THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN PHILOLOGY AND MODERNITY: SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON ERICH AUERBACH'S CONCEPT OF FIGURA

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Introduction

This article tries to plumb the hidden depths of Erich Auerbach's concept of figura in terms of modernity.

In *Mimesis* (1946), a masterpiece of comparative literature, Auerbach bridges the gulf between the Old and New Testaments through the mediation of the rhetorical concept of figura. Figura makes it possible for the two Testaments, separated by the lapse of time and languages, to establish a new reciprocal relationship of prefigurement/fulfillment; the stories of the Jewish Old Testament "prefigure" the events that follow in the Christian New Testament, and conversely the latter "fulfills" the former. Moreover, Auerbach effectively applies the ancient concept of figura to his analysis of the historical development of European literature from the latter half of the ancient period to the Middle Ages, which culminated in Dante's *La Divina Commedia*.

The ancient character Auerbach attached to figura has recently assumed a new dimension in contemporary discussion of culture, which has been led by some American literary critics, Edward Said and others, since the 2000s.

Said acknowledges the actuality of figura in terms of opening the enclosure of one culture — ethnic, national, and religious — toward negotiation with others. To illustrate this particular aspect of figura, Said highlights the fact that Auerbach, a German Jew, wrote a substantial part of *Mimesis* in Istanbul, the Islamic city where Auerbach lived in exile after fleeing Germany during the Second World War. Despite facing adversity, Auerbach achieved the considerable feat of presenting an extensive panorama of literary representations of the West. As suggested by Said, those three distinct cultural entities — Jewish, European, and Islamic — which have long been antagonistic to each other in many respects converged in a single scene in *Mimesis*. That is, Said views figura afresh in terms of sociality and modernity.

This reappraisal of figura recently has been further explored by two American cultural critics who seems to follow faithfully in the footsteps of Said's secular humanism or the recent trend of postcolonialist criticism of culture: Sarah Pourciau and Earl Jeffery Richards. These new American critics argue that behind the concept of figura lies Auerbach's profound sense of a crisis regarding either the leveling and erosion of traditional cultural values in the modern West (Pourciau), or the massive blow that the Holocaust delivered to the culture of European Jews, including Auerbach himself (Richards).

It is important to note the differences between the two interpretations of figura described above. For Pourciau, figura suggest the possibility of what we call "the logic and ethics of cross-cultural understanding." For Richards, figura provides a basis for exposing the injustices

committed by Europeans against the Jews throughout history. Thus, Auerbach's concept of figura stands at a crossroads, leading to a discrepancy between the moderate and radical approaches to the plurality of culture. Owing to the increased complexity in the interpretations of figura, it is in fact left to a broader political discretion to decide which side one should agree with. The author of this article concludes that, despite its inadequacy, Pourciau's argument of moderate mediation has more validity and opens up more possibilities for the future of cultural pluralism.

I.   *Figura and the Question of Modernity*

In *Mimesis* (1946), Erich Auerbach establishes a connection between the Old and New Testaments through the mediation of the literary concept of figura. Between these two texts, there are seemingly unbridgeable gulfs in terms of both time and subject matter. Although the New Testament authors were familiar with the Old Testament, these two texts came into existence separately across a gap of several centuries. Furthermore, the contents are totally different; the Old Testament is a collection of scriptures of Judaism, whereas the New Testament comprises a series of sacred texts of Christianity. Despite these discrepancies in time and content, Auerbach lays out a line of development from the Old to the New Testaments through a scheme whereby the Old Testament "prefigures" the New Testament and conversely, the latter "fulfills" the former. Auerbach writes the following:

> [Figural interpretation] "establishes a connection between two events or persons in such a way that the first signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second involves or fulfills the first. The two poles of a figure are separated in time, but both, being real events or persons, are within temporality. They are both contained in the flowing stream which is historical life, and only the comprehension, the *intellectus spiritualis*, of their interdependence is a spiritual act."[1] In practice we almost always find an interpretation of the Old Testament, whose episodes are interpreted as figures or phenomenal prophecies of the events of the New Testament.[2]

In this vein, figura is described as a form of synthesis, but the scope of the synthesis extends far beyond the Old and New Testaments. In the first chapter of *Mimesis*, Auerbach discovers the archetype of realistic representations in European literature in the stylistic antagonism between the eloquent, lucid narrative of the Homeric epics and the reticent, allusive storytelling of the Old Testament. Meanwhile, such stylistic antagonism corresponds to the cultural antagonism between Hellenism and Hebraism, both of which are generally acknowledged as historical roots of European civilization. Subsequently, the two kinds of antagonism further metamorphosed into a new stylistic opposition between *sermo gravis* (the sublime and elevated style) and *sermo remissus* (the low style) in the Latin classics. Such a series of antagonism, Auerbach continues, was eventually synthesized in the *Divina Commedia*, the greatest masterpiece of European medieval literature. Dante's lofty synthesis in the *Commedia*

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[1] Erich Auerbach, "Figura," in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.53.

[2] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans. William R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), p.73.

was, most noteworthily, made possible by the mediatory function of figura. Thus, the concept of figura played a particularly important role in the development of the religion and literature of Europe from ancient times to the Middle Ages.

As is clearly suggested even by this short overview, Auerbach assigns to figura the status of, as it were, a philosophy of history. His characterization of figura as such therefore might prompt a question: why did an originally rhetorical concept slide rather sneakily into a historical one? This question seems reasonably valid here because most of us naturally wish to draw a parallel between the Latin term *figura* and the English adjective *figurative*. Moreover, dictionaries of the English language usually define "figurative" as almost synonymous with "metaphorical." Figura therefore is perceived not so much as a concept of history, but rather as a strategy of rhetoric. Then, the aforementioned question thus raises its head: why does Auerbach ascribe a historical nature to figura — a term heavily loaded with rhetorical connotation?

This question has two possible answers and related explanations. One is a historical survey of the concept, and the other is a socio-biographical (from-a-perspective-of-the-"life-and-times") account with respect to Auerbach's career as a literary critic and Romance philologist of the twentieth century.

As for the historical development of figura, Auerbach's essay, straightforwardly titled "Figura" (1938), provides some basic facts. In classical antiquity, figura was regarded first and foremost as a concept of rhetoric. For example, Quintilian, a Roman orator and pedagogue, defined figura to be "a refined technique of expressing or insinuating something without saying it, in most cases of course something which for political or tactical reasons, or simply for the sake of effect, had best remain secret or at least unspoken."[3] Such a prehistory of figura was drastically altered by the Early Fathers of Christianity, who superimposed the rhetorical concept of figura on their biblical exegesis. Their methodology is usually called the "prefigurative interpretation." In a way, they attempted to create a historical narrative by searching for hidden consistencies between the Old and New Testaments, two distinct texts historically separated by both time and in content. To bridge such a historical gap, they had to necessarily employ figurative interpretations. In this particular aspect of the "figurative," the Early Fathers' historiographical attempts overwhelmed figura's pre-Christian nature as a rhetorical device.

So far, mostly so good; it is a steady approach to trace back the historical development of the concept of figura philologically. Nevertheless, it does not provide us with an adequate answer to the question of Auerbach's reasoning for his interpretations of the term.

In order to explore further why Auerbach placed such great emphasis to figura as a concept of history rather than of rhetoric, we must delve into the social and intellectual contexts of modern European history. This approach will be elaborated further through the rest of this article, but I intend to provide a brief overview here. With regard to the socio-biographical aspects surrounding Auerbach, there are two main issues: one is the influence of German historicism on Auerbach, and the other is a critical reappraisal of figura as a reflection on Jewish tradition and European modernity.

First, Auerbach, a leading authority on Romance philology in twentieth-century Germany, has been generally acknowledged to be an offspring of German historicism. German historicism originally took shape as a reaction to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, which was in

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[3] Auerbach, "Figura," p.27.

general disposed to neglect the historical aspects of humankind. Auerbach states that "the whole scheme [of German historicism] was outlined by Johan George Hamann in the 1760s, and its methodology was conceived for the first time by Herder. Its perfect philological expression was accomplished in the works of Hegel and its basis for praxis in those of the scholars of Romanticism."[4] In this development of modern German intellectual history, "the field in which I am engaged, Romance philology, is a small branch diverged from a large tree of Romantic historicism."[5] His own words here most eloquently represent Auerbach's academic background and orientations.

The next question concerns how the current of German historicism came to include the concept of figura. In response to this question, Timothy Bahti, one of the most active commentators on Auerbach, recently presented a new view that, considering its synthetic nature, the concept of figura can be broadly categorized as a form of dialogical logic similar to Hegel's concept of sublation.[6] Just like Hegel designed sublation as a part of his grand theory of human history, Auerbach subsumed the concept of figura into his own philosophy of history. Thus, the two paths — figura and modern historicism — cross at a single point of synthetic, dialogical sublation.

In addition, the scope of historicism extends beyond the boundary of German intellectual history. In Auerbach's case, the influence of Giambattista Vico's philosophy of history is crucial.[7] Vico, an eighteenth-century Neapolitan philosopher and rhetorician, is regarded first and foremost as a theorist of a modern hermeneutical interpretation of history. Vico argues that, since history, as opposed to nature, is essentially a human production, the cognition of history is also a human matter, one that is generally conducted through the agency of historical studies. Therefore, a historian's role, Vico continues, is to mediate the past and the present; a historian in the present reconstructs the past through his/her philological investigations. Such a structure of history in Vico's philosophy is quite similar to the synthetic nature of Auerbach's concept of figura in that the present reality is intermingled with the past reality through the mediation of a historian's imagination.

In sum, the fact that Auerbach's philology was heavily indebted to two modern historical lines of thought — German historicism and Vico's philosophy of history — suggests that the concept of figura encompasses a wide range of subjects and periods, and significantly exceeds the confines of both rhetorical oratory and biblical exegesis. The meaning, or potentiality, of figura for the contemporary study of culture should be sought for not only in the realm of pre-modern literature and religion, but also in the context of modernity.

Second, as a natural extension of figura's modern characteristics, there emerges a new view that Auerbach intended figura to be a reflection on modernity. To the best of my knowledge, this new interpretation was most powerfully, albeit rather simplistically, offered in the opening section of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983). In this well-known monograph on the origin and vogue of modern nationalism, Anderson pays special attention to a gaping

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[4] Erich Auerbach, "Vico und Herder," in *Gesammelte Aufsatze zur romanischen Philologie* (Bern: Francke Verlage, 1967), p. 223. The translation from the original is mine.

[5] *Ibid*., p. 223.

[6] Timothy Bahti, "Auerbach's *Mimesis*: Figural Structure and Historical Narrative," in *Allegories of History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp.141-42.

[7] Timothy Bahti, "Vico, Auerbach, and Literary History," in *Vico: Past and Present*, ed. Giorgio Tagliacozzo (Atlantic Highland, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1981), pp.97-114.

abyss between pre-modern and modern temporality. For the modern mind, time is perceived as being composed of homogeneous units — seconds, minutes, hours, days, years, and so on — thereby passing by regularly and straightforwardly from the past through the present to the future. For the pre-modern mind, however, time was not necessarily coordinated in such a "rational" or "scientific" manner. The past, the present, and the future were interpenetrated at the same time, and all of these temporal units were simultaneously experienced, with a sense of possible reversibility. To illustrate such a pre-modern consciousness of time, Anderson refers to the prefiguring-fulfillment characteristic of figura in *Mimesis*. Anderson writes:

> [Auerbach] rightly stresses that such an idea of simultaneity is wholly alien to our own. It views time as something close to simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present. In such a view of things, the word "meanwhile" cannot be of real significance... What has come to take the place of the medieval conception of simultaneity-along-time is ... an idea of "homogeneous, empty time," in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar.[8]

Together with Auerbach's *Mimesis*, Anderson briefly refers to Walter Benjamin's "Themes on the Philosophy of History" (1940), a formidably esoteric essay on the revelation of the past in the Jewish messianic tradition. Anderson compares the two literary critics' concepts in terms of historical consciousness, suggesting that Benjamin's messianic revelation of the past is structurally similar to Auerbach's figura. With their concepts, the two German-Jewish critics of culture equally aim at a temporal consciousness wherein a sort of amalgamation between the past and the present occurs.

While Anderson's view is rather hypothetical and destitute of any detailed textual analysis, it still seems to provide an important clue for developing the argument of this article. For such a reason, I will follow the view that Auerbach's concept of figura was designed as a reflection on Western modernity and I will elaborate further on this view through the rest of this article: initially, Auerbach might have formulated the idea of figura as an effective conceptual tool for a sweeping analysis of Western literary history, but he eventually dared to step out of the rigor of classical philology to undertake a critical appraisal of contemporary civilization. This claim might sound bizarre at least at this early stage, for, as far as we can judge from *Mimesis*, Auerbach strictly, or at least superficially, applies the analytic tool of figura exclusively to literary texts of the pre-modern period, mostly ancient and medieval. It is not that I insist that figura is a product of modern times. On the contrary, I argue that the very fact that figura is an ancient concept enables modern people to view their own experiences of modernity differently. I presume that, while inconspicuously nurturing such an ambitious design of criticism, Auerbach placed enormous importance to the concept of figura in *Mimesis*.

To demonstrate this hypothetical reading, it is crucial to see how Auerbach actually combines his inquiry into modernity with his philological practices. In exploring this theme, I will begin by referring to two recent studies on Auerbach by American critics of culture, Sarah Pourciau and Earl Jeffery Richards. Both critics acknowledge that *Mimesis* still has great appeal for contemporary readers, not so much because Auerbach attempted to grapple with the long-term, sweeping historical development of European literature, but because he sneakily injected

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[8] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), p.24.

an unvoiced critique of European culture and politics into the work. This type of new interpretation is based primarily on the fact that Auerbach wrote the most substantial part of *Mimesis* in Istanbul, an Islamic city where he was in exile for several years after fleeing from Nazi Germany. Starting from this bare fact, the two critics investigate the motivating force of *Mimesis*, which is either Auerbach's criticism of European modernity (Pourciau) or his conscious awareness of the Jewish identity and tradition (Richards).

II.   *Auerbach in Istanbul*

Let us begin with Sarah Pourciau, who examines figura in terms of modernity.[9]

The title of her essay, "Istanbul, 1945: Erich Auerbach's Philology of Extremity," concisely indicates the complex and multilayered nature of the problem. As mentioned earlier, Auerbach wrote a large part of *Mimesis* in Istanbul, where he found asylum in the 1940s. He impressively recollects the difficulties of those days in the famous postscript to *Mimesis*, lamenting most of all the fact that, along with being besieged by Islamic culture, he was restricted from accessing reliable sources of classical philology. Despite such adversity, or perhaps because of it, Auerbach accomplished the unprecedented feat in surveying the historical totality of European literature. While pinpointing the predicament of Auerbach in exile, Pourciau proposes a concept of "extremity," which comprises the following three distinct elements. First, "extremity" refers to the fringe of Europe, the city of Istanbul located at the "edge" of the West. Second, "extremity" also means Auerbach's "plight" that forced him into political exile. Third, and most importantly, "extremity" reflects the unique and unorthodox, albeit surreptitiously so, nature of *Mimesis*, a work of philology. A philologist is usually supposed to be abstemious about matters outside his immediate field, consequently being politically conservative. Nevertheless, Auerbach, an authentic philologist, audaciously smuggled a radical critique of modernity into *Mimesis*. Pourciau's concept of "extremity" is thus overdetermined.

Starting from this plurality of "extremity," Pourciau undertakes to uncover the underlying meaning of figura, particularly its encoded messages to Auerbach's twentieth-century contemporaries. Unfortunately, Pourciau's attempt to interpret the depths of *Mimesis* leaves much to be desired, but it does provide some helpful hints for the argument of this article. In any case, let us see the gist of her interpretation. Pourciau writes:

> [T] he figural paradigm turns out to encode, among other things, a 20th century philologist's response to the so-called crisis of values. Grounded in the rigorously provisional reality of a truly time-bound form, the figural stands alone in the European tradition as a viable source of real, historical meaning; it alone directs the trajectory of *Mimesis*, determines all interpretive value judgments, and justifies the opposition between Homer and the Hebrew Bible, for it alone transcends the binaries of modern experience in the struggle to join meaning and matter. The anachronism involved in reading a medieval form against the backdrop of a modern dilemma is the product of the perspectival method Auerbach unapologetically defends in "Epilegomena zu *Mimesis*," as the only intellectually

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[9] Sarah Pourciau, "Istanbul, 1945: Erich Auerbach's Philology of Extremity," in *Arcadia* 41.2 (2006), pp.436-60.

honest way of writing history.[10]

As Pourciau clearly and powerfully states here, figura's sphere of influence is by no means limited to the temporal frame of ancient religious history in which the Early Fathers of Christianity absorbed the doctrinal content of Judaism into Christian theology and history. It extends beyond hundreds years to the twentieth century, an age when Auerbach, faced with the crisis of emerging modern Western civilization, tackled through his philological studies conundrums of the century such as the leveling of cultural values and the disparity between meaning and matter. In this vein, Pourciau surmises that figura was designed not only as a literary apparatus for analyzing classical text but also as an unspoken remedy for malignancies Auerbach detected in contemporary European society and culture. As an illustration of such an implicit message of criticism, Pourciau cites the following passage from *Mimesis*. This paragraph is the last one of the final chapter. Auerbach writes:

> 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. And it is most concretely visible now in the unprejudiced, precise, interior and exterior representation of the random moment in the lives of different people. So the complicated process of dissolution which led to fragmentation of the exterior action, to reflection of consciousness, and to stratification of time seems to be tending toward a very simple solution. Perhaps it will be too simple to please those who, despite all its dangers and catastrophes, admire and love our epoch for the sake of its abundance of life and the incomparable historical vantage point which it affords. But they are few in number, and probably they will not live to see much more than the first forewarning of the approaching unification and simplification.[11]

In the original context of *Mimesis*, a phrase like "the unprejudiced, precise, interior and exterior representation of the random moment in the lives of different people" specifically refers to the modernist literature of the twentieth century, such as the experimental novels of Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust, which are the primary subjects of stylistical analysis in Auerbach's final chapter. In closing an extended analysis of Western literature, Auerbach reaffirms an Auerbachian sociology of literature, suggesting with a tinge of warning that the modernists' complex, multilayered method of representing reality could eventually lead to the "unification and simplification" of society and culture.

By focusing on the somewhat pessimistic tone that emanates from this particular passage, Pourciau proceeds into a deep, critical reading of *Mimesis* from her own perspective of "extremity." She is not satisfied with ascribing Auerbach's pessimism solely to the raw fact of his exile; her criticism never takes such a simple-minded and unsophisticated form. On the contrary, she meticulously gives a microscopic examination of Auerbach's remarks on twentieth-century matters that can be glimpsed throughout *Mimesis*, albeit only intermittently. Such repeated remarks, however scant they may be, Pourciau stresses, undoubtedly reflect Auerbach's deep sense of crisis, which potentially underlies every page of *Mimesis* as a basso-continuo, or leitmotif, and philosophically underpins a supposedly value-free book of philology.

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[10] *Ibid*., p.450.
[11] Auerbach, *Mimesis*., pp.552-553.

First and foremost among the points of intersection between the critique of contemporary civilization and classical philology is an antithesis of "legend" "and "history." As is widely known, in the first chapter of *Mimesis* Auerbach stylistically contrasts the "legendary" nature of Homeric epics with the "historical" one of the Old Testament as follows: "Homer remains within the legendary with all his material, whereas the material of the Old Testament comes closer and closer to history as the narrative proceeds."[12] As for the legend, "It runs far too smoothly. All cross-currents, all friction, all that is casual, secondary to the main events and themes, everything unresolved, truncated, and uncertain, which confuses the clear progress of the action and the simple orientation of the actors, has disappeared."[13] Thus, a particular trait of the legend is that both the form of narration and its contents are simplified. In contrast with such simplicity, "The historical event which we witness, or learn from the testimony of those who witnessed it, runs much more variously, contradictorily, and confusedly."[14]

As long as we literally follow this comparison, it appears that Auerbach differentiates these two types of literary representation with rigid impartiality. Pourciau, however, surmises that Auerbach surreptitiously declares history superior to legend. This surmise, Pourciau continues, can be substantiated by comparing two passages from the first chapter of *Mimesis*.

> [T] he difference between legend and history is in most cases easily perceived by a reasonably experienced reader. It is a difficult matter, requiring careful historical and philological training, to distinguish the true from the synthetic or the biased in a historical presentation; but it is easy to separate the historical from the legendary in general.[15]

In this first passage, it may be presumed quite fairly that Auerbach discriminates against legend in favor of history, thereby suggesting the importance of examining history critically. Such a presumption can be bolstered by a second passage, which includes Auerbach's direct reference to twentieth-century history.

> Let the reader think of the history which we are ourselves witnessing; anyone who, for example, evaluates the behavior of individual men and groups of men at the time of the rise of National Socialism in Germany, or the behavior of individual peoples and states before and during the last war, will feel how difficult it is to represent historical themes in general, and how unfit they are for legend; the historical comprises a great number of contradictory motives in each individual, a hesitation and ambiguous groping on the part of groups; only seldom (as in the last war) does a more or less plain situation, comparatively simple to describe, arise, and even such a situation is subject to division below the surface, is indeed almost constantly in danger of losing its simplicity; and the motives of all the interested parties are so complex that slogans of propaganda can be composed only through the crudest simplification — with the result that friend and foe alike can often employ the same ones. To write history is so difficult that most historians are forced to make concessions to the technique of legend.[16]

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[12] *Ibid*., p.19.
[13] *Ibid*.
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] *Ibid.*
[16] *Ibid*., pp.19-20.

Considering the fact that Auerbach placed these two passages on a single page, he might have been attempting to analyze stylistic characteristics of classical literature from the broader perspective of a critique of contemporary civilization. It is possible to draw a parallel between the two faces of Auerbach: one is that of a German Jew, who, facing the historical catastrophe of his native country, detests the perniciousness of the Nazis' racist demagoguery, and the other is that of an authority on classical philology, who catches the smell of something fishy about legend and its representational traits of unduly simplifying reality. Auerbach alludes to the importance of critically examining the knotty problem of legend and history from the standpoint of a "German-Jewish philologist" who was politically persecuted by the Nazis.

Such a deep reading might draw immediate criticism from some readers of *Mimesis*. This is so because, as far as the first chapter is concerned, Auerbach's reference to contemporary issues is strictly limited to this single page; moreover, the topic emerges somewhat abruptly. Given that condition, Auerbach's remark on Nazism can reasonably be read as nothing more than a momentary digression from his main subject, or as a mere sideshow. Pourciau, however, ventures to dismiss such an interpretation as naïve and superficial, instead proposing to see the whole situation in a reversed way: that Auerbach's covert aim was to make people more aware of the malaise of modern society.

The next question to be asked is how the foregoing series of disparities will become less glaring in their opposition, if not completely reconciled. To answer this question, Auerbach, a philologist, takes the historical approach to the utmost. Historically speaking, the initial and most fundamental antagonism between Hellenism and Hebraism — the one between the legendary nature of Homer's epics and the historical traits of the Old Testament — gradually evolved into a new form of synthesis during the subsequent development of Christian theology and literature, finally reaching a culmination in Dante's *Divina Commedia* in the Middle Ages. The pursuit and analysis of this developmental process — first, a stylistic division between the low and the high, and subsequently an amalgamation of the two — presumably is one of the highlights of the first half of *Mimesis*. What deserves particular attention here is that Auerbach deliberately ascribes this synthetic development of literary representation to the mediating power of figura. Meanwhile, if we turn our eyes to contemporary history, figura's power of mediation and synthesis can also have enormous potential for solving complex problems concerning the crisis of culture in the twentieth-century West. As the gulf separating the legendary from the historical, which seemed to be unbridgeable, was finally synthesized through the mediation of figura, so a contemporary version of that gulf, between two opposing forces such as meaning and matter, also can be bridged, or at least minimized. This prospect for eventual synthesis paves the way for critical philological intervention into broader social agendas, such as the leveling of traditional cultural values or the great profusion of harmful political propaganda. Pourciau concludes her ambitious argument about the impact of Auerbach's exile experience on his philology, especially on the underlying motive of *Mimesis*, by stating, as we saw earlier, that "the figural paradigm turns out to encode, among other things, a twentieth-century philologist's response to the so-called crisis of values."[17]

I have so far tried to be faithful to Pourciau's arguments and intentions, while drastically trimming their somewhat intricate details, thereby reconstructing her thoughts with emphasis on the mediatory function of figura. In concluding this section, I would point out that the merits

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[17] Pourciau, *op cit.*, p.450.

and demerits of Pourciau's reading nearly offset each other. Certainly, Pourciau provides a fresh perspective on the sociality latent in Auerbach's philology, especially on the mediatory function of figura. However, her argument remains less than fully persuasive, giving the impression of being sometimes unwarranted and sometimes overinterpreted. In short, the most serious problem is that Pourciau pays less attention to the problem of Jewishness than it deserves. As discussed earlier, Jewish culture, which Auerbach represented as "historical" as opposed to "legendary," was given high marks. Despite its stylistic allusiveness, the Old Testament still holds to historicity in its narrative, consequently making its ancient Jewish protagonists come alive at this moment in time. Consciously or unconsciously, Pourciau neglects to look at this specific aspect of Jewishness. All things considered, her argument might already have reached an impasse at this point. Let us then advance our own reading with the help of another critic.

III.   *Figura, Jewishness, and Creaturalism*

In this section, I will explore the theme of Jewishness that underlies the narrative of *Mimesis*. In doing so, I will depend primarily on a recent study by an American Romanist and literary critic, Earl Jeffery Richards.[18] The topic of Jewishness is nothing new; Pourciau calls attention to Auerbach's exile experience, which she argues paved the way for his critique of Western modernity. In the light of Jewishness, however, Pourciau eventually turns out to be more concerned with the geographical and psychological effects of foreign exile from Europe than with any substantial influence of Jewish culture. In contrast, Richards puts forward an interpretation that focuses directly on Auerbach's Jewish origin, drawing the conclusion that there is an antagonism between Jewish culture and figura.

Although Richards shares with Pourciau a view on the interplay between modernity and the depth of *Mimesis*, he prominently highlights Jewishness, contrasting it with figura. For Judaism, the view that the doctrines of Judaism were finally incorporated into those of Christianity through the mediation of figura means, after all, nothing but that the wretchedness and misery of Judaism — its own history and customs — were rejected as inauthentic, or at best belittled. If we adopt such a drastic paradigm shift, a completely different view of figura will emerge: although Auerbach attached enormous importance to figura in *Mimesis*, he might have done so only as a mere pretense or cover-up. Richards infers that Auerbach's mounting concern for the disadvantages or hardships of contemporary Jews was carefully and effectively camouflaged by his apparently value-free analysis of figura from a philological standpoint. In reality, however, Auerbach wished to convey a hidden message of solace and encouragement to his contemporary fellow Jews, who were faced with the real threat of genocide in the 1940s. We can see the gist of his interpretation in this passage:

> Auerbach analyzes Paul's allegory as the beginning of the attempt in the west to deny not just the truth of Jewish history but any truth whatsoever to Jewish history. The first-century controversy in the early church whether Christians should follow Jewish customs assumed a new contemporary poignancy in light of the growing Nazi threat to Europe's

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[18] Earl Jeffery Richards, "Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* as a Meditation to the Shoah," in *German Politics and Society* 19.2 (2001), pp.62-91.

Jews.[19]

With the phrase "Paul's allegory" in the first sentence above, Richards in fact refers to Auerbach's concept of figura, thereby drawing a parallel between Paul and Auerbach. On the one hand, Paul, who was one of the Apostles and one of the co-authors of the New Testament, was a converted Jew. While thus standing at the intersection between Judaism and Christianity, Paul audaciously reinterpreted the Old Testament for the convenience of the New Testament, strategically incorporating the former's Jewish contents into the doctrines of Christianity. On the other hand, it was Auerbach, a German Jew of the twentieth century, who shed a new light on ancient Biblical exegeses, attempting a consciously modern reinterpretation of the whole process with a new term, *figura*. In other words, it was not until Auerbach tactically diverted the originally rhetorical concept of figura into an analysis of the historical development of biblical exegesis that the significance of Paul's hermeneutical manipulations fully came to light from a cross-cultural perspective, between Judaism and Christianity. Paul and Auerbach thus hold parallel positions, though separated by almost two thousands years.

Although he indicates some affinity between Paul and Auerbach, Richards focuses on differentiating the types of effects the concept of figura had exercised on the two ancient religions. For Christianity, figura by no means has a negative implication: the mediatory function of figura made it possible for Paul to establish a correlation between the Old and New Testaments, and, more importantly, Christianity fundamentally holds a dominant position over Judaism, in the manner in which Christianity "fulfills" Judaism. For Judaism, however, the same condition has a completely different meaning. To the Jews, Paul's view that Judaism "prefigures" Christianity is nothing but a maneuver to demean or endanger the historical and cultural identity of Judaism proper; and accordingly, Paul's conceptualization of figura, which permits such a kind of slander on Judaism, can be conceived of as an ideological apparatus for splitting the two religions, or even stirring up antagonism between them. To make matters more serious and complicated, such a negative characterization of figura for ancient Judaism unexpectedly becomes all the more poignant in mid-twentieth-century Europe as the threat of the Holocaust for the Jews grows increasingly imminent.

Given the predicament the Jews had thus far incurred, especially in the middle of the twentieth century, Richards continues, it can be reasonably inferred that Auerbach was driven to seek for a grounding of Jewish identity in some locations other than figura. Auerbach finally discovered an answer in the concept of "creaturalism." By the term "creaturalism," as opposed to "figura," Auerbach primarily refers to the kind of literary representations that reflects the "immediacy" and "historicity" of the creatures of God, namely human beings. Auerbach also explains creaturalism in terms of the process by which the antagonism of literary styles, between the high and the low, had been gradually synthesized in the development of ancient Western literature.

The prototype of creaturalism goes back to the story of Christ's incarnation in the Gospels. Despite being a man of noble birth, Christ never lost "immediate" and close contact with those at the bottom of his society: the Son of God was, as a matter of fact, born in a small barn, humbly learned to work as a carpenter, and associated intimately with people of the lower classes such as criminals, prostitutes, and the poor in general. What can be observed here is the

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[19] *Ibid*., pp.68-69.

way Christ, the Son of God, experienced the same standard of living as the commoners. That is, in the representations of the Gospels, the high mingles with the low prototypically; the eternal, sublime ideal of God actually materializes in the tangible, historical world of humans in which common folk simply exert themselves in their modest, everyday lives. Such a combination of the high and the low in the representations of the Gospels became a starting point for stylistic division and synthesis in the historical development of European literature from late ancient times to the Middle Ages, processes that finally reached their culmination in Dante's *Divina Commedia*. In summary, the representational traits of creaturalism primarily consist of noblemen's "immediacy" and intimacy with common people's everyday experience and a stylistic medley of high and low elements in the development of "history."

Creaturalism in *Mimesis* is indeed a fresh viewpoint. It is true that most commentators on *Mimesis* have paid unerring attention to Auerbach's concern with common people's everyday lives as described in literature, but they have surmised that this concern stemmed primarily from Auerbach's theoretical inclination to explore the sociology of literature; that is to say that Auerbach attempted to analyze the history of Western literature from a standpoint outside the pure aesthetics of literature. Richards, by contrast, returns to the inside of literary text and reveals deeper grounds underlying Auerbach's alleged interest in sociology. Richards argues that *Mimesis* was motivated not only by Auerbach's sociological concern but also by his "existential" desire. Since Auerbach, a Jewish philologist exiled into the Islamic world, was deeply afflicted with cultural deracination, he was, above all, eager to restore immediate contact with the liveliness and diversities of human exuberance. One possible way to satisfy such a spiritual aspiration through philological investigations was to focus on the animated scenes of the holy Christ's intimate association with commoners and thereby theorize a series of episodes as creaturalism. Richards thus gives prominence to the concept of creaturalism, which, in comparison to the concept of figura, seems to have received less attention than it deserves.

After indicating the implied importance of creaturalism, Richards proceeds to ask how the concept of creaturalism specifically relates to Jewishness. Since Auerbach remains unduly reticent about this theme, one can only guess at his intention by "reading between the lines." Richards has in mind a passage like the following:

> The poor beggar Odysseus is only masquerading, but Adam is really cast down, Jacob really a refugee, Joseph really in the pit and then a slave to be bought and sold. But their greatness, rising out of humiliation, is almost superhuman and an image of God's greatness. The reader clearly feels how the extent of the pendulum's swing is connected with the intensity of the personal history — precisely the most extreme circumstances, in which we are immeasurably forsaken and in despair, or immeasurably joyous and exalted, give us, if we survive them, a personal stamp which is recognized as the product of a rich existence, a rich development. And very often, indeed generally, this element of development gives the Old Testament stories a historical character, even when the subject is purely legendary and traditional.[20]

The last sentence — which states that despite the "purely legendary" origin of the Old Testament, its stories assume "a historical character" — seems to be a strong hint concerning the interplay between creaturalism and Jewishness. Still, the suggested amalgamation of legend

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[20] Auerbach, *op. cit.*, p.18.

and history in the Old Testament remains elusive and opaque here, for Auerbach is somewhat reserved in articulating how his theorization of creaturalism in literature specifically relates to his interest in Jewishness. To understand Auerbach's implication better, therefore, I will split the single proposition of Auerbach's last sentence into the two distinct conceptual entities of "legend" and "history," then examine separately how each concept relates to creaturalism.

First, let us consider the creatural nature of the legend: how do the legendary lives of ancient Jewish patriarchies relate to creaturalism? The central figures in question are the three Jewish patriarchies, those of Adam, Jacob, and Joseph. They were all visited unexpectedly by outrageous misfortune, but they never gave up, and they finally achieved glorious victories after long struggles. Such triumphant stories of Jewish legendary ancestors, Richards argues, typify creaturalism, because in each case, an arduous and vigorous struggle embodies both misery and glory, or the low and the high, which, as mentioned earlier, is one of the main characteristics of creaturalism.

Second, one must examine the historicity of creaturalism and Jewishness: how does creaturalism intervene in the reconciliation of the assumed opposition between legend and history? Richards speculates that Auerbach compares the ancient legends to the Holocaust; Auerbach indirectly analogizes the calamites and hardships his own ancestors had to endure to the catastrophe and disaster of the Holocaust, an unusual occurrence for contemporary Jews in Europe. To those Jews who underwent the enormous hardships in the Holocaust, the legendary stories about the great experiences of their ancestors, who stood up against terrible hardships and finally overcame them, provides splendid consolation and encouragement. The ancient legends of the ancestral Jews thus revive in the twentieth century; despite their legendary and ahistorical nature, the stories of the Old Testament also assume a historical perspective.

Richards, who emphasizes the concept of creaturalism as opposed to that of figura, concludes his series of arguments as follows:

> The radical nature of Auerbach's approach lies in the fact that he uncovers the recuperation of everyday reality as the single greatest element of continuity in western literature and that he uses this as a veiled allegory for the destruction of Europe's Jews.[21]

Elsewhere, this conclusion is paraphrased by stating that creaturalism was intended "as an antidote to Pauline figuralism."[22] We should note that on this particular issue of "antidote to ... figuralism," Richards sharply splits from Pourciau, who takes the side of figura. It seems that most readers of *Mimesis* have thus far paid so much attention to figura that they have not noticed the hidden importance of creaturalism.

Besides highlighting the significance of creaturalism, Richards also provides other clues for reading the depths of *Mimesis* in terms of Jewishness. Here, I will briefly mention one of these clues, the theme of *Akedah*, the name often given to the story of Abraham, who was summoned to offer up his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice to God by binding him to the altar. Since the Middle Ages, European Jews had often been faced with genocidal massacres and persecution by Christians. When their very existence was at stake, they invariably referred to the story of Akedah, hoping for spiritual consolation and salvation. In *Mimesis*, which was written in the midst of the Holocaust, Richards argues, the theme of Akedah was re-enacted, although

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[21] Richards, *op. cit.*, p.70.
[22] *Ibid.*, p.69.

camouflaged, in a manner faithful to the Jewish tradition.

The primary contrast between the two representational styles in the first chapter of *Mimesis* is inconspicuously re-enacted in its final chapter. In the first chapter, Auerbach analyzes two particular scenes selected from Homer's epics and the Old Testament: a scene of Euryclea's washing of Odysseus' feet and that of Abraham's Akedah. This famed coupling of the two texts, according to Richards, is unobtrusively relocated to a new pairing of two twentieth-century modernist novels: Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Marcel Proust's *Du côté de chez Swann*, respectively. From the former, Auerbach extracts the episode of Mrs. Ramsay taking measurements of her son's socks; the washing of Odysseus' feet is equated with the measurement of socks. From the latter, Auerbach selects a scene in which an unnamed hero, presumably a Jew, who suffers from slightly morbid sensitiveness, fears being reproached by his authoritarian father. The hero of Proust's novel is analogized to Isaac, Abraham's son; the two protagonists share a similar situation in that both are subjected to the domination of patriarchy. By juxtaposing the two sets of mutually contrasting representations (four in total), and especially by drawing attention to the two anecdotal prototypes of Jewish patriarchy — ancient and modern stories, that is, those of the Old Testament and Proust's novel — Auerbach tries to resurrect the theme of Akedah, and evoke the agony and misery of the Jews among his contemporaries, or at least those who were entitled to the succession of Jewish spiritual tradition and therefore capable of recognizing Auerbach's intended allusion.

As briefly outlined above, Richards' reading of *Mimesis* features a combination of archetypical and political criticisms, a sort of meta-criticism that investigates the sociopolitical backgrounds of *Mimesis* from the perspective of the prototypical sufferings of the Jews.

In the preceding two sections, I have examined two recent interpretations of *Mimesis*. The two American critics, Pourciau and Richards, both delve into the depths of *Mimesis*, focusing on how Auerbach, an austere philologist of Western classical literature supposed to be deliberately abstemious about intervening into contemporary matters, in fact smuggled his own criticism of Western modernity into *Mimesis*. Both critics refreshingly shed new light on some underlying motives of Auerbach's philology. However, as for the specifics of their arguments, they go their own separate ways. On the one hand, Pourciau interprets figura in term of Auerbach's awareness of crisis, or pessimism, over the past and future of Western civilization. On the other hand, Richards sees figura as an enemy of Jewish identity, discovering Auerbach's real message in the concept of creaturalism.

Our next step is to make a judgment of our own: which interpretation has more validity? This is the task I will undertake in the rest of this paper, but before proceeding to the details, I will make two preliminary remarks.

The first problem shared by the two critics is that the common basis of their arguments is rather unsubstantiated; their interpretations are constructed on the somewhat unwarranted assumption that *Mimesis* is motivated by Auerbach's profound concern for the erosion of modern society. Auerbach's scholarly writings, if viewed as a whole, consist mostly of philological works that are characteristically stoic about straying into contemporary matters. The rigorousness of his academic style is, as mentioned repeatedly, impressively consistent. Even in *Mimesis*, which seems to be an anomaly of such abstentionism or consistent philological style, Auerbach discloses his critical remarks on European modernity in a deeply reserved manner. Readers of *Mimesis* stumble across outbursts of Auerbach's inward thoughts only intermittently. Such restriction in the text may induce its interpreters to succumb to the

lure of over-interpretation; whenever they come to pivotal moments of their arguments, Pourciau and Richards alike invariably do nothing but resort to highly speculative assumptions, such as "Auerbach must have an idea of ..." Given such a flaw, it seems that the socially oriented critics of culture who endeavor to unearth a correlation between figura and modernity in *Mimesis* have already done their utmost, reaching a theoretical impasse.

The second problem is that the two critics fundamentally disagree as to the assessment of figura. Is figura a principle of hope for overcoming the leveling of ideas and values, or the crisis of culture, in modern society? Otherwise, is it a cultural apparatus that enables Jews to hand down the collective memories of the hardships their ancestors went through from generation to generation? Because the negotiation between Western and Jewish societies has a long and complex history, it would be premature to conclude that Auerbach simply gave precedence to one of the two sides. The Holocaust, surely one of the most horrible and tragic incidents in human history, was foremost among a series of unfortunate occurrences spawned by the tangled interactions between Westerners and Jews. More specifically and importantly, Auerbach himself was buffeted by the turbulent seas of his time and found himself in the midst of the Holocaust. In the light of such historical conditions, it might be tentatively concluded that the two critics see the back and the front of the same coin, from their own viewpoints. Nevertheless, another kind of problem persists. Pourciau reads in the synthetic and mediatory function of figura some possibilities for the studies of culture. Meanwhile, Richards consistently has a negative view of figura, instead emphasizing the neglected importance of creaturalism. The dilemma between figura and creaturalism is a question that cannot be overlooked.

What I can suggest, at least at this stage of my argument, is that it would be expedient not to launch a direct, frontal attack on this question. Primarily for reasons of space, I will develop my own reading by examining this question from a broader, albeit somewhat roundabout, perspective. In the following sections, I will present two points of view. One is the history of the reception of *Mimesis* in the United States, and the other is an aspect of cultural pluralism in *Mimesis*.

IV.   *The Reception History of Mimesis in the United States: From Optimism to Pessimism*

In this section, I will look at how *Mimesis* has been received thus far. Since its publication in 1946 (the original in German) and in 1953 (the translation into English), how have scholars and critics, especially those who belong to university departments of humanities, read *Mimesis*? The reason I pose this question is that by reviewing the reception history of *Mimesis*, I will be able to make clear the characteristic features of both Pourciau's and Richards' new readings in contrast with previous ones, and consequently, suggest how the implied gap between the two new readings can be bridged, or at least explained.

As for the history of the reception of *Mimesis*, Paul Bové, an American literary critic, has offered an important and intriguing analysis that might be labeled a "genealogy of *Mimesis*."[23] Bové carefully and thoroughly examines the process by which *Mimesis* has been "canonized" in the field of humanities, especially in comparative literature, thereby revealing an ideology that

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[23] Paul Bové, "The Last of the Latecomers (Part 1): The Critical Synthesis of Erich Auerbach," in *Intellectuals in Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp.79-130.

lurks behind such a process of "canonization." As can be inferred easily from his somewhat combative tone, Bové seems to have undergone a baptism of post-structuralism. As is often the case with scholars and critics who espouse such an academic *modus operandi*, Bové rather exasperatingly maintains his own abstruse style, which is perplexing enough for those unfamiliar with, or critical of, the piles of obfuscatory jargon that fill literary and cultural theory. The following summary of his argument is thoroughly paraphrased in my own vocabulary.

Tracing the reviews of *Mimesis* back to the early 1950s, Bové discovers that, in the period just after its publication, words of praise for the book were far outnumbered by those of criticism. Most of the early reviewers in the English-speaking world harshly criticized Auerbach for indiscriminately amalgamating apparently incompatible aspects of literature, for example, the social and collective nature of the literary public versus the artistic individuality of the literati. With the sole exception of René Welleck, an experienced scholar of comparative literature, reviewers utterly failed to see Auerbach's ambitious objectives, such as a sociological analysis of literary production and a pessimistic critique of modernity in general. Thus, *Mimesis* did not initially receive the steadfast and prestigious recognition it now enjoys worldwide.

After passing through these early years of unappreciative criticism, *Mimesis* has gradually been recognized as an important work, and eventually as part of the "canon," of literary studies in American academe. The reason for this change can be explicated by looking not so much inside *Mimesis* itself but rather at the ideology of American literary studies in the 1950s. More specifically, in this case, the term "ideology" refers to antagonism between scholars who esteem positivist and historicist approaches to literary works (the history-of-literature school) and those who focus on the scrutiny of a text without considering any historical facts or backgrounds whatever (the school of New Criticism). Scholars and critics belonging to both schools had actively competed with each other on the American literary studies scene, eventually coming to a standstill as early as the latter half of the 1950s. This standoff finally came to a compromise through the mediation of *Mimesis*, which provided in a single volume an exquisite equilibrium between historical and ahistorical analyses. As a result, *Mimesis* came to be widely applauded as a groundbreaking work by the proponents of both literary disciplines as well as by a wide range of other readers. Auerbach's masterly synthesis was, Bové argues, foremost among the reasons behind the critical acclaim for *Mimesis* in this second stage of its reception history.

Despite, or precisely because of, such a situation, twentieth-century Americans could not properly grasp the pessimism latent in *Mimesis*. Their inability was due largely to the historical fact that America was near the zenith of its material prosperity. In addition, and as a rather cynical view, American scholars and critics intentionally or unintentionally averted their eyes from Auerbach's pessimism to their best advantage; they shrewdly exploited the authority of Auerbach, who was widely regarded as embodying the authenticity of European intellectual tradition, for the purpose of gaining their own ascendancy, or of enjoying their exhibitionism and desire for self-display, in American academe. It is a well-known fact that, in twentieth-century America, numerous academic fields made great strides, fueled by the contributions of a group of outstanding intellectuals and scientists exiled from Europe who settled in the United States. Conversely, even in the postwar period, American-born academics still suffered from an inferiority complex in relation to their European counterparts. In order to overcome their sense of being second-rate, it appeared easiest to ride the coattail of Auerbach's authority and prestige by simply beating the drum for *Mimesis*. The motive lying behind the American canonization

of *Mimesis* was incompatible with Auerbach's deep pessimism. That is the gist of Bové's genealogical analysis, in my own words.

Moving on from a critical survey of Auerbach's reception, we can now fully clarify the positions occupied by Pourciau's and Richards' recent readings. Scholars and critics, especially those of comparative literature, until recently had read *Mimesis* almost exclusively in terms of optimism; only recently have they have come to acknowledge its pessimistic nature. In other words, the messages concealed between the lines of *Mimesis* — the critique of modernity — have at long last come to be rightly recognized from the standpoints of pessimism and social criticism.

Behind such a transition of interpretation lies the turbulence of social and cultural change that the world experienced during that period. That change entailed a decline in the West's superiority and domination. The political-cultural hegemony the West had maintained in the modern era has increasingly come to be questioned. The identity of Westerners, which used to be consistent, self-evident, and powerful (at least to themselves), has gradually shown signs of faltering. What has emerged is an urgent need to take into account the cultural "other," which had long been virtually ignored. As far as the cultural criticism of the last two decades is concerned, students of culture have consciously examined cultural matters in terms of contacts and negotiations between the West and the non-West. This shift of interest is closely related to a major upheaval in the humanities within American academe as well as elsewhere in the world; after the 1980s, the static nature of structuralist methodology was gradually displaced by the dynamics of post-structuralism. Scholars and critics have become more concerned with observing cultural matters not as autonomous, invariable texts but rather as closely tied to the external contexts of texts, such as politics, economics, and history. As a result, they have also explored the depths of *Mimesis* in terms of sociality; the theme of "Auerbach in Istanbul" thus clearly reflects tendencies of contemporary cultural criticism.

Another issue related to the reception history of *Mimesis* is that the meaning of its latent pessimism can be better understood by comparison with *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), written by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. These two books have similar backgrounds, in that both were written by German-Jewish intellectuals who were exiled from their homeland to the United States at almost the same time. People received the two books, however, in a strikingly contrasting manner. As for *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, people, especially proponents of academic leftism, immediately and aptly recognized its pessimistic message and harsh critique of modernity: the Enlightenment in the West inherently involved brutality and violence from the very beginning of a mythical age. On the contrary, people have paid less attention to the pessimism of *Mimesis* than it deserves. This was partly because, as emphasized repeatedly earlier, readers of *Mimesis* — mostly those belonging to the field of literary studies — have had difficulty in seeing *Mimesis* as Auerbach's unique reflections on modern Western civilization, and partly because, as will be discussed shortly, a bright, beaming spirit of tolerance, mediation, and understanding resonates throughout *Mimesis*. The somewhat sanguine reception of *Mimesis* among American academics bolstered a widespread, even canonical, image of *Mimesis* and Auerbach among the general reading public: through his meticulous, detailed analysis of literary styles and representations, Auerbach arduously but successfully accomplished an unprecedented feat of surveying the totality of Western literature. The acclaim, whether academic or popular, eventually had the effect of obscuring the concealed pessimism of *Mimesis*.

Turning our eyes from America to Japan, similar problems can be observed. Japanese scholars and critics of comparative literature and culture have thus far emphasized the importance of *Mimesis* exclusively in terms of Auerbach's basic methodology of textual analysis, which is usually called *explication de texte* in French.[24] Some of them, who were greatly inspired by Auerbach, have achieved a number of outstanding successes by absorbing and digesting the method of *explication de texte* in their own ways.[25] I have no reluctance in acknowledging this particular aspect of "success." Nevertheless, we must also face up to another aspect of reality: they have almost nonchalantly addressed themselves to the optimistic aspects of *Mimesis*, consequently failing to listen to the pessimistic tones that Auerbach murmured quietly. Still, even they, I believe, will surely admit that the circumstances surrounding Japanese academe, especially those of the humanities, have rapidly and drastically changed in recent years. A wide range of people have increasingly and naturally come to recognize phenomena such as "globalization" and "co-existence with other cultures" as among Japan's, as well as among the world's, most pressing problems of the twenty-first century. Given such changes, a different picture of *Mimesis* will surely contribute to the advance of cross-cultural studies in Japan as well as worldwide.

V.   *Concluding Remarks: From the Question of Modernity to an Inquiry on Cultural Tolerance*

In the preceding section, I located the American reception of *Mimesis* in a transition from optimism to pessimism. This characterization, which is indebted in part to Bové's genealogical analysis and in part to my own interpretation, seems reasonably plausible. Nevertheless, a problem still remains in understanding the thought of Pourciau and Richards. What was Auerbach's ultimate objective: a critical reflection on modernity or a return to the Jewish tradition? Which conceptual apparatus — figura or creaturalism — has greater validity and potential for the future of cultural criticism?

My tentative conclusion is that today's readers of *Mimesis* do not necessarily need to choose between either of these two alternatives. I believe that one of the important teachings *Mimesis* provides even now is not so much that people should take either side hastily, but rather that they should discard such a simple-minded dichotomy. Albeit in a quiet voice, Auerbach calls for us to approve of consciously vacillating among conflicting claims and views. This can be paraphrased as a kind of "philosophy of tolerance," which permits the co-existence of different values and ideas through people's interactions and negotiations. In Auerbach's case, the ideal of cultural tolerance took shape between remembering Jewish traditions and pursuing the philology of Western literature. Taking a critical look at Western modernity from the standpoint of a persecuted Jew is by no means separable from recollecting the hardships his ancestors had to endure throughout thousands of years. *Mimesis* is a work in which two different cultures — Western and Jewish — were intermingled inextricably and miraculously. In this respect, Richards, who pronounces that creaturalism is "an antidote to figura," seems to

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[24] As for the details of the method of 'explication de texte and Auerbach, see Herbert Lindenberger, "On the Reception of Mimesis," in *Literary History and the Challenge of Philology*, ed. Seth Lerer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp.195-213.

[25] Sukehiro Hirakawa, *Japan's Love-hate Relation with the West* (Folkestone, Kent, England: Global Oriental, 2004).

have gone a little too far. Meanwhile, although Pourciau's argument has a serious problem in terms of its neglect of Auerbach's Jewishness, she also aptly captures the mediatory function of figura that works between a series of antagonisms — Christianity and Judaism, legend and history, meanings and matters, and so on. By thus focusing on figura, Pourciau rightly suggests a possible way in which students of contemporary cultural criticism can tackle Auerbach's works afresh. In sum, foregrounding an antagonism between figura and creaturalism is not necessarily a productive way of reading *Mimesis*.

In concluding this article, I will reaffirm my conclusion by returning to the text of *Mimesis*. In passages like the following, Auerbach focuses on the Apostle Paul as a theorist and practitioner of figura. Auerbach writes:

> [The movement to embark upon the tremendous venture of missionary work among the Gentiles] 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.[26]

He also writes:

> Paul and the Church Fathers reinterpreted the entire Jewish tradition as a succession of figures prognosticating the appearance of Christ, and assigned the Roman Empire its proper place in the divine plan of salvation. Thus while, on the one hand, the reality of the Old Testament presents itself as complete truth with a claim to sole authority, on the other hand that very claim forces it to a constant interpretive change in its own content; for millennia it undergoes an incessant and active development with the life of man in Europe.[27]

These two passages make it clear at once that Auerbach emphasizes Paul's "middle-of-the-roadism," or "moderate liberalism." Although Paul was of Jewish origin, he audaciously formulated a strategy of figura, which separated the Old Testament from original Jewish traditions and contexts. Paul's objective in using this strategy was neither an apologetics of Judaism nor a justification of Christianity's dominance over Judaism. Rather, Auerbach claims, it was a posture of holding the middle ground between the two religions and cultures. By the concept of figura, both Paul and Auerbach — the former, a progenitor of tolerant figuralism and the latter, a successor who revived Paul's ideal and tradition two thousands years later — preach an ethic and logic of positioning oneself in a chasm of differences.

I will further reinforce this conclusion of my own by recourse to some illuminating remarks by Edward Said, an eminent scholar of comparative literature and culture who powerfully embodies Auerbach's ideals of cross-cultural understanding in the field of contemporary cultural criticism. Perhaps keeping in mind the passages from *Mimesis* cited just

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[26] Auerbach, *op. cit*., p.48.
[27] *Ibid*., p.16.

above, Said remarks on Paul's conceptualization of figura and Auerbach's resuscitation of it. Said writes:

> Auerbach's Jewishness is something one can only speculate about since, in his usual reticent way, he does not refer to it directly in *Mimesis*. ... It is not hard to detect a combination of pride and distance as he describes the emergence of Christianity in the ancient world as the product of prodigious missionary work undertaken by the apostle Paul, a diasporic Jew converted to Christ. The parallel with his own situation as a non-Christian explaining Christianity's achievement is evident, but so too is the irony that, in so doing, he travels from his roots still further. Most of all, however, in Auerbach's searingly powerful and strangely intimate characterization of the great Christian Thomist poet Dante — who emerges from the pages of *Mimesis* as *the* seminal figure in Western Literature — the reader is inevitably led to the paradox of a Prussian Jewish scholar in Turkish, Muslim, non-European exile handling (perhaps even juggling) charged, and in many ways irreconcilable, sets of antinomies that, though ordered more benignly than their mutual antagonism suggests, never lose their opposition to each other.[28]

Said's claim here can be summarized in two points. First, there is a possible correlation between two facts: the fact that the Apostle Paul, a key figure who took the initiative of propagating Christianity throughout Europe, was in fact "a diasporic Jew converted to Christ" and the fact that Auerbach, who dynamically described the total image and history of the development of European literature, was actually an exiled Jew. Second, and more important, the correlation underscores the greatness of Auerbach, who, while going back and forth among several distinct cultures — European, Jewish, Islamic, and even American — endeavored to "handl[e] and "juggl[e]...irreconcilable...sets of antagonism." Elsewhere in the same essay, Said states that "Auerbach seems to be negotiating between the Jewish and European (hence Christian) components of his identity."[29] Here, special attention should be paid to the series of verb phrases, such as "handl[e]," "order more benignly," and "negotiat[e]." Evidently, Said's eyes are focused on a particular aspect of *reciprocity* indicated by such phrases. Said thus projects onto an image of the philologist Auerbach the ethics and logic of contemporary cross-cultural understandings. This reading by Said seems to be fully congruous with his reputation as a representative of postcolonial intellectuals who have lived through the predicament of culture in the late-twentieth-century world. In this respect, contemporary students of culture, including me, who are afflicted with the impasse of scholarship, will be able to gain some promising clues and possibilities for future directions in research. By discovering in the rhetorical concept of figura a social orientation for cultural tolerance and pluralism, I will tentatively conclude my argument.

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[28] Edward W. Said, "Erich Auerbach, Critic of the Earthy World," in *Boundary 2* 31.2 (2004), p.20.
[29] *Ibid*., p.23.