Chapter 34

Vassilis Lambropoulos (1953–)

from “The Rites of Interpretation,”
The Rise of Eurocentrism (1993)

Readers of Mimesis will remember the well-prepared and touching comparison in chapter 1, where the two basic types of literary representation in Western culture are dramatically contrasted. The scene of Odysseus’ recognition by his old housekeeper Euryclea in the Odyssey is examined in great thematic and stylistic detail, and then interpreted against a parallel reading of the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis. The wide variety of distinct features exhibited in the two texts is organized in two corresponding sets of diametrically opposed character and tone. These sets are then seen as concise pictures of the worldview expressed in the respective works, and are used as the basis for a broad outline of the Homeric and the Biblical systems of thought. At the end of the chapter, the two types are set forth as the starting point for the investigation of European literary representation that the rest of the book conducts through the centuries, from antiquity to modern times.

All this is scrupulously explored and narrated in painstaking philological fashion. Passages are selected carefully and read thoroughly, distinctions are made with an informed eye on stylistic detail, and differences are established with discriminating attention to the particular aspects and the overall pattern of the texts. Both works are considered as epics, but their qualities are found to differ in such a fundamental way that they express (and allow for) opposing modes of understanding and of literary writing. Erich Auerbach (1892–1957) states that he chose to elaborate on this opposition because it operates at the foundations of Western literature, and therefore must be posed at the beginning of his study. But his presentation immediately raises questions. Mimesis (1946) does not have an introduction: there is no first, separate section to present its purpose and describe its approach. Instead, the work begins in medias res: “Readers of the Odyssey will remember the well-prepared and touching

Reworking the beginning of Erich Auerbach’s essay, “Odysseus’s Scar” (see Chapter 9), Vassilis Lambropoulos, C. P. Cavafy Chair in Modern Greek and Professor of Classical Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan, argues that Auerbach, rather than comparing and contrasting two modes of interpretation, privileges what Auerbach casts as the Biblical mode.

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scene in book 19, when Odysseus has at last come home” (Auerbach 1953: 3). It begins with a first chapter which, like the rest, bears a neutrally descriptive title, “Odysseus’ Scar,” and immediately proceeds to conduct a close reading of a classic text. Only after several pages does it become clear that it deals with two texts, rather than one, that it seeks to establish the origins of Western mimetic modes, and that it functions as an introduction to the whole volume. Thus the title is deceptive: while it seems to promise a treatment of a Homeric passage, the chapter is as much about Abraham’s sacrifice as it is about Odysseus’ scar. It appears, then, that the book is introduced in a surreptitious manner. The suppression of the character of the piece and of its second major topic are closely linked: what at first glance looks like a first chapter and a discussion of the Odyssey proves to be an introduction and a comparison of Homer with the Old Testament.

The basic opposition, which the essay establishes but the title does not acknowledge, is posited and developed in a long series of dichotomies, purported to articulate the distinctive features of the Homeric and the Biblical style: external–internal, presence–absence, unity–disconnectedness, totality–fragmentation, illuminated–obscure, clarity–ambiguity, foreground–background, simplicity–complexity, stability–fermentation, serenity–anguish, being–becoming, legend–history. In all these binary oppositions, the first member refers to the Homeric world and the second to the Biblical, while each polarity indicates the antithesis and clash of the two worldviews and mimetic modes. Auerbach argues that the two sets of categories indicate contrasting ways of thinking and dictate contrasting ways of understanding them: each has to be comprehended in its own terms. Consequently, he insists: “Homer can be analyzed . . . but cannot be interpreted” (13), while “the text of the Biblical narrative . . . is so greatly in need of interpretation on the basis of its own content” (15). Auerbach refrains from explicitly defining his terminology; but from the basic sets of categories it may at least be inferred that analysis (which applies to the Homeric) is more of a description of simple incidents, surface meanings, and direct messages, while interpretation (which responds to the Biblical) uncovers hidden meanings, implied messages, and complex significances. This is not the place to discuss the critical validity of such a distinction. It is more important to see how the approach called “interpretation” describes Auerbach’s own method of reading literature.

Auerbach is faithful to his position when he reads the scene from Genesis in that he conducts an in-depth, penetrating interpretation which seeks to elucidate all its dimensions. As exemplified in this application, interpretation is the search for an ultimate explanation of both meaning and purpose. It tries to uncover the hidden, obscure, silent, ineffable, multiple meanings of a text, promising and at the same time threatening, retrievable yet always elusive, under the thick layers of language. It also tries to explain the purpose of it all, to describe the overall plan, to specify the final direction toward which everything is moving. In this part of his investigation, Auerbach is consistent. But he does not show the same consistency in his approach to Homer. For although he argues that the Greek epic allows only for analysis, his discussion exhibits all the unmistakable signs of an interpretive reading: it presents the hidden complexity of the incident with Euryclea, traverses successive layers of significance, exposes invisible assumptions, and finally builds on it a whole theory about Homeric mimesis. Interpretive understanding is again his guiding motive, since he