

Auerb'Ark

In the opening chapter of his most celebrated work on realism in European literature, Erich Auerbach brings forward a comparison between the *Odyssey* and the Old Testament. He is himself in a good position to do so, living in Istanbul, being a Jew on a run from Nazi Germany, not only an interesting geographical position then between Greek and Israel, but also a rather interesting psychological blend of personal odyssey and diaspora. In his comparison Auerbach brings forward the example of Ulysses's scar recognized by his old maid at his return. He then explains how the flash back accounting on the boar hunt accident which provoked the scar when Ulysses was young, is related as some kind of omnipresent narration bringing light to every aspect, living nothing unsaid and most of all no ambiguity which can be subject to interpretation.

The Biblical episode of Abraham ordered by God to sacrifice Isaac is instead accounted as a rather decontextualized narration in which much is left mysterious and subject to interpretation. At this point of the chapter, Auerbach seems to grow rather indignant about the vertical and authoritarian imposition of universal history present in the Old Testament. At first sight, this operation, under a psychoanalytic perspective, could be seen as somewhat of a manifestation of the Oedipus complex where the author kills the father, the authority as latter post-modern authors seems to so successfully undertake. Yet, this moment of perceivable indignation it is probably justifiable under the circumstances in which Auerbach himself was living, victim of the Nazi authority and their restricted view of history. As a matter of fact, the Jewish traditional culture would not allow an interpretative argument to prevail over another like in a Nazi authoritarian context, but rather be a way to constantly generate infinite arguments. Soon after, in fact, Auerbach moves forward bringing in a better light the Old Testament and describing some more positive features like the psychology of the elder characters which is not present in the Greek epic and distinguishing the first epic as legendary while the second as historical.

Further on in the book Auerbach brings forward another literature example which is also particularly related to his state as an expat. The example is that of the French author Stendhal, who, like Auerbach, had to live in exile in Italy after a very successful life in the ancient regime and Napoleon army. This biographical emphasis is only brought forward rather late in the text and Auerbach seems to bring the reader to immerse himself into the actual narration of one of Stendhal's novels, *Le Rouge at le Noir*. He does so by introducing large chunks of the actual novel. This operation can be seen as a method useful for the reader to immerse himself into the actual atmosphere

and climax, as later he would account on another French author, Honoré de Balzac who uses realism by providing an immersive detailing of the context. In addition, this reproducing of whole chunks of literature examples can be also seen as a form of sampling. Under this light, Auerbach himself can be seen a Biblical character, a Noah, as if the whole book itself was some sort of Ark undertaking. This is again particularly the case giving the ever changing social and political situation in which Auerbach found himself, just like Stendhal one hundred years before. The Noah Ark metaphor to describe Auerbach's operation can be further related to his relation of Balzac's operation, the *La Comédie Humaine*, yet another attempt to sample all characters of human society. Auerbach himself stresses the fact that Balzac's main inspiration came from zoology. One may then start to think of realism as a practice of sampling a reality that is threatened to extinction by the social circumstances, as it has been also the case of the neo-realist movement rising out of World War II.