourse networks? And, in what amounts to the same question: by saying “yes” to everything, is tolerance simply another name for Foucault’s notion of (bio)power?

Well before the more recent disciplinary self-reform in comparative literature, a secularized notion of representation, understood, in accordance to Auerbach’s vision, as the representation of a polyphonic universal humanity, already informed a work such as Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, first published in 1978. Although Said was consistently critical of Western literary and cultural representation for being complicit with the military and political agendas of Western imperialism, once we reclassify the objectionable features of Orientalism, as Said analyzes them, as examples of cultural bigotry and ethnocentric bias, Said’s critique must be recognized as an eminently logical sequel to Auerbach’s work. Not surprisingly, *Mimesis* was acknowledged by Said as a book that had profoundly influenced his thinking (see Said, 2003: pp. xx-xxii; 1997: pp. 68–69, 72–73; 2006: pp. 5–9; 1994: pp. 43–61).

In the introduction he provided for the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Auerbach’s book, Said calls it “the finest description we have of the millennial effects of Christianity on literary representation” (Said “Introduction”: pp. xxii). In his magisterial appraisal of Auerbach’s landmark study, Said empathizes with Auerbach’s historical situation as a Prussian-Jewish intellectual forced into exile by mid-twentieth century German National Socialism. Rather than subjecting Auerbach’s claims about literature to any harsh criticism, Said chose to interpret them imaginatively – indeed, literarily – as the flaws of a tragic hero:

the triumph of *Mimesis*, as well as its inevitable tragic flaw, is that the human mind studying literary representations of the historical world can only do so as all authors do – from the limited perspective of their own time and their own work. (Said, 2003: pp. xxxii)

Its generosity notwithstanding, Said’s reading has the effect of subjectivizing Auerbach’s work, leaving open the question of the historicality of Auerbach’s comparative undertaking.

As Auerbach tells us in the Epilogue, the composition of *Mimesis* took place in the city of Istanbul. Said’s incisive comments on this locale of Auerbach’s exile are worth citing at length:

To any European trained principally, as Auerbach was, in medieval and renaissance Roman literatures, Istanbul does not simply connote a place outside Europe. Istanbul represents the terrible Turk, as well as Islam, the scourge of Christendom, the great Oriental apostasy incarnate. Throughout the classical period of European culture Turkey was the Orient, Islam its most redoubtable and aggressive representative […] The Orient and Islam also stood for the ultimate *alienation* from and opposition to Europe, the European tradition of Christian Latinity, as well as to the putative authority of
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ecclesia, humanistic learning, and cultural community. For centuries Turkey and Islam hung over Europe like a gigantic composite monster, seeming to threaten Europe with destruction. To have been an exile in Istanbul at that time of fascism in Europe was a deeply resonating and intense form of exile from Europe. (Said, 2006: p. 6; my emphasis)

In so far as the spotlight remains on Auerbach himself as the tragic hero, Said is quite right to conclude that *Mimesis* is not only “a massive reaffirmation of the Western cultural tradition,” as it has often been assumed to be, but also:

a work built upon a critically important alienation from it, a work whose conditions and circumstances of existence are not immediately derived from the culture it describes with such extraordinary insight and brilliance but built rather on an agonizing distance from it. (Said, *The World*: p. 8; my emphasis)

Even so, Said’s repeated use of the word “alienation” alerts us to considerations that go beyond Auerbach’s personal circumstances. Said’s interventions on behalf of the non-Western world, in particular, make it difficult to overlook another important aspect of alienation: for a (re)construction of the European literary canon of its scope and scale, *Mimesis*, despite being written in Istanbul, bears little trace of the legacies left by the Arabs, the Turks, and Islam in Europe. Should this omission be explained strictly in terms of professional competence (i.e. that Auerbach was a specialist of romance literatures and thus could not have been held responsible for not addressing Islamic literatures and cultures)? Or should it be understood as the limit to the secularist, modern Western ethics of tolerance, an ethics that aspires toward redeeming all of humanity and that nonetheless, perhaps because of the acquiescence to exclusionism that constitutes its fundamental approach to alterity, must in the end ban/bar some from entry?

This “tragically flawed” alienation – in the literal sense of rendering alien – of some peoples and cultures from Auerbach’s monumental literary history resonates a bit too well with the anguish Auerbach expresses in the 1952 essay “Philology and *Weltliteratur*” at the superabundance of non-European literatures and languages emerging on the modern historical stage. “There is no more talk now […] of a spiritual exchange between peoples, of the refinement of customs and of a reconciliation of races,” Auerbach writes sadly of the postwar era; advocating the Goethean ideal of *Weltliteratur* as “a conception of the diverse background of a common fate,” he holds onto the hope of a positive effect (cohesion, mutual understanding, common purpose) resulting from this conception, adding that such an effect “might […] help to make us accept our fate with more equanimity so that we will not hate whoever opposes us – even when we are forced into a posture of antagonism” (Auerbach, “Philology and *Weltliteratur*”: pp. 6–7; my emphasis). For him as a philologist steeped in the European romance tradition, the masses of the non-European world clearly presented, at the dawn of the cold war, a threat rather than a source of comfort.

If Auerbach’s story of literature can be understood as the forerunner of the situation in which comparative literature finds itself today – a loose discourse network sprouting from an incessant proliferation, intermingling, and hybridization of subjects – his
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remarks just cited above also bring home the kinship between the democratizing impulse and an older human condition, hatred. That kinship would be a good way of explaining why literature, understood in the broad modern sense of fictional composition, continues to be relevant in one significant sense. As tolerance becomes the global mediation currency for human transactions, with an ever renewable start-up point or zero balance known as a common humanity, it is the human subjects who are unable to participate in tolerance – whose accounts are messy and insolvent, as it were – who pose the greatest fascination. Cast in the Auerbachian terms of linguistic style, these would be subjects who refuse to speak or are incapable of speaking other than in their own idioms, whose styles remain elusively antagonistic, idiotic, monolingual, or untranslatable. As we read fiction circulating around the globe, such mutant relations to the ethics of tolerance may take on the import of a kind of alterity, one that remains outside the religious, philosophical, literary, and cultural-political trajectories charted by Christian benevolence and its secularist avatars. Between the joyously nihilistic destabilization of the human as such and the humanism of the Auerbachian literary paradigm, a rupture persists, prompting a line of flight. Even if minor, this line of flight will likely remain a vital force in comparative literature’s continual self-invention.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1 Hereafter references to Auerbach’s book will be taken from the 2003 edition.
2 Passages of this essay that pertain to Auerbach have been adapted for the present one.
3 For a well-known discussion of Abraham’s story in terms of a distinction between ethics and faith, see Kierkegaard.
4 It should be noted that Auerbach consistently contrasted the Christian origins of Western literature with the Hellenic, and that, for this reason perhaps, he did not highlight the differences between Judaism and Christianity. In the parameters he set up, “Judeo-Christian” and “Christian” seem interchangeable.
5 For this point, see especially Chapters eight and eleven of Mimesis, on Dante and Rabelais respectively.
6 Using as his example the depiction (in the Gospel according to Saint Mark) of Peter’s denial of Jesus, Auerbach describes how Christianity spread by gradually detaching itself from more ethnically specific (Judaic) elements. “To be sure, for a time its effectiveness was hampered by practical obstacles. For a time the language as well as the religious and social premises of the message restricted it to Jewish circles. Yet the negative reaction which it aroused in Jerusalem, both among the Jewish leaders and among the majority of the people, forced the movement to embark upon the tremendous venture of missionary work among the Gentiles, which was characteristically begun by a member of the Jewish diaspora, the Apostle Paul. With that, an adaptation of the message
to the preconceptions of a far wider audience, its detachment from the special preconceptions of the Jewish world, became a necessity and was effected by a method rooted in Jewish tradition but now applied with incomparably greater boldness, the method of revisional interpretation. The Old Testament was played down as popular history and as the code of the Jewish people and assumed the appearance of a series of ‘figures,’ that is of prophetic announcements and anticipations of the coming of Jesus and the concomitant events” (Auerbach, 2003: p. 48, my emphasis). An English version of Auerbach’s famous essay “Figura” can be found in Auerbach, Scenes from the Drama of European Literature (see Said, “Introduction”: pp. xx-xxii).

8 As a philologist, Auerbach was preoccupied in this essay with the methodological problem of synthesis, but the overtones of alarm and pessimism at a changing world are clear (see Said, Beginnings, pp. 68–69; Culture, p. 45; Mimesis, p. xvi). See also Mufti, who argues that Said’s secular criticism should be understood as being rooted in a minority-exilic conception of culture – that is, that it is aimed not so much at religion per se as at forms of majoritarian thinking such as nationalism.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING


Mufti, Aamir. (1998). Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism, and the Ques-


