
**Literary Criticism
&
the Structures
of
History**

**Erich Auerbach
&
Leo Spitzer**

by
Geoffrey Green

Foreword

by
Robert Scholes

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*University
of
Nebraska Press
Lincoln &
London*



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permanence and durability of the Committee
on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity
of the Council on Library Resources.*

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Green, Geoffrey, 1951-

*Literary criticism and the structures of history,
Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer.*

*Half title: Literary criticism and
the structures of history.*

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Auerbach, Erich, 1892-1957. 2. Spitzer, Leo,
1887-1960. I. Title.

PN75.A9G74 801'.95'0922 82-2654

ISBN 0-8032-2108-8 AACR2

Foreword

This is a book a little outside the academic norm. The myths of academic objectivity—"disinterest" in the Arnoldian sense—die hard, as do the myths about the total separation of critical and creative writing. Yet Geoffrey Green has had the temerity to study two scholar-critics as if they were simply writers—men of letters caught up in history and to a great extent the products of it. He shows us in this unusual study how Erich Auerbach's and Leo Spitzer's major contributions to literary study are linked to their personal histories and the larger history of their times, which made them both exiles from their homelands and the academic environments that might have nurtured them more easily but with less stimulation.

Not that Green's study is largely concerned with biographical detail. It isn't. It is a work of interpretation, devoted to the major critical texts of Auerbach and Spitzer, reading them in the light of the personal and historical circumstances from which they emerged. Auerbach's *Mimesis*, for instance, the most influential single work produced by either writer, is interpreted by Green in the context of German discussions of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, illustrated by excerpts from a sermon preached by Cardinal Faulhaber at Munich in 1933. Similarly, in interpreting Spitzer's work, Green traces the persistent strains of mysticism, combined with a comfortable sense of self-worth, that make the fundamental procedures of Spitzer's critical practice more of a personal mode and less of an adaptable methodology than is usually acknowledged.

An investigation into the careers of these two distinguished exiles

is not simply a case of criticism scrutinizing itself, however, for Auerbach and Spitzer were more than literary critics. They were humanists with an abiding concern for the ways in which humanistic study might contribute to culture. There is a powerful ethical strain in their work, which marks them—along with their prodigious learning—as scholars of another time and place. Green's major achievement in this study is the tracing of this ethical strain in each career, the isolation of the special quality in each man's work, and the situation of this individuality in relation to the historical moment that shaped it.

The men, the moment, the milieu—this is a traditional study in its methodology. Only the subject matter is unusual: the treatment of scholars, of philologists, as “writers.” But writers they were, because they have had and continue to have readers, and their influence in their adopted country has been strongly felt. It is time for this influence to be better understood. Geoffrey Green's serious and insightful pioneering study constitutes an excellent beginning on this task.

ROBERT SCHOLES

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Introduction

"If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come,
it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come:
the readiness is all."

Hamlet (Act 5, Scene 2)

"Look beyond the shadowy scope of time, and, living once
for all in eternity ... find the perfect future in the present."

Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Birthmark" (1843)

Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer were two members of a distinguished German quartet of modern scholars who specialized in Romance philology. Along with Karl Vossler and Ernst Robert Curtius, they were the principal practitioners of German Romance philology, a discipline "inaugurated by Uhland and Diez," and "rooted in German historicism, a movement whose successive proponents from Herder to the Schlegels and Jacob Grimm, were committed to the idea of an historical development manifested in the individual *Volksgeist*."¹ As a group, the four exerted a significant influence on European literary studies. But in response to nazism, both Auerbach and Spitzer emigrated to the United States. Their presence enriched the American critical environment and helped change the way we think about literature, literary criticism, and the historical process.

Auerbach and Spitzer adhered to an expansive conception of

philology as the premier branch of scholarship embracing all historical fields of knowledge. Whereas philosophy considers the nature of laws that are timeless and everlasting, philology has as its terrain the conditional and particular aspects of historical reality. In this, they carried on Vico's distinction: "Philosophy contemplates reason, whence comes knowledge of the true; philology observes that of which human choice is author, whence comes consciousness of the certain."²

Their intellectual tradition had its roots in German historicism, which, according to Auerbach, emanated "from the so-called Storm and Stress group of the 1770's, from the first works of Herder and Goethe and their friends; later from the Schlegel brothers and the other German romanticists"; historicism is "the conviction that every civilization and every period has its own possibilities of aesthetic perfection; that the works of art of the different peoples and periods, as well as their general forms of life, must be understood as products of variable individual conditions, and have to be judged each by his own development, not by absolute rules of beauty and ugliness."³

Another influence on both scholars—closely related to German historicism and developing as well from Romanticism—is the tradition of *Geistesgeschichte* ("history of spirit"). The term *Geist*, according to Spitzer, includes "all the creative impulses of the human mind (e.g., feelings)." It emphasizes synthesis over analysis and centers on the principle that "an idea [is not] detachable from the soul of the man who begot or received the idea [or] from the spiritual climate which nourished it." *Geistesgeschichte* focuses on "the totality of the features of a given period or movement which the historian tries to *see as a unity*—and the impact of which . . . does in fact amount to more than that of the aggregate of the parts." Jakob Burckhardt, Wilhelm Dilthey, Georg Simmel, Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch were all, in Spitzer's view, noted exponents of *Geistesgeschichte*.⁴

The tradition of *Geistesgeschichte* encourages the historian to find an integral concordance among the artistic, cultural, scientific, and historical realms of man's activities. Such an enterprise echoes Vico's

call for “the ideal history of the eternal laws which are instanced by the deeds of all nations” rather than “the particular history in time of the laws and deeds” of any one nation. Vico’s emphasis on an “ideal eternal history” based on the “natural law” and history of “the peoples,” as well as his insistence on a “universal republic of letters” led many adherents of historicistic *Geistesgeschichte* (including Auerbach and Spitzer) to recognize Vico as an important ancestor predating its roots in German Romanticism. According to Isaiah Berlin, Vico “uncovered a species of knowing not previously clearly discriminated, the embryo that later grew into the ambitious and luxuriant plant of German historicist *Verstehen*—empathic insight, intuitive sympathy, historical *Einfühlung*, and the like.”⁵

The common intellectual background shared by the four men did not prevent a change in approach that occurred as a result of the advent of Hitlerism. Auerbach and Spitzer—themselves in movement from Germany to Istanbul to the United States—embraced the principles of *becoming over being*: literary history was an evolutionary process in time. Vossler (1872–1949) and Curtius, remaining in Germany, emphasized the fixed and timeless nature of literature; in Curtius’s words, “continuity became more important to me than actuality.” He noted that “we no longer feel it incumbent on us to justify the ways of God to man.”⁶

A brief examination of the career of Curtius (1886–1956) will help provide clarification of the divergence among the four scholars. The Alsace locality of his birth with its Franco-Germanic culture offered him an early experience of Europe that transcended nationalistic values. Although trained as a medievalist under the instruction of Gustav Gröber (whose positivistic and historicistic concerns helped pioneer the conception of Romance philology in the twentieth century), Curtius achieved his initial reputation as an authority on European modernist literature: his engaging essays contained original interpretations of modernistic literary works at a time when few readers were able to comprehend their operational principles. Knowledgeable about contemporary philosophical trends, and

maintaining personal acquaintances with many of the notable literary figures of the period, Curtius was viewed as a literary critic whose explications of the works of particular authors of various nationalities were meant to help engender a pan-European humanistic atmosphere.

The social and political disruption in Germany prompted Curtius to produce a remonstrative tract against what he believed were the self-destructive and antihumanistic tendencies of the German culture (*Deutscher Geist in Gefahr*, 1932). But with the outbreak of war, Curtius returned to the past and his philological training; throughout the war, he researched the Latin literature of the Middle Ages. The result, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1948) is one of the seminal works of literary scholarship in our time. He investigated *topoi* (the designs of order in antiquity that were incorporated—with the breakdown of social and cultural denominations—into language as rhetorical functions and appeared in literature as stock formulations). Curtius utilized *topoi* in an effort to establish the continuity of European culture and literature from antiquity to the present age. With the world again at peace, Curtius's work was applauded by nations who—although previously antagonistic—were ardent for affirmation of a universal humanism.

Curtius emphasized the degree to which his own work, like the development of the literature he studied, remained thematically coherent. "Life," he believed, ". . . goes beyond itself in order to participate in something that is no longer life."⁷ Thus, his writing was unified by his conception of the process of literary evolution as hermetic and irremovable, changeless and eternal—"something that is no longer life." Such a vantage point stresses what prevails: Curtius's lifelong advocacy of a Europe united by its common literary antecedents and by those placid and enduring humanistic values that dominated its civilization.

Diminished by this approach of stability is the sense of man's existence as a historical drama: the manner in which life stands before us in all of its immediacy as a perpetual process of present

occurrence. From this motile perspective, man and his literature are subsumed in the emergent dynamic of historical change. Curtius's work would be depicted (in the words of Benedetto Croce) as one man's "act of comprehending and understanding induced by the requirements of practical life."⁸ Such a mode of analysis in regard to Curtius makes several allusions possible. His Alsatian origins may have wielded an effect on his commitment to the unity of the French and German cultures. Modernism may have exerted an appeal for Curtius because his sensibility was resistant to nationalism and its boundaries. The Nazi regime in Germany and the European war may have represented, for Curtius, the demolition of his harmonic ideals. Finally, it is possible that Curtius's return to the Middle Ages as a subject for inquiry constituted an attempt at denial of the violent and destructive world at war—a denial that was transformed by the resumption of peace into the most sublime sagacity.

While Curtius and Vossler, under the duress of history, sought as their goal the determination of an aloof and absolute truth, Auerbach and Spitzer, also in response to history, strove to attain that literary process which would realize, in Américo Castro's words, "a form of conversation, a living companionship with those who in one way or another have left behind them a living expression of their lives. . . . The historian . . . confronts lives that are in the process of *doing*, that are trying to communicate with, or obtain something from, other lives."⁹

It was for this reason that Auerbach and Spitzer reminded Curtius of his fruitful presence in Germany during the Second World War. Similarly, Spitzer, in criticizing Vossler's interpretation of Jewish themes in sixteenth-century literature, included this rebuke: "But should [Vossler] not have forgotten his clever transitions, when faced with the plight of Israel in the Germany (his Germany) of 1938, a situation no less critical than that of 1553?"¹⁰

These were scholars whose works of literary criticism were aroused and stimulated by the structures of historical change. But for Auerbach and Spitzer, this interaction with history attuned them in an

extraordinary way to the manner in which literature and history are profoundly interrelated. Auerbach's account of their experience is signal: "The most priceless and indispensable part of a philologist's heritage is still his own nation's culture and language. Only when he is first separated from this heritage, however, and then transcends it does it become truly effective. We must return . . . to . . . the knowledge that the spirit [*Geist*] is not national."¹¹

As writers-in-exile, Auerbach and Spitzer existed in a world of cross-culturation; they functioned in a context of transformation. They were compelled to reckon with their own artistic and intellectual antecedents, with the cultural migration they were experiencing. They created works of literary criticism that situated themselves in the most complex and torrid regions where societies confront each other, fictions merge with societies, conceptions become actions, and images become words. They unceasingly attempted to probe the nature of their identities as authors, the validity of their critical tradition in exile, and the essential conceptual space that existed for a writer who was striving for nothing less than to imprint the mores of his artist's individual creative society on the collective society-at-large.

Both Auerbach and Spitzer were literary critics and historians. From their distinctive perspectives, they aggressively sought to formulate a configuration for literature that would be in accordance with the dynamics of history. As a result of their emigration from Europe to the United States, they drew on the traditions and intellectual resources of two historical cultures in order to investigate the properties of Western literary evolution. Thus, to consider their work is to encounter again the literary and historical past that forms the basis for all present inquiry.

Each man conceived his task as the creation of immediate expressions about what is past, or passing, or to come. That body of criticism, enveloped in immediacy, has become frozen in a doctrinaire past: their work has never been evaluated according to their individual estimation of it. One approach toward reappraising the

work of Auerbach and Spitzer is to focus on their own emphasis on historical process and change. Historical relativism amid the contingencies of spiritual continuity, historical and linguistic evolution, generic development and alteration, historical and literary structure: these persistent themes serve to underline that aspect of movement and flux which characterized both men's careers—namely, cultural migration during a time of historical and social crisis. As authors and critics, they were concerned with literature, but outside those roles, they could not (nor did they wish to) confine their criticism to literary texts; their interests extended to politics, religion, history, ideology. Their work must be returned to the context and climate of its composition. Only then, with a resuscitated sense of their historical intentionality, can the process of our own assessment be undertaken.

The following pages will, I hope, help to illuminate the concerns and priorities, both literary and historical, of Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer, which are at the center of our own intellectual pursuits.

Acknowledgments

The idea for this study originated with one portion of my doctoral dissertation. I appreciate the help of the American Council of Learned Societies whose grant-in-aid enabled me to undertake new research that developed and expanded the original idea into the present volume. The following individuals read all or part of the manuscript and contributed valuable suggestions: Jackson I. Cope, Leslie A. Fiedler, René Girard, Frank Kermode, Marcus Klein, and Marjorie Perloff. I would like to thank all those friends whose spirited conversation on a variety of topics helped me to refine my thoughts on literary criticism and the historical process.

I owe a different sort of debt to my parents for their constant encouragement and love. I am obliged to all my family for their warmth and fellowship. Finally, I am grateful to my wife, Marcia, who is always there for me. Her presence makes everything possible.

Erich Auerbach

When Erich Auerbach died in 1957, the world lost a distinguished scholar. Many academic journals mourned his passing; they referred to his impressive contributions in Romance philology, and to his expertise in medieval studies, Latin antiquity, and Christian symbolism. The implication was that a venerable elder statesman had passed away, a man whose literary output had long been completed. But at his death Auerbach was a man of only sixty-four years. He had not begun to write until he was thirty-seven. He had been actively immersed in new projects, studies, and deliberations.

With the passing years, his critical stature increased. He was cited as one of the greatest literary scholars of the century, one of a remarkable group of brilliant German scholars—Karl Vossler, E.R.Curtius, and Leo Spitzer—all of whom had concentrated on Romance philology.¹ Central to all assessments of Auerbach, however, was the notion of the particular isolated quality of his investigations: he had completed several important and intricate textual explications of Dante; he had explored the development of realism as it evolved through various literary periods; and he had clarified the conception of Christian figural interpretation, demonstrating its influence during the medieval period.

But never has his work been evaluated according to his own estimation of it: "My purpose is always to write history." His studies have never been considered according to the unifying principles Auerbach had in mind. Comparing his work to that of Vossler, Curtius, and Spitzer, he wrote: