ANTIQUITY IN DARK TIMES: CLASSICAL RECEPTION IN THE THOUGHT OF THEODOR ADORNO AND ERICH AUERBACH

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Abstract

Erich Auerbach (1903-1957) and Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) were two of the many German Jewish intellectuals who left National Socialist Germany in the 1930s. Recent scholarship within Classics has paid attention to the critical readings of Homer’s *Odyssey* that both men produced in exile, that is, the first chapter of Auerbach’s *Mimesis, the Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946) and the first excursus of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) written by Adorno in collaboration with Max Horkheimer. This dissertation investigates, through the notion of ‘exile’, how the critical reception of antiquity operated in the wider thought of Adorno and Auerbach. I seek to show how Auerbach and Adorno develop powerful critical positions in articulating their alienation from the particular forms of philhellenism that had anchored German philology and philosophy.

This dissertation falls into two halves reflecting the manner of Adorno and Auerbach’s engagements with classical antiquity. The first half examines Auerbach and Adorno’s direct receptions, that is, their readings of Homer. Chapter One investigates how Auerbach adduces a Judeo-Christian notion of the sublime and thus challenges the criteria by which Homer was held up as an aesthetic ideal. Through Adorno’s notion of ‘epic naïveté’, Chapter Two shows how the Frankfurt thinker reads the *Odyssey* as an aesthetic object and therefore as a potential resource of liberation, as well as the *Grundtext* for the barbarism of Western civilization.

The second half of this dissertation examines Adorno and Auerbach’s responses to the philhellenic organisation of scholarly methods. Chapter Three argues that Auerbach reconfigures the notion of *Weltliteratur*, replacing Goethe’s original formulation of the Greeks as the paradigm for this concept. Chapter Four examines the philosophical consequences of Adorno’s choice of ps. Aristotle’s *Magna Moralia* for the title of his 1951 collection of aphorisms *Minima Moralia*. I show how Adorno frames an ethic of homelessness, as a response to the violence of modernity, through recourse to an image of damaged Hellenism.

This dissertation argues that Adorno and Auerbach provide a dialectical model of classical reception that is deeply sensitive to the political conditions in which the very idea of antiquity is formulated.
For my mother,

Sakalakalavathy Manickam
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It seems churlish to fail in enumerating the many friends beyond the academy who have brought great joy, wisdom, and comfort to my life. In that case, I give my final thanks to my family. Priya Umachandran is the other (better) half of my soul. Our parents have given me such a precious gift in her, my sister and my strength. What’s more, they made a home in London escaping war and genocide in Sri Lanka. They filled it with books and music and food, where curiosity was cherished and discipline was rewarded. These are the resources that have kept my back tall in a world that is not organized to value the intellect of a brown woman. I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my mother: I miss her every day.
Philosophy, Philology, and Philhellenism

Dark times…are as such not identical with the monstrosities of this century which indeed are of a horrible novelty. Dark times, in contrast, are not only not new, they are no rarity in history…

Hannah Arendt, Preface to *Men in Dark Times*.1

This dissertation is concerned with the particular shape of the thought of Erich Auerbach and Theodor Adorno as a response to the darkness of their historical moment. In exile from Europe, Auerbach and Adorno took up significant intellectual endeavours that established them as foundational figures for the study of literature, history, and philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century and beyond. In the latter half of the 1940s, both men positioned classical antiquity prominently in their critical projects. I seek to understand the manner and motivation of their turns to classical antiquity. In doing so, I examine how Auerbach and Adorno grappled with darkness of the ancient past and of their present.

* * *

Erich Auerbach was born in Berlin in 1892 and had lived a rich and tumultuous life prior to the intellectual achievements for which he is best known. He trained in jurisprudence at Heidelberg in 1913 and served in the German military with distinction in the First World War. Switching fields, he earned his doctorate in Romance Philology at the University of Greifswald and served as a librarian at the Prussian State Library in Berlin. Auerbach had established himself with the

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1 Harcourt, Brace and World, New York NY. 1968 ix.
publication of *Dante: Poet of the Secular World* (1929). The 1933 Nuremberg laws effectively made it impossible for Auerbach to continue working as professor of Romance Philology at the University of Marburg. Having been ousted from his position in 1935, Auerbach moved to Istanbul, joining a number of German intellectuals at the Turkish State University, including fellow Romance scholar Leo Spitzer. During this period Auerbach collected and wrote the material that became *Mimesis: the Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946). Auerbach moved to the United States in 1947: he held a position at Pennsylvania State University before a brief stint at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Princeton in 1949. In 1950 Auerbach moved to Yale and was Sterling Professor until his death in 1957.

Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno was born in 1903 in Frankfurt. He had established an early interest in philosophy through his friend Siegfried Kracauer, as well as in music, studying at the Hoch Conservatory in Frankfurt. These twin interests in music and philosophy shaped Adorno’s intellectual world. In 1928, Adorno submitted research on Søren Kierkegaard as his Habilitation which became his first book *Construction of the Aesthetic* (1933). Its publication coincided with the day that Hitler seized power. By this point, Adorno had already known Max Horkheimer for over a decade, since their first meeting in a seminar in which Horkheimer had given a paper on the thought of Edmund Husserl. Ten years Adorno’s senior, Horkheimer became director of the Institute of Social Research in 1931 and helped Adorno establish himself intellectually by giving him the opportunity to publish essays in the Institute’s journal, *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. Adorno moved to Merton College, Oxford in 1934 and then to New York in 1938. Reunited with Horkheimer in 1941 in California, the
Frankfurt pair developed their style of philosophy that blended sociological method and cultural criticism. The fruit of this collaboration was *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947). Adorno returned to Germany in 1949 and held a post as Professor of Sociology at the University of Frankfurt. After Adorno and the other members of the Institute returned to Europe, they were central to the project of rebuilding Germany’s postwar intellectual life, to the point where they could be seen as establishment figures by their students rather than fierce critics of culture.

This dissertation focuses on the thought and work of Adorno and Auerbach in their respective periods of exile, that is, for Adorno the period 1938-1949 and for Auerbach, 1935-1956. The term ‘exile’ is primarily an actors’ category and therefore orients how I have read and understood the work they produced in this period. Exile was not only an experience of physical dislocation but also intellectual and spiritual displacement. I seek to show that Adorno and Auerbach used exile as a metaphor for the estrangement from German culture that National Socialism had forced upon them. I am particularly concerned with philhellenism as the particular strand of the German cultural imaginary in relation to which Auerbach and Adorno express this estrangement. I show how Auerbach and Adorno develop powerful critical positions in articulating their alienation from the particular forms of philhellenism that had anchored German intellectual life.

Whilst the cultural dynamics of German philhellenism have long been recognized, it has emerged as a particularly fruitful line of research within classical reception studies in the last twenty years.\(^2\) Adorno and especially Auerbach have drawn scholarly

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\(^2\) Butler, E.M. *The Tyranny of Greece Over Germany: A Study of the Influence by Greek Art and Poetry Over the Great German Writers of the Eighteenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge
attention, including from classicists, because of their provocative readings of the *Odyssey.* This dissertation argues that the critical reception of Greek antiquity in the thought of both men extends beyond their readings of Homer. I show how Adorno and Auerbach, through their interrogations of how philhellenism has shaped key concepts in the philosophy of history and in literary studies, forge new ways of thinking about how modernity should figure itself in relation to the ancient past.

In the first half of this dissertation, I investigate Auerbach and Adorno’s subversive philological readings of the *Odyssey.* Since F.A. Wolf’s groundbreaking *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795), German classical philology had developed its modern scientific method through investigating Homeric poetry. Even when these investigations were

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conducted comparatively, the place of Homeric poetry was guaranteed as a historical touchstone at the origin point for culture or as an aesthetic paradigm. The first half of this dissertation demonstrates that Adorno and Auerbach attend philologically to the style and form of Homeric poetry. Furthermore, I show that both men are attuned to the political valences of approaching classical antiquity through philology. Therefore I argue that both men take up the philological method strategically, engaging not only in the critique of the ancient text itself but also in the interrogation of the cultural position of Homer as the privileged object and symbol of philhellenism.

In Chapter One, “Auerbach’s Sublime and the Counter/Exemplarity of Homer”, I investigate the critique of philhellenism in Mimesis: the Representation of Reality in Western Literature. I show how Auerbach constructs an argument that philhellenism had skewed the terms in which literature, ancient and modern, was evaluated. Through formulating a Judaeo-Christian notion of the sublime, Auerbach displaces Homer as the paradigm for the Western literary tradition. In Chapter Two, “Homeric Naïveté in the Dialectic of Enlightenment”, I show how Adorno undertakes an analysis of Homeric style in order to make a philosophical argument about how violence has been encoded into the foundational elements of Western civilization. Where the polemical impetus of Adorno’s reading has been recognized, I argue that we should see Adorno as an attentive reader of Homeric poetry, sensitive to its beauty and it potential to generate a politics of freedom.

The second half of this dissertation examines Adorno and Auerbach’s responses to how philhellenism had organized scholarly methods. In Chapter Three “The World in Auerbach’s Mouth” I show how Auerbach revises the notion of Weltliteratur. Goethe
had originally formulated this concept with the ancient Greeks as its aesthetic model. I investigate Auerbach’s motivations for replacing the Greeks with the paradigm of the Middle Ages, specifically because it was a ‘non-national’ moment in the history of European culture. Therefore I argue that Auerbach makes a critical intervention into the philosophy of history and the philhellenic formulation of the idea of the German nation. Chapter Four, “Not at Home Among the Greeks: the Critical Reception of Antiquity in *Minima Moralia*”, is concerned with how Adorno disentangles a German sense of cultural belonging from philhellenism. This chapter emphasizes the politics of receiving antiquity implied in Adorno’s choice of ancient intertext. I argue that Adorno mobilizes ps. Aristotle’s *Magna Moralia* to illuminate the inadequacy of Greek antiquity as the anchor for national identity. Furthermore I show how Adorno makes the case for the critical estrangement from Greek antiquity as the mode in which philosophy after the Holocaust can cope with history.

Adorno and Auerbach did not formulate *Antike* in identical terms. Adorno’s idea of classical antiquity primarily referred to the Greeks: it was formatted by a history of philosophy in which Greek thinkers and ideas, from the pre-Socratics to Aristotle, dominated almost exclusively. Auerbach’s notion of antiquity, however, was directed away from the Greeks by his investment in the literary traditions that grew out of Latin. Much more than Adorno, Auerbach was compelled to shift the emphasis within his ideas about antiquity towards moments of chronological, as well as cultural, alterity. Therefore we see throughout his oeuvre attention to post-classical antiquity, especially the thought of the early Christian theologians such as Augustine. Auerbach’s notion of antiquity is in some ways more historical than Adorno’s: an
investment in the tradition of Latinity as it developed into the vernacular languages of Europe allowed Auerbach to track cultural shifts and developments at the small scale.

The two halves of this dissertation demonstrate that Adorno and Auerbach engage with antiquity through its texts and as a vast metaphor whose field of reference could encompass the world. I argue that in prising philology and philosophy from the crucible of philhellenism, Adorno and Auerbach pull Antike apart from the inside. Furthermore, I have organized this dissertation in such a way as to reflect how I have understood Adorno and Auerbach’s readings constitute the critical reception of antiquity. Thus, these four chapters together argue that the critical reception of antiquity must be dialectical. Both men produce recuperative responses to antiquity, as well as pessimistic critiques. Without the former impulse, one can only abandon antiquity: neither Adorno nor Auerbach adopts this approach, recognizing that the critical engagement with antiquity allows them to think through the foundations of their disciplinary structures and methods. Without the latter impetus, one risks culpable innocence with respect to how antiquity has been culturally and politically mobilized. Thus, I have taken Adorno’s critique of language as instrumentalized thought to heart: I give the last word of the dissertation over to his mobilization of the Winged Victory of Samothrace, a potent image of severely damaged Hellenism as the image of Weltgeist. The image of this headless, winged statue is the culmination of the argument that the critical reception of antiquity must be dialectical, that is, open-ended, political, and attuned to the relationships between history, power, and violence. This is the mode of engaging with antiquity through which Adorno and Auerbach responded to the darkness of their moment – thus I have understood their acts of reception, as we stand in the darkness of our own.
Part One: Direct Receptions
Chapter One: Auerbach’s Sublime and the Counter/exemplarity of Homer.

In 1948, Erich Auerbach published *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländische Literatur* (hereafter *Mimesis*). Its first essay is “Die Narbe des Odysseus” (“Odysseus’ Scar”) Auerbach’s opening salvo in a brilliant, and brilliantly idiosyncratic, narrative of the history of European literature. Calling into question the exclusively paradigmatic status of Homer, Auerbach insists that the Old Testament exemplifies ‘realism’, that is, the mode of representation that *Mimesis* tracks. This chapter returns with fresh eyes to Auerbach’s challenge. Specifically, it explores the politics of Auerbach’s move of rendering Homer as a counterexample, rather than example, of Western literature. Here I argue that this radical re-evaluation of Homer is articulated through the cultural politics of the ‘sublime’.

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6 De Jong, I. “After Auerbach: Ancient Greek Literature as a Test Case of European Literary Historiography” *European Review*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2014, 116–128 elucidates the problem facing comparative criticism of Homeric poetry: “any scholar who like Auerbach wants to compare Homer and the bible will have to look both east and north of Helicon, to both Near Eastern and Indo-European contexts, and will have to take up a position in the debate of historical versus typological” 118. Auerbach’s approach to Homer continues to provoke classicists in part because it draws from both sides of this debate, as diachronically historical (the comparison of Homer with later works of literature) and explicitly typological (Homer as the example of classicism).

7 Auerbach pivots from *Odyssey* 19 to *Genesis* 22.1 by appearing to concede to the notion that Homer’s cultural status is incontestable: “Die Eigentümlichkeit des homerischen Stils wird noch deutlicher, wenn man einem ebensfalls epischen Text au seiner anderen Formenwelt ihm gegenüberstellt” *Mimesis* 9. Trask translates *Eigentümlichkeit* as ‘genius’ though it would be more in keeping with the analysis that Auerbach goes on to offer translate this term with more ambivalence. Auerbach’s advertisement of a comparison between two equally weighted texts is a sleight of hand – a manoeuvre that this chapter identifies that Auerbach deploys more than once in reading Homer. The project of translating *Mimesis* clearly warrants further research as Porter, J.I. “Erich Auerbach and the Judaizing of Philology” *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 35 No.1 2008, 118 suggests, particularly as Auerbach himself was intimately involved in the translation process. Haubold, J. “Beyond Auerbach: Homeric Narrative and the Epic of Gilgamesh” in *Defining Greek Narrative* eds. Cairns, D and Scodel R. (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2014) 16 presses further on the translation of *Eigentümlichkeit*. 
Auerbach left National Socialist Germany in 1935, escaping the increasing tide of anti-Semitism that made living and working in Germany an untenable proposition. By the time he left Germany, Auerbach had held the chair of Romance philology at the University of Marburg for six years. In *Mimesis*, Auerbach presents his twelve years in Turkey as a kind of exile, removed from the scholarly culture and academic material that he thought necessary for this kind of work.⁸ After the end of the Second World War, he turned to the relative security of the American academy. In 1950 Auerbach headed first to Penn State University and took up the post of professor of Comparative Literature at Yale until his death in 1957.

The twenty chapters of *Mimesis* give a panoramic, if potted, history of the development of realism in literature in Western Europe, from Homer and the Hebrew Bible to James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.⁹ *Mimesis* seeks to track realism as a mode of representing reality.¹⁰ Auerbach’s idiosyncratic definition of realism prioritizes a break with the ‘classical’ doctrine of styles.¹¹ The decisive historical moment of the initial break with the classical, that is, pagan doctrine of literary representation was

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⁸ *Mimesis* 557: “I may also mention that the book was written during the war and at Istanbul, where the libraries are not equipped for European studies. International communications were impeded; I had to dispense with almost all periodicals, with almost all the more recent investigations, and in some cases with reliable critical editions of my texts. Hence it is possible even probable that I overlooked things which I ought to have considered and that I occasionally assert something which modern research has disproved or modified.” See Konuk, K. *East West Mimesis: Auerbach in Turkey* (Stanford University Press, Palo Alto CA. 2010) for a detailed historical examination of how the scholar-in-exile is as much Auerbach’s construction as the pose of epistemic mastery.

⁹ Auerbach’s method of comparative reading in “Odysseus’ Scar” is not consistently pursued across *Mimesis*. He treats the following texts without reference to a comparative text: Gregory of Tours’ *History of the Franks*, the *Chanson of Roland*, Chrétien de Troyes *Yvain*, Dante’s *Inferno*, Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, Antoin de Sale’s *Le Reconfort de Madame de Fresne*, Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Montaigne’s *Essais*, Shakespeare’s *Henry IV parts 1 and 2*, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, Molière’s *Tartuffe*, Schiller’s *Laus Miller*. The chapters containing comparative analysis cluster towards the beginning and end of *Mimesis*.

¹⁰ Auerbach roughly traces realism in different incarnations: Dante’s Christian figural realism, Rabelais’ creaturely (Kreatürliches) realism and social realism of the French nineteenth century. Nevertheless, these realities for Auerbach are all genetically related by Stilmischung.

the incarnation of Christ. For Auerbach, the historical and mimetic problem of the earthly life of Christ constituted the first instance of *Stilmischung*, wherein ‘everyday practical reality’ (*alltägliche und praktisch Wirkliche*) could be treated ‘seriously, problematically and even tragically’ (*ernster, problematischer, ja sogar tragischer*) in literature rather than “within the frame of a low or intermediate kind of style, that is to say, as a grotesquely comic or pleasant, light, colorful, and elegant entertainment”. Realism thereafter, in whichever era Auerbach identifies its operation, is marked by two characteristics: an overt departure from the classical separation of form and content (*Stiltrennung*) and an element, if only a trace, of the theological. The argument of *Mimesis*’ opening chapter is that that Homer’s *Odyssey* sets the template for the classical hierarchy of the levels of style and Hebrew Bible is the first literary instance of the break from that system of literary representation.

In a vigorous back and forth in the pages of the journal *Romanische Forschungen*, Auerbach replied to two classicists who had reviewed *Mimesis* with consternation. His responses were later published as an appendix to the English translation. Auerbach dealt with two related charges: that he had given ancient depictions of reality short shrift and that he had neglected to deal with anything other than Homer as

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12 *Mimesis* 555, “Nachwort” 516: It was the story of Christ, with its ruthless mixture of everyday reality and the highest and most sublime tragedy, which had conquered the classical rule of style. (…es war die Geschichte Christi, mit ihrer rücksichtslosen Mischung von alltäglich Wirklichem und höchster, erhabenster Tragik, die die antike Stilregel überwältigte).

13 *Mimesis* 554, “Nachwort” 515: im Rahmen einer niederer oder mittleren Stilart, das heisst entweder als grotesk komisch oder als angenehme, leichte, bunte und elegante Unterhaltung…

representative of Greco-Roman literature before the turn of the millennium. He defended himself with not much more than a shrug:

this first chapter might have dealt with other literary documents of archaic Greece (to bring into considerations ones from Homer himself, from Aeschylus, perhaps from Hesiod and perhaps the art of the sixth century…)

However that would have given the book an entirely new dimension into early antiquity… and I recoiled from that.

Mimesis 560

The inclusion of more ancient Greek literary evidence would have provided context into the culture from which Homeric poetry emerged - precisely the kind that Auerbach provides for other authors. Auerbach defends his manner of reading Homer as an explicitly strategic choice:


16 A conspicuous element of Auerbach’s dehistoricized treatment of Homeric poetry is a lack of interest in its origins as oral poetry. The closing observations of “Odysseus’ Scar” reveal that this is a self-conscious strategy (“Narbe” 26-7):

Da wir die beiden Stile, den homerischen und den alttestamentlichen, als Ausgangspunkte benutzen, so haben wir als fertige genommen, wie sie in den Texten sich bieten; wir haben von allem abgesehen, was sich auf ihre Ursprünge bezieht und haben also die Frage, ob ihre Eigentümlichkeiten ihnen ursprünglich zugehören, oder ob sie ganz oder teilweise auf fremde Einwirkungen zurückzuführen sind, und auf welche, ganze beiseite gelassen.

Chapter Four in Bakker E. Pointing at the Past: From Formula to Performance in Homeric Poetics (Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA. 2005; previously published as Chapter Four = "Mimesis as Performance: Rereading Auerbach's First Chapter," Poetics Today 20 (1999): 11-26) takes up the question of Auerbach and the orality of Homeric poetry, though his observation that Auerbach’s mimesis is ‘static’ is fundamentally a misreading of the dialectical conception of mimesis.
For my purposes it would have sufficed to begin with the time around the birth of Christ. But it proved not to be feasible to find an introduction that would have been able to measure up to the Homer chapter in clarity and effectiveness for presenting the problem…

*Mimesis* 560

The meta-critical utility of Homer to expose a literary historical problem (*die Deutlichkeit... für die Problemstellung*) emerges in “Odysseus’ Scar” as a quality of ahistorical clarity in Homeric poetry itself. Auerbach takes up the scene in Book 19 of the *Odyssey* in which the nurse Euryclea sees through the disguise the returning hero has adopted and recognizes him via the scar on his leg. Auerbach juxtaposes this episode with the *Akedah* or the “Binding of Isaac” (*Genesis* 22.1-19) a painful scene of intimate violence and test of faith from the Hebrew Bible. In this episode, God demands that Abraham sacrifices his “only beloved” son Isaac, only to intercede just before the sacrifice happens and provide a ram as a substitute. Auerbach sets up these episodes are examples of two different schemes of style: the contrast between these two schemes in turn sets up the argument of *Mimesis*. The critical impulse to make Homer and the Hebrew Bible an *exemplary* contrast of styles flattens the reading of both texts out, in order to produce maximum difference of representational modes. So, in “Odysseus’ Scar”, Homer’s elegant style is all foreground and no history, luminous in its disinterestedness and psychological clarity.\(^{18}\) By contrast, the Hebrew Bible’s

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\(^{17}\) *Epilegomena* 2: …für meine Zwecke hätte es genügt mit der Zeit um Christi Geburt zu beginnen. Aber eine Einleitung zu finden, die an Deutlichkeit und Wirksamkeit für die Problemstellung sich mit dem Homerkapitel hätte messen können, erwies sich als undurchführbar…

\(^{18}\) *Mimesis* 11-12, “Narbe” 13-14: Auf der einen Seite ausgeformte, gleichmässig belichtete, ort- und zeitbestimmte, lückenlos im Vordergrund miteinander verbundene Erscheinungen; ausgesprochene Gedanken und Gefühle; mussevoll und spannungsmässig sich vollziehende Ereignisse. Auf der anderen Seite wird nur dasjenige an den Erscheinungen herausgearbeitet, was für das Ziel der Handlung wichtig ist, der Rest bleibt im Dunkel; die entscheidenden Höhepunkte der Handlung werden allein betont, das Dazwischenliegende ist wesenlos; Ort und Zeit sind unbestimmt und deutungsbedürftig; die Gedanken
paratactic style is all background and saturated in history: its attention to suffering, particularly psychological suffering, puts everything else into darkness. Though the ostensible claim is that the programmatic contrast between Homer and the Hebrew Bible is between “two equally ancient and equally epic texts”, Auerbach’s final defence of his approach undercuts the neutrality of this claim. There he states that ‘antiquity’ constitutes a counterexample to the history of representation that Mimesis pursues: “…ancient literature is treated in my book above all as a counterexample” (Gegenbeispiel). As this chapter will show, Auerbach has a specific referent in mind for der Antike, that is, pre-Christian Greek antiquity (the status of pre-Christian Rome is much more contentious is Auerbach’s thought, since he is so clearly invested in the tradition of Latinity, from the early Church to the emergence of the European vernacular languages).

This chapter takes up counter-exemplarity as a key trope for Auerbach’s analytical project in Mimesis. I examine how Auerbach consistently uses Homer as a figure to think through the various overarching arguments about how to write the history of Western literature (Mimesis) or about the place of single texts within those literary historical configurations (Dante’s Inferno, the Old Testament). I will explore how successive evaluations of Homer as literary-historical example or counterexample are operative in Auerbach’s critical activity before, during and after the war. The simplest claim here is that Auerbach consistently reads Homer in comparison. However, Homer does not always come out on top in Auerbach’s comparisons: I will show how

und Gefühlhe bleiben unausgesprochen, sie werden nur aus dem Schweigen und fragmentarischen Reden suggeriert; das Ganze, in höchster und ununterbrochener Spannung auf ein Ziel gerichtet, und insofern viel einheitlicher, bleibt rätselvoll und hintergründig.

19 Mimesis 11, “Narbe” 13: Nicht leicht also lassen sich grössere Stilgegensätze vorstellen als zwischen diesen beiden, gleichermassen antiken und epischen Texten.

20 Mimesis 559: Die Antikeliteratur wird in meinem Buch vor allem als Gegenbeispiel behandelt.
the valence of Homer as a paradigmatic figure shifts in his thought.\textsuperscript{21} These shifts constitute the grounds for thinking through the politics of exemplarity and counter-exemplarity of Homer. I argue that Auerbach’s notion of sublime is a seismograph,\textsuperscript{22} tracking his shift in thinking of Homer from example to counterexample.

This chapter is structured by analysis of Auerbach’s three comparative readings of Homer. In two of these readings, Auerbach juxtaposes Homer with Dante, another key figure in his intellectual thought-world. The Homer/Dante comparative readings are offered in 1929 and 1958: it is instructive to observe how the terms on which Auerbach compares Homer and Dante change from the pre- to post-war context.\textsuperscript{23}

This chapter turns to Auerbach’s first book \textit{Dante: als Dichter der irdischen Welt}.\textsuperscript{24} In observing how the mobilization of Homer changes between the two versions of the history of Western literature in the \textit{Dantebuch} and \textit{Mimesis}, the first part of this chapter argues that tracking the terms on which Auerbach evaluates Homer against Dante is instructive for the analytical weight of the evaluation in “Odysseus’ Scar”.


\textsuperscript{22} Güthenke takes up the baton from Most, G.W. “Ansichten über einen Hund. Zu einigen Strukturen der Homerrezeption zwischen Antike und Neuzeit” \textit{Antike und Abendland} 37 (1991) 144-168 in exploring how Homer operates as the needle for contemporary concerns of and about culture (the representation and cultural positioning of nature, Güthenke argues, has the same indicating function as Homer in this respect). \url{https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/1317} [Accessed 07/25/17].

\textsuperscript{23} The context of the \textit{Dantebuch} should also be thought of as the period between two world wars. Auerbach fought in northern France in World War One and was seriously injured in April 1918 (Barck, K. “Erich Auerbach in Berlin Spurensicherung und ein Portrait” in \textit{Erich Auerbach: Geschichte und Aktualität eines europäischen Philologen} eds. Barck, K. and Treml, M. Kadmos, Berlin 2007, 202-4).

The middle portion of this chapter makes an analytical priority of the ‘sublime’, arguing that it is a critical part of the notion of realism and therefore that it animates Auerbach’s evaluation of Homer in *Mimesis*. To get to grips with Auerbach’s sublime, this chapter turns to the “supplement” (*Ergänzung*)\(^\text{25}\) to *Mimesis*. Auerbach collected four essays published together as *Literary Language and its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and the Middle Ages*\(^\text{26}\) (1958, hereafter LLP), ostensibly to address the most significant chronological and hermeneutical gap in *Mimesis*.\(^\text{27}\) In the first essay of this book, Auerbach announces an overhauled, Judeo-Christian notion of the sublime, following Augustine’s *sermo humilis*. This chapter turns to another essay in LLP entitled “Camilla, or, the Rebirth of the Sublime” (hereafter “Camilla”) in which we can see the Auerbach’s sublime in hermeneutic action by comparing Dante and Homer.

This chapter will finally be in a position to examine how the sublime operates as Auerbach’s critical criterion in his reading of Homer against the Hebrew Bible in *Mimesis*. Auerbach’s 1948 reading of Homer in “Odysseus’ Scar” is the pivotal moment for Auerbach in thinking about the sublime as the key term in his (re)-

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\(^{25}\) LLP 22; *Literatursprache* 22.


\(^{27}\) LLP 22-3: ‘Of course *Mimesis* presents a number of obvious gaps which are not filled in. But such gaps struck me as less important than my neglect of the early Middle Ages. Between the section on the fifth century… and the chapter on the song of Roland, there is only the analysis of the single text by Gregory of Tours; the long epoch from 600-1100, which, though it is the poorest of all periods in the time span under consideration, is the one in most need of interpretation is the one most neglected…the crucial theme of research in the literature of the early Middle Ages – the great hiatus, the period in which there is no literary public and no generally intelligible literary language’. *Literatursprache* 22-3: Zwar hat Mimesis eine Menge von augenfälligen Lücken, die auch hier nicht ausgefüllt werden. Aber das schien mir weniger wichtig als die grosse und nicht nur stoffliche Lücke im frühen Mittelalter. Zwischen dem Abschnitt über das 5.Jahrhundert… und dem Rolandkapitel steht nur die Analyse eines Textes von Gregor von Tours; die längste, zwar ärmsste, aber am meisten interpretationsbedürftige Epoche, zwischen 600 und 1100, ist fast unbehandelt… was doch wohl der Kerngegenstand frühmittelalterlicher Literaturforschung ist: die grosse Pause, in der es kein literarisches Publikum und keine allgemein verständliche Literatursprache gibt.
evaluation of Homer. In positioning the Hebrew Bible as the paradigmatically sublime text, Auerbach asserts the counter-exemplarity of Homer.

_Mimesis, the sublime, and crises of representation_

The sublime is an overloaded philosophical concept, whose capacity for critical redefinition is expansive, to say the least.\(^{28}\) Many definitions converge on the idea that the sublime traffics in the politics of representation. After ps. Longinus, the sublime identifies friction in the complex relationship between reality, literature and reader. Moreover the sublime often has a phenomenological hinge on which the reader’s experience of the world or herself can be substantially changed through the mediation of literature. Even though Auerbach is not particularly interested in the phenomenology of reading, the relationship between the world and reality that the sublime makes addresses the core investigation in _Mimesis_, specifically around the limits of representation.

\(^{28}\) Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux’ 1674 translation of ps. Longinus’ _On the Sublime_ with a polemical preface inaugurates the modern philosophical genealogy of the concept. It also constituted a critical intervention in the _querelle des anciens et des modernes_. Beyond the Idealist iterations of the sublime in the German and British traditions (Kant and Hegel on the one hand, Burke on the other), the sublime’s conceptual ground is sprawling in western European philosophy. The Idealists’ iteration of the sublime is an attempt to demarcate the sublime in contradistinction to ‘the beautiful’. In general, both national Idealist traditions frame the sublime in terms of aesthetic philosophy. Burke and Kant ask questions about the nature of sublime objects as well as aesthetic experience of these, and the relationships between sublime object and experience. Kant installs in the sublime the notion of ‘negative pleasure’ (a pleasure that imbricates terror), an ambivalence within experience that also conceptually foregrounds experience over object. Hegel installs the negativity within the concept rather than the experience of the sublime. The negotiation of the negative in the sublime is taken up by the psychoanalytic tradition, wherein the sublime marks the gaps and lacks that inhere in all systems of representation (Lacan’s suggestive but not fully worked out account of the sublime tips experience or the sublime over into sublimation). In the last thirty years, the sublime has been conceptualized as a tool in the critique of late modernity, thus the coining of the post modern or the technological sublime (see Jameson, F. _Postmodernism or the cultural logic of late capitalism_ [Duke University Press, Durham NC. 1991] or Zizek, S. _The Sublime Object of Ideology_ [Verso, London 1989]).
Yet, aside from Doran (2007), the sublime has not been a focus for the scholarship on Auerbach. In part, this can be explained by how idiosyncratically he defines his notion of the sublime. Auerbach’s sublime is calibrated to the notion of *sermo humilis*. Furthermore Auerbach attributes it specifically to Augustine’s transformation of the tradition of classical rhetoric. Auerbach understands *sermo humilis* as Augustine’s response to the crisis in representation caused by the Incarnation of Christ. *Sermo humilis*, for Auerbach as it was for Augustine, is a rhetorical lowest common denominator that represents the most urgent subject matter. It constitutes a strategy by which lofty subject matter (the message of Christ) could be represented to the widest possible audience. This is the first sense in which we might consider Auerbach’s sublime a hyphenated concept, mediating between the scale of audience and significance of subject matter. Other conceptual hyphenations inhere in Auerbach’s sublime too:

*Sublimitas* and *humilitas* are…wholly ethico-theological categories, not aesthetico-stylistic ones. Yet in this latter sense too, that is in terms of style, the antithetical fusion of the two was emphasized… as a characteristic of Holy Scripture… (T)he true and distinctive greatness of the Holy Scripture (was) that it had created an entirely new kind of sublimity, in which the everyday and the low were included, not excluded, so that, in style as in content, it directly connected the lowest and the highest.

*Mimesis* 153-4

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30 “Adam und Eva” 150: ... sublimitas und humilitas sind hier überall ethisch-theologische, nicht ästhetische-stilistische Kategorien; doch auch in diesen letzteren Sinne, im stilistischen, ist die antithetische Verschmelzung beider als Eigentümlichkeit der heiligen Schrift schon zur Zeit der
The earlier kind of sublime that Auerbach gestures towards is the rhetorical tradition of Cicero and Quintillian, organized along strict divisions of the humble and the sublime. In the ‘new’ kind of sublimity, Auerbach claims that the Church fathers made radical connections between the world and its literary representation. The antithetically formulated and hyphenated categories that Auerbach claims here are related to one another. Auerbach’s sublime is constituted by aesthetics (in the mode of literary style) and ethics (in the historical mode): one category implicates the other. To put that another way, the ethical content of sublime literature is worked out at the level of literary style, and conversely, the way in which language works to create effects points outside itself, towards the ethical and the theological.31

The final hyphenation of Auerbach’s sublime is as a Judeo-Christian concept. By locating the sublime as an Augustinian concept, Auerbach underscores its Christian content. In light of that formulation, working out how Auerbach’s sublime is in any way a Judaized notion is a tricky because ps. Longinus’ definition of the sublime mobilizes the Septuagint in addition to pagan authors.32 Auerbach’s rejection of ps. Longinus’ reading of the sublime, in addition to the emphasis on Augustine, suggests that his conception of the sublime is as predominantly a Christian concept, even when he mobilizes the Hebrew Bible as his primary evidence.

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31 Auerbach’s ideal formulation of the relationship between style and ethics is tightly compounded. The title term of his 1949 essay “Vico and Aesthetic Historism” crams these two concepts together.

32 Porter, J.I. The Sublime in Antiquity (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2016) makes a polemical intervention by arguing contra a long standing convention that the sublime is articulated for the first time in ps. Longinus’ treatise. Instead, Porter argues that the sublime was articulated with great variety, for example, in the history of science as well as in the rhetorical tradition before ps. Longinus.
The sublime, in its many iterations, deals with the limits of representation. The conceptual turf of the sublime is the hinterland of mimesis: it operates in the aporia of other mimetic strategies and charts out their failures. Next to the sublime we might place the Jewish *Bilderverbot*. Both constitute strategies of representing by not representing, pointing towards what lies beyond the reach of mimesis. In the Jewish tradition of representation, the Talmudic prohibition against graven images (*Bilderverbot*) maps out similar territory to the sublime, in demarcating the limits of representation and in pointing out the possibilities for transcending them. Is Auerbach’s sublime a Judaized concept by virtue of being a species of *Bilderverbot*? This question is complicated by Auerbach conceptual genealogy for his sublime. The key co-ordinate for his sublime is Augustine’s *sermo humilis*, that is, his notion of the sublime is dependent on the historical and material historicity of god-made-flesh, and the possibility of communicating this incarnation. At the very least, we might see that there is considerable conceptual overlap between Auerbach’s sublime and *Bilderverbot* in delimiting the possibilities of representation. Perhaps Auerbach’s sublime emerges most clearly as a Judaized concept by virtue of the ends to which he uses it in *Mimesis*: the sublime insists that a coherent history of Europe can be written through its literature. “Odysseus’ Scar” secures a historical idea of Europe only on the condition that the place of the Jew in that history is at its very heart.

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33 Hegel’s intervention in the history of the sublime is not by any means as influential as Kant’s. Nevertheless, for the concerns of this chapter, Hegel’s reading of the sublime is a critical moment because in the first instance the sublime is rendered as most evident in Jewish religious writings, particularly the Psalms. See “Noah and Noesis: Greeks, Jews and the Hegelian Dialectic” in Leonard M., *Socrates and the Jews: Hellenism and Hebraism from Moses Mendelssohn to Sigmund Freud* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2012) 65-103.
Homer in 1929

The following section is interested in the continuities and discontinuities around the articulation of Homer that exist between *Dante: Poet of the Secular World* (1929) and *Mimesis* (1946). Auerbach’s early work on Dante is a testing ground for many of the ideas that are operative in *Mimesis*. The two projects share a fundamental concern: the focus on realism in the *Dantebuch*, understood as ‘ways of narrating’ ([*Darstellungsart*]) also lies at the conceptual heart of *Mimesis*. Furthermore, Auerbach’s methodological procedure remains consistent between the *Dantebuch* and *Mimesis*. Auerbach’s preferred mode of investigation is *Begriffsentwicklungsgeschichte*, taking up the thick conceptual history of a term, author or idea and tracing its vicissitudes from Greco-Roman antiquity onwards. The counter-intuitive argument of the *Dantebuch*, that Dante is an intensely immanent (*irdisch*) poet, anticipates the attention to the representation of the material world in *Mimesis*. Since the *Commedia* is one of the most beautiful testimonies in European literature to the transcendental power of love (in the figure of Beatrice) and the power of transcendent love (the divine order of the Christian world as the structure through which the poet-narrator moves towards salvation), Auerbach’s figuring of Dante as a poet with *this-worldly* concerns is an astonishing move.

A further common element between Auerbach’s approach in the two books is his insistence that Dante is the highpoint of European literature. If *Mimesis* sets up classicism and realism as two modes of representation in a double helix, it is perhaps useful to view the work of Auerbach’s earlier book as articulating realism as one of those strands of representation that also culminates in Dante. Auerbach’s view of

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34 Dante 3, Dantebuch 6.
history insists that *Geist* tacks dialectically towards its ultimate fulfillment. He therefore identifies moments of synthesis – a particular idea of the European tradition coheres around single and singular literary figures of genius, emerging as the distillation of that moment of culture. Moreover, Auerbach recruits these cohesive figures at moments in which the very idea of *Kultur* is at risk: his turn to Dante in 1929 must be seen in the context of interwar anxiety about the fragmentation of European culture. Auerbach’s emphasis on unity in his reading of Dante and Homer mobilizes the cohesive cultural force of a shared canon of literature.

Literary style constitutes the key grounds on which Auerbach compares Dante and Homer. He insists on Dante’s affinity for ancient rhetoric, claiming that unlike his contemporary, the poets of the *dolce stil nuovo*:

Dante’s dialectic of feeling is something quite different. Quite unconsciously at first, it harks back to the authentic sources of ancient rhetoric, that is, to the Greeks. For although Dante did not know Greek, though he only had the vaguest notion of Homer and none at all of the tragic poets – although he had drawn his classical culture from a few Latin authors who seem, from our point of view, to have been selected quite arbitrarily – none the less he is the

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35 In a similar move, T.S. Eliot reprises his 1929 essay on Dante in a series of three lectures on German radio in summer 1945 entitled “Die Einheit der Europäischen Kultur” (published in English in 1948, as an appendix to *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*). Michael Dirda notes in his introduction to the Manheim translation of *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*: ‘…in the twenty years between the late 1920s and the late 1940s, one important writer after another argued strongly for Dante – above Shakespeare – as the central figure of European literature…This is the era of T.S. Eliot’s important essay *Dante* (the same year as Auerbach’s study). Osip Mandelstam’s ‘Conversation about Dante (1933) and Laurence Binyon’s magnificent rendering of the *Commedia* into English terza rima (1933 and following’). More locally to Auerbach, fellow Romance scholar Karl Vossler published *Dante als religiöse Dichter* in 1929 following up on his earlier *Die Göttliche Komödie: Entwicklungsgeschichte und Erklärung* (1907-1910). Mansen, M. *Denn auch Dante ist unser! Die Deutsche danterezeption 1900-1950* (De Gruyter, Berlin 2010) makes a case that the German reception of Dante is a testing ground for examining the politics of culture in Germany in the first half of the twentieth century.
authentic heir of what is noblest in ancient Greece, of the language of μέν and δέ; his sentences are the first time since antiquity which contain a world and are as simple as the lines of a primer, which express deep feeling with the clarity of thought, which pierce the heart with their quiet even measure, above all they are the first in which rhetoric does not suppress reality but forms it and holds it fast. (my emphases)

Dante 48

Auerbach posits that Dante’s affinity for Greek in general and Homer in particular was “unconscious…at first”, though he does not follow up with where Dante’s intentional modeling after Homer occurred. Instead he presses the bigger claim that Dante “is the authentic heir of what is noblest in ancient Greece”. This claim is capacious enough both to take up the point that Auerbach goes on to make about Dante’s simple style as a vehicle for complex feeling and also to implicate Dante as the successor to Homer. This implication rests of course on reading Homer as the referent of that “which is noblest in ancient Greece”. Auerbach concedes the basic point that Dante had no direct access to Greek texts and only ‘the vaguest notion of Homer’. Nonetheless, Auerbach repeats the claim that Dante was able to recuperate the inherent balance of Greek in his Italian verse. The appropriate use of rhetoric does not constitute mere decorative style or dry pedantry but is nothing less than a vital textual mode of attending to the world. Auerbach idealizes the Greek language and

36 Dantebuch 61-2: … so zeigt die Gefühlsdialektik Dantes, und zwar zuerst ganz unbewusst, das Zurückgreifen auf die echten Quellen der antiken Rhetorik, und damit auf das Griechentum. Denn obgleich er nicht griechisch konnte, von Homer eine sehr vage und von den Tragikern gar keine Vorstellung besass – obgleich er seine ganze klassische Bildung aus einigen nach unserem Urteil wahllos und zufällig zusammengewürfelten lateinischen Schriftstellern gezogen hatte –, ist er doch der echte Erbe des edelsten Griechentums, der „Sprache, die das μέν und δέ geschaffen hat“; seit der Antike sind seine Sätze die ersten, die eine Welt enthalten und einfach sind wie aus einer Fibel, die ein tiefstes Gefühl ausdrücken und klar sind wie ein Gedanke, die das Herz zu sprengen drohen und in strengem Masse sich ruhe bewegen; vor allem aber die ersten, in denen die Rhetorik das Wirkliche nicht unterdrückt, sondern formt und festhält.
Homer to such an extent that it is possible to read the Latin literary tradition as also part of the millennia long gap that between Homer and Dante, that is, a gap between poets who knew how to use rhetoric properly, to ‘form reality and hold it fast’ (das Wirkliche ... formt und festhält).

Auerbach’s insistence on Dante as Homerus redivivus is an argument based, in the first instance, on style. Moreover he insists that the politics of style have far-reaching historical implications. Following on directly from the discussion of how Dante’s formulation of thirteenth century Italian language operates in a balanced, distinctly Greek mode, Auerbach argues that Dante has managed to resolve a formative schism in European intellectual history avant la lettre:

However, the antithesis of classical and romantic, which Vossler employs here... strikes me as inappropriate to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries... The dialectic of feeling that is the new element in that poetry is far more romantic than classical in inspiration, and with the exception of Dante, none of the poets possessed what I should call the classical element in it.

Dante 51

Here, Auerbach effectively reads ‘classicism’ and ‘romanticism’ as stylistic principles. Dante is uniquely positioned here as reconciling the aesthetic antithesis of classicism and romanticism, that is, anticipating these differing and (sometimes)
opposed modes. Auerbach positions Dante as the heir to Homer in his capacity to embody the literary ideals of nationhood and an idea of Europe:

Here for the first time he cast off the stylistic peculiarities of the time to such a degree that the European voice which is his voice, rings out… Nor should it seem strange that we speak of a European voice in connection with an early Italian work… Here for the first time an appeal was made to the public that was to be the mainstay of the new European culture… (The idea of the noble vernacular) started with Dante, is a unity in diversity, the true modern European Koινή or common tongue.

Dante 76-77

Instead of celebrating the diversity of emerging vernacular languages across medieval Europe, Auerbach focuses on how the choice to write in Italian redeems linguistic unity. Auerbach makes the link here to Dante’s justification of the decision to write the Comedy in Italian in his incomplete technical treatise De eloquentia vulgaris. In Book One, Dante articulates the idea of volgare illustre, the ‘noble vernacular’, as a solution to the confusing multiplicity of language after Babel. Furthermore, Auerbach construes Dante’s redemption of linguistic unity as a “true modern European Koινή”.

Either Homer or the Bible could make a claim to be Auerbach’s referent for Koινή, that is, the cultural glue that held together a pre-modern idea of Europe. If, however, we imagine that Dante’s ‘European voice’ marks a rupture between the culture of the

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38Dantebuch 95-6: In ihm befreit sich Dante zum erstenmal so weit den partikulären Gegenbenheiten des dichtersichen Zeitstils, dass die europäische Stimme, die seine Stimme ist, unmittelbar erklingt und vernehmbar wird…Auch darf es nicht befremdlich erscheinen, dass wir ein frühes italienisches Werk als europäische Stimme rühmen…Hier wird zum ersten Male an das Publikum appelliert, das zum Träger der neuen europäischen Bildung werden sollte…(die Konzeption des volgare illustre) diese gemeinsame Konzeption, die von Dante ausgeht, ist ein Gemeinsames in Mannigfaltigen, die eigentliche moderne europäische Koινή…
past and the beginning of a European modernity, Auerbach also suggests that the
*Comedy* contains the possibility for preemptively resolving the rupture between
antiquity and modernity:

Thus he founded the national literature of his country and with it the lofty
European style underling the national literature of all the national tongues; if
the humanists had taken up his heritage, the eternal and still unresolved
*querelle des anciens et des modernes* would probably never have arisen.

Dante 98

The tension here between Dante as the foundational figure for Italian literature *and* as
the figurehead for a European style is a productive one for Auerbach; my next chapter
on Auerbach’s notion of *Weltliteratur* will follow how he puts it to use. Thus
Auerbach formulates a paradigm for how to relate to the ancient past as much as it is a
model for coping with the diverse literary traditions and cultures of Europe. In
addition to the reconciliation of classicism and Romanticism, Auerbach runs his
argument about Dante’s poetics of unity through a further intellectual debate. He
entertains the counterfactual that the quarrel between ancient and moderns could have
been prevented if ‘the humanists’ had accurately read Dante’s move to write the
*Comedy* in Italian, that is, if they had seen that radical innovation in language was
possible by embracing, rather than rejecting, antiquity. The *querelle* operated
precisely along this faultline: how to evaluate the relationship between the
contemporary moment and classical antiquity. A key term in their debate was the

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39 Dantebuch 123: Er begründete die nationale Dichtung seine Landes und damit zugleich den
gemeineuropäischen hohen Dichtungsstil aller Nationalsprachen; hätten die Humanisten sein Erbe
angetreten, so wäre die ewige und noch immer unentschiedene Querelle des anciens et des modernes
wohl nie entstanden.
This chapter now turns its attention to how Auerbach makes his own intervention into the sublime in 1958, maintaining his conviction that Dante was the figure in whom an idea of Europe could cohere. Auerbach’s articulation of his own notion of the sublime will radically re-assess his 1929 conclusion that Homer, just like Dante, could be a figure to unite Europe.

Camilla and the sublime: Homer against Dante

The following section examines the argumentational strategies of “Camilla, or, the rebirth of the sublime” (“Camilla, oder, Über die Wiedergeburt des Erhabenen” hereafter “Camilla”) which contains a Begriffsentwicklungsgeschichte of the sublime. I attend to how Auerbach’s derives his concept of the sublime by thinking against the key classical text on rhetoric in which Homer is paradigmatic of the sublime: ps. Longinus On the Sublime (Περὶ ὑψους). Auerbach explicitly articulates the sublime in terms of an evaluation of Homer through ps. Longinus’ treatise. “Camilla”, like “Odysseus’ Scar” also mobilizes a comparative analysis of Homer. Therefore it is a useful way of getting to grips with the sublime as a term that lies tantalizingly below the surface of Mimesis. This section first sketches out the argumentation of “Camilla”. I then examine how Auerbach’s direct citation of ps. Longinus in “Camilla” operates before I proceed to work out the precise terms of the sublime on which Auerbach evaluates Dante over Homer.

40 For a comprehensive account of the place of the sublime (and antiquity more generally) within the querelle, see Norman, L. The Shock of the Ancient: Literature and History in Early Modern France (University of Chicago Press, Chicago IL, 2011).
41 “Camilla oder Über die Wiedergeburt des Erhabenen” in Literatursprache und Publikum in der Lateinischen Spätantike und im Mittelalter 135 -176; “Camilla, or, the Rebirth of the Sublime” in Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and In the Middle Ages 181-233.
Virgil is Auerbach’s starting point in “Camilla”. Auerbach seeks to understand how the presentation of the Amazon queen Camilla at *Aeneid* 7.803-717 is transformed in the later Latin tradition, using the notion of the sublime as the grounds of this transformation. Auerbach compares the Virgilian Camilla with how she was written in an anonymously authored twelfth century epic in Old French, *Enéas* (“Camilla” 186ff.) Auerbach argues that where Virgil’s Camilla is an example of sublime style, her medieval French counterpart Camille is too overwrought to be sublime.\(^{42}\) Auerbach argues that this decline in the sublime can be used as a symptom to track the decline of classical rhetoric in general. He gives a sociological account to explain this decline,\(^{43}\) tracking deep into the medieval period. For Auerbach, the disappearance of classical culture is resolved in the *rebirth* of the sublime and with it the vitality of Greco-Roman antiquity. Ultimately, Auerbach finds the rebirth of the sublime in Dante.

Auerbach’s insistence that the *Comedy* manifests the rebirth of the sublime is run through a comparison of Dante with Homer via Longinus. “Camilla” is part of a broader investigation into Christian sublime:

\(^{42}\) Auerbach explains his choice of Virgil’s description of the entrance of Camilla because it creates a certain effect (“Camilla” 185, LLP 137):

… the whole is quiet, self contained, pure unreflecting epiphany; and this pure epiphany in turn embodies the character and quite unmistakably, though indemonstrably, the destiny which belongs to the character. The passage is a perfect example of classical poetry…

(my emphasis)

…ist das Ganze ruhend, in sich bestehend, ohne die geringste Reflexion, reine Erscheinung; in der reinen Erscheinung wiederum das Wesen, ja auch unverkennbar, wenn auch unnachweisbar, das zu dem Wesen gehörende Schicksal mitenthaltend: ein volkommenes Stück antiker Dichtung.

Despite this claim, I suggest that Auerbach’s ends *Camilla* as he does because Homer, rather than Virgil, is the quintessential figure in the classical rhetorical tradition around the sublime.

\(^{43}\) Auerbach argues that, in the early Middle Ages, the culture (that is, the political institutions and the wider public) that fostered ancient rhetoric fell away, funneling the study of rhetoric into the private cloisters of the Latin medieval church.
On my arrival to the United States, I began to investigate the theme of *sermo humilis*, the Christian sublime and to follow it into the Middle Ages; my starting point was from Augustine (*De doctrina christiana* 4.18)… “Camilla”… deals with an essentially similar problem.

The sublime, implicitly at the conceptual heart of *Mimesis*, is brought to the surface of analysis in Auerbach’s later essays. Furthermore, Auerbach’s articulation of the sublime is set up as a significant departure from the Longinian sublime, understood to be symbolic of the whole pagan Greco-Roman tradition. In his wider story of the sublime, Auerbach identifies Augustine as the Christian thinker who stepped away from the classical rhetorical notion that a hierarchy of style should correspond to content. Auerbach recognizes that the Incarnation not only narrowed the range of sublime subjects to one but also generated profound theological and mimetic problems. Auerbach admires the early Christian thinkers’ responses to these challenges. In particular, he identifies a democratizing impulse of the Christian revolution in representation. The early Christian thinker found ways to articulate complex theological doctrine in the simplest language in order to appeal to the greatest number of people. Auerbach’s reference to Augustine’s *De doctrina christiana* 4.18 (where the Church father deals with the problem of representation) provides exact co-ordinates for his notion of the sublime. Taken as a whole, the argument of “Camilla” has the whole European tradition of literature its scope through the sublime from Homer via Augustine to Dante as the critical pivots.

44 LLP 22: In den USA begann ich daher… das schon vorher angeschlagene Thema des sermo humilis, der christlichen Form des Erhabenen, genauer zu untersuchen und weiter ins frühe Mittelalter zu verfolgen; der Ansatz dafür war die Augustinstelle *De Doctrina Christina* IV.18… Die dritte Abhandlung, Camilla, … hat noch eine im wesentlichen ähnliche Problemstellung…
At two programmatic points of this essay Auerbach cites directly from *On the Sublime*. Firstly, the epigraph of “Camilla” is taken from ps. Longinus\(^{45}\). The second, more substantial citation provides Auerbach with his concluding comparison of Dante with Homer. In both instances, Auerbach picks up section 9 of *On the Sublime*, where ps. Longinus argues for Homer’s sublimity over Hesiod’s by comparing their modes of representing the divine (how could Hesiod’s poetry be sublime if it includes divine snot?!\(^{46}\) Auerbach is interested in *On the Sublime* 9 because of its attention to Homer as the sublime poet *par excellence* and specifically as the poet who is able to represent the divine appropriately. Together, the two citations of *On the Sublime* 9.8 in “Camilla” gesture towards Auerbach’s critical intervention into the sublime in *Mimesis*, in which Homer and the Hebrew Bible serve as examples of polemically contrasting notions of the sublime, rather than illustrating one and the same idea of the sublime as ps. Longinus argues.

By way of concluding the essay, Auerbach juxtaposes *On the Sublime* 9.8 with *Inferno* 9.64 ff. wherein Dante’s narrator describes the epiphany of the mysterious figure named only as the *messo del cielo*.\(^{47}\) Auerbach observes that:

45 Auerbach cites: ὕψος μεγάλοφροσύνης ἀπήχμα (*On the Sublime* 9.2). A way to read this epigraph is as the sum of what Auerbach conceives of as the classical notion of the sublime: the sublime in literature is the mimetic correspondent of elevated subject matter. On that reading, this epigraph sums up the tradition against which Auerbach places his own (Judeo-Christian) definition of the sublime, that is, the argument that “Camilla” develops.

46 ὦ ἄνομοιν γε τὸ Ἑσιόδου ἔπι τῆς Ἀχλώς, ἐγεί Ἑσιόδου καὶ τὴν Ἀσπίδα θέτεν: τῆς ἐκ μὲν ἄνων μοῖχα ἔδων: οὗ γὰρ δεινόν ἐποίησε τὸ ἔδωλον, ὀλλὰ μισητόν.

47 Dante’s narrator describes the violent effects of the majesty of the divine being as it brings help to him and Virgil from the spirits of hell of blocking their way. These spirits scatter ‘like frogs, before their enemy the serpent’ before the divine presence so that Dante and Virgil can go on their way. *Inferno* 9.76-8:

COME LE RANE INANZI A LA NEMICA
BISCALA PER L’ACQUA SI DILEGUAN TUTTE.
FIN CH’A LA TERRA Ciascuna S’Abbica,
Longinus has made the scene even more grandiose and long-rolling than it is in Homer by skipping the tranquil interruption in which the palace, the horses, Poseidon’s garment and scourge, are described; probably not by design but unconsciously in his enthusiasm for the sublime, he has ignored the contradiction in the wording, which in the first lines refers plainly to a journey on foot and in the other to a chariot ride.

“Camilla” 226

The citation from the Iliad ‘obviously from memory… put together from different passages’ (“Camilla” 225) has the effect of compressing Homeric style to a caricature of itself. This distillation of the sublime in Homeric style is a synthetic product of ps. Longinus’ analysis. And yet, despite the careful identification of ps. Longinus’ bricolage technique of reading and rewriting Homer, he goes on to treat this passage as if it were a straightforward citation from the Iliad. Auerbach reads this episode as a moment of slippage in the sublime style that Homer is supposed to embody:

And yet, Longinus is not wrong, for Homer too seems to forget the context. He surrenders to the moment, and the reader is entitled to do the

48 LLP 170: Longinus hat die Szene noch grossartiger und langhin rollender gestaltet, als sie bei Homer ist, indem er die vergleichsweise ruhige Unterbrechung, in der der Palast, die Pferde, das Gewand und die Geissel beschreiben werden, übersprungen hat; um den Widenspruch in den Worten, die in den ersten Versen deutlich eine Fussreise, in den späteren aber eine Fahrt mit Pferden ausdrücken, hat er sich nicht gekümmert…

49 Auerbach’s citation indicates which lines ps. Longinus has taken from the Iliad to create this synthetic passage to maximum ‘Homerizing’ effect (“Camilla” 225/LLP 169-70):

… τρέμε δ’οὕρεα μακρὰ καὶ ἦλθ’ 13.18
καὶ κορυφαὶ Τρώων τε πόλες καὶ νῆμες Ἀχαιῶν 20.60
ποσσὶν ἐν’ ἀθανάτωσι Ποσειδάωνος ἵόντος. 13.19
βῆ δ’ ἐλασσεία κύματ’, ἀτόλλε δὲ κιτέ ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ 13.27
πάντοθεν ἐκ κενθυμίων, οὐδ’ ἤγνωμεν ἄναστα. 13.28
γηθοσύνη δὲ θάλασσα διότατο, τοῖ δὲ πέτοντο 13.29

50 Auerbach notes that Homer’s style is not always evenly and assuredly sublime. “Camilla” 226: Homer assuredly provides many examples (of the sublime) though they are rarely pure, for Homer tends to intersperse his sublime passages with lighter touches.
same… In Homer the present moment is everything. And so Longinus is right in praising Poseidon’s striding and riding as a pure representation of divine sublimity. In its pure appearance it is free from all passion and purpose.

“Camilla” 227

The imperturbable existence of the gods, who traffic in mortal affairs but are not moved by them, ought to constitute sublime subject matter. Auerbach points out that for ps. Longinus’ reading to stand, that is, for Homer really to be an example of the sublime, it is necessary for the reader to ignore the context of where Poseidon has come from (an argument with Zeus 11.13.18-13.29) and his passionate involvement with the Greeks. Therefore either ps. Longinus has made an error in reckoning that this is an example of the sublime or the classical idea of the sublime needs to take into account instances like this. Auerbach moves down to the second order of representation to move out of this impasse. Now it is not just the reader who is overcome with the effect of sublime representation, it is the poet himself. In the emphasis on the “surrender to the moment …the present… appearance…” Auerbach codes his analysis of the sublime in the same mode as his analysis of “Odysseus Scar”. The key term there was ‘foregroundedness’ (Vordergründigkeit) a kind of shimmering ahistoricity or historical amnesia. Here Auerbach implicates the figure of Homer in his own act of forgetting (or perhaps, more accurately, a sleight of hand) that is, just as susceptible to the sublime as ps. Longinus describes it: a shock-and-awe operation in terms of style whose primary goal is to transport and overwhelm the audience.

51 LLP 171: Und dennoch hat Longinus nicht unrecht, denn auch Homer scheint den Zusammenhang zu vernachlässigen. Er gibt sich dem Augenblicke hin, und auch der Leser darf es tun… Im Homer ist die Gegenwart des Augenblicks alles. Longinus hat also doch recht, wenn er Poseidons Schreiten und Fahren als reines Beispiel der Darstellung göttlicher Erhabenheit preist.

reader. Auerbach’s reading itself depends on a strategic act of forgetting: our
complicity with his sleight of critical hand that builds an argument on ps. Longinus’
synthesized Homer rather than Homeric poetry itself.

Turning to Dante, Auerbach goes on to note the rhetorical similarity between these
moments of epiphany in the ps. Longinus’ citation of the *Iliad* and in *Inferno*. In
both authors, Auerbach finds that the most admirable quality is the “artistic
intelligence behind both, the creative force that is in full control of itself and its
rhetoric: it is equally evident in both passages that rhetoric does not govern but
serves…” (“Camilla” 230, LLP 173). There are differences in style between the two
passages (in the ps. Longinus passage, it is made immediately clear which god is the
subject, whereas Dante withholds the identity):

Decisive is what underlies this difference… Homer narrates an event in
which he himself does not participate. His human beings and his gods as well
may rejoice or suffer, smile or grow angry, he himself is not involved… the
underlying tone always remains the same: it is the tone of narrative neutrality,
a kind of sublime serenity, equable, untroubled, almost playful, and by virtue
of its evenness, almost divinely sublime; it has the sublime serenity that his
gods are not always able to maintain. Dante, on the other hand, is not only the
narrator; he is at the same time the suffering hero… He is not outside,
contemplating, admiring, and describing the sublime. He is in it… here the

53 “Camilla” 229, LLP 172: In these lines, appearance and movement carry the same power as in the
passage from Homer; they equal the Greek model in the articulation of the expression, richness of
sentence, structure and above all in what is for us essential, namely, unity of tone. (Was die
Homerstelle an Macht der Erscheinung und an Gewalt der Bewegung besitzt, das besitzen auch diese
Verse; sie sind an Artikuliertheit des Ausdrucks, Reichtum des Satzbau, vor allem aber, was hier das
Wesentlichste ist, an Einheitlichkeit der Höhenlage, dem griechischen Gebilde ebenbürtig.)
figure of the sublime is not universal and unrelated to the narrator as it is in Homer; it concerns Dante; the \textit{messo del cielo} has been sent in his behalf… It is easy to see that the implications of our comparison between these two passages are not limited to the passages themselves; they are more general.

“Camilla” 231

The most significant difference between the two passages for Auerbach however is around the notion of the dis/interestedness of sublimity. Contrasting the relationship of Homeric and Dantean narrators to their narrative, Auerbach argues that the latter is represents himself as a part of the action he describes, and specifically, as invested in the appearance of a divine saviour. This self-representation allows Dante to control the narrative entirely. The dis-interested Homeric narrator, though he does not represent himself, let alone represents himself as being affected by the sublime event of an epiphany, remains neutral. The insistence that Dante is a poet of supreme immanence is not a new conclusion for Auerbach: that was his audacious argument in the monograph on Dante. What is new here, however, is the emergence of the sublime as a criterion for evaluating the skill of a poet in representing the world.

“Camilla” argues that the sublime style of antiquity enshrined a quality of disinterestedness in the world. The Incarnation constituted a historical rupture and

\footnote{LLP 174-5: Entscheidend ist vielmehr, was ihm zugrunde liegt. Homer erzählt einen Vorgang, an dem er selbst nicht beteiligt ist. Mögen seine Menschen, ja auch seine Göttter, sich freuen oder leiden, geniessen oder zuernen, er selbst ist nicht darin verstrickt… so ist doch darunter eine Grundstimmung, die stets dieselbe bleibt: die der erzählenden Neutralität; sie ist wie eine erhabene Heiterkeit, gleichmaessig, unbetroffen und beinahe spielend, dabei eben durch das gleichmaessig und unbeteiligt Heitere fast göttlich erhaben; es ist die erhabene Heiterkeit, die seine Göttter nicht immer aufrecht zu erhalten vermögen. Aber Dante ist nicht nur der Erzähler; er ist zugleich der Held und der Leidende; … Er steht nicht aussen, um den Anblick des Erhabenen zu betrachten, zu bewundern und zu schildern. Er steht darin… Ist doch die Gestalt des Erhabenen hier keine allgemeine und beziehungslose wie im Homer, sondern sie betrifft Dante, der messo del cielo ist fuer ihn abgesandt… Es ist leicht einzusehen, dass sich die Bedeutung unseres Vergleichs zwischen der Homer – und der Dantestelle nicht auf diese Stellen beschränkt; sie ist allgemeiner.}
therefore produced a profound mimetic problem. Thus Auerbach mobilizes Augustine’s strategy for addressing this problem: a re-invention of the sublime. For Auerbach, Dante’s poetry constitutes the culmination of this modern sublime: a synthesis of the highest subject matter in a vernacular language, recounted in intimate human experience. Thus positioning Dante’s poetry as a work of art and almost as scripture,55 “Camilla” tracks a bifurcation of the sublime into the Christian and the pagan. In this sense, Auerbach’s strategy of dealing with Homer through Longinus distils and isolates the entirety of pagan antiquity around the notion of the sublime. Auerbach argues that Dante supersedes not only a mode of representation (in the figure of Homer) but also the theorization of that mimetic mode (in getting to Homer through ps. Longinus).

Sublime Akedah

Having tracked Auerbach’s critical comparisons of Homer thus far, this chapter is in a position to turn back to Mimesis. This section argues that the analysis of Mimesis, like that of “Camilla”, retains the sublime as the key term on which Homer can be evaluated as counterexample. I will demonstrate how Auerbach positions Homer as counter-example of the sublime in Mimesis. As in “Camilla”, this is as much a strategy of making an example out of a particular text as an embodiment of the sublime. This section will therefore focus on how Auerbach reads the Akedah as example of the sublime and the episode of Odysseus’ scar as its diametric opposite.

55 “Camilla” 233, LLP 176: Dante’s poem is a work of art, but it is at the same time a revelation… (Dantes Gedicht ist ein Kunstwerk, aber es ist zugleich eine Offenbarung…).
In the first instance, Auerbach’s choice of episode from the *Odyssey* and the Old Testament as critical for establishing example and counter example of the sublime. Secondly this section turns to Auerbach’s analysis of the styles of the chosen episodes. I will track how Auerbach demonstrates that Homeric literary style is integrated and complex in contrast to the paratactic literary style of the Old Testament. The perversity of such a reading only makes sense in terms of the relationship Auerbach posits between style and history in the respective texts. In terms of style as both a linguistic and a historical term, I argue that the Akedah fulfils the conditions of Auerbach’s sublime that is, the paratactic representation of a hypotactic view of history.

The sublime emerges *passim* at the surface of the analysis of *Mimesis*. When it does appear, it is formulated as *sermo humilis* or the Judeo-Christian sublime. For example, in Chapter Three, ‘The Arrest of Peter Valvomeres’, Auerbach explicitly flags Augustine’s rhetorical intervention into the sublime as a response to the Incarnation. The pithiest formulation of the sublime in *Mimesis* however occurs in chapter seven, ‘Adam and Eve’. In discussing its resurgence of the ‘very old Christian

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56 In the last seventy years there has been a scholarly consensus that Homeric style is paratactic because it originated as oral poetry. This consensus was taking shape at the same moment that Auerbach was proposing his counter-intuitive reading of Homer: see Notopolous, J.A., “Parataxis in Homer: A New Approach to Homeric Literary Criticism” Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association Vol. 80 (1949) 1-23. See also Thomas, R. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992).

57 In Trask’s 1953 English translation of *Mimesis*, Auerbach points back to the article also entitled “Sermo Humilis” that appeared in 1952 (*Romanische Forschungen* LXIV, 304-364). This 1952 article forms the basis on the 1958 essay that appears in LLP. Suffice to say, we can consider Auerbach’s notion of the sublime as stable from 1946 onwards.

58 *Mimesis* 72, “Die Verhaftung des Petrus Valvomeres” 74: That the King of Kings was treated as a low criminal, that he was mocked, spat upon, whipped and nailed to the cross – that story no sooner comes to dominate the consciousness of the people than it completely destroys the aesthetics of the separation of styles… it engenders a new elevated style, which does not scorn everyday life and which is ready to absorb the sensorily realistic, even the ugly, the undignified, the physically base… a new *sermo humilis* is born… ; Dass der König der Könige wie ein gemeiner Verbrecher verhöhnt, bespient, gepeitscht und ans Kreuz geschlagen wurde – diese Erzählung vernichtet, sobald sie das Bewusstsein der Menschen beherrschte, die Ästhetik der Stilteilung vollkommen; sie erzeugt einen neuen hohen Stil, der das Alltägliche keineswegs verschmäht, und der das sinnlich Realistische, ja das Hässliche, Unwürdige, körperlich Niedrige in sich aufnimmt…es entsteht ein neuer <<sermo humilis>>…
motif” in twelfth century French mystic Bernard of Clairvaux, Auerbach gets straight to the heart of the Judeo-Christian sublime:

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\text{Sublimitas and humilitas are... wholly ethico-theological categories, not aesthetico-stylistic ones. Yet in this latter sense too, that is, in terms of style, the antithetical fusion of the two was emphasized... as a characteristic of Holy Scripture, especially by Augustine... [I]t had created an entirely new kind of sublimity, in which the low were included, not excluded, so that in style as in content, directly connected the lowest and the highest.}
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Mimesis 153-4^59
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In pinpointing the conceptual content of the sublime, \textit{Mimesis} anticipates the concerns of \textit{Camilla}. Just as in the later essay, the sublime in \textit{Mimesis} is primarily a renegotiation of the terms of the relationship between style and content (\textit{Stil, Inhalt}), as set out by the Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition. After providing this definition, Auerbach glosses the common-sensical critical terms of ‘content and style’ in rather unwieldy critical terms of “ethico-theological and aesthetico-stylistic” (see page eighteen above). This section goes on to show how Auerbach renders the relationship between the Akedah’s style and content as an example of “the new kind of sublimity”.

^59 “Adam und Eva” 150: ... sublimitas und humilitas sind hier überall ethisch-theologische, nicht ästhetische-stilistische Kategorien; doch auch in diesen letzteren Sinne, im stilistischen, ist die antithetische Verschmelzung beider als Eigentümlichkeit der heiligen Schrift schon zur Zeit der Kirchväter hervorgehoben worden, besonders von Augustin... (Die Stilkritik) dass schriften, die nach ihrem Urteil in einer unmöglichen, ungebildeten Sprache und ohne Kenntnis der Stilkategorien geschrieben waren, die höchste Wahrheit enthalten sollten... hat aber zugleich ihre Augen geöffnet für die wahre und eigentümliche Grösse der heiligen Schrift: das diese nämlich eine ganzne neue Art des Erhabenen geschaffen habe, in welcher das Alltägliche und Niedrigsten nicht ausgeschlossen, sondern mitenthalt sei, so dass ihrem Stil, wie ihrem Inhalt, eine unmittelbare Verbindung vom Niedrigsten zum Höchsten verwirklicht werde.
If the scales were tipped in favour of Dante in “Camilla”, the analysis of *Mimesis* takes this critical partiality one step further. Auerbach’s choice of episodes as examples of the sublime in “Odysseus’ Scar” is instructive. The choice of the Akedah as the representative episode for Biblical style is decisive here. It remains one of the most densely interpreted episodes in the Jewish and Christian scriptural traditions. On the one hand, the Akedah depicts an inexplicably cruel God who would test a believer’s faith – therefore this episode could be mobilized as an argument for those who positioned the God of the Old Testament as anathema to the God of the Christian Bible. The Akedah could also be mobilized for more explicitly anti-Semitic readings of the Bible, in which Judaism was linked with the practice of child sacrifice (despite the fact that the practice is disavowed repeatedly in other parts of the Hebrew Bible). On the other hand, the Akedah is also a key episode for the method of figural interpretation: the Akedah corresponds to the how the Crucifixion is read as the sacrifice by God of Christ, “his only beloved son”. If sublime content is constituted by “the antithetical fusion… of (the) ethico-theological”, the Akedah works this definition out: Abraham is presented in a moment of extreme antithesis between the ethical and theological, in conversation with his god but nevertheless in psychological crisis.

Auerbach’s presentation of the Akedah serves to reinforce the sublimity of its content. Whilst framing this as a narrative that “everybody knows” (… *es beginnt die

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60 Auerbach alludes to the intense hermeneutic attention the sacrifice of Isaac attracted. *Mimesis* 10: the journey (of Abraham and Isaac to the appointed place of sacrifice) …is inserted, like a blank duration, between what has passed and what lies ahead, and which yet is measured: three days! Three such days positively demand the symbolic interpretation which they later received’. “Narbe” 12: So ist die Reise… zwischen dem Vergangenen und dem Bevorstehenden eingelagert ist wie eine unausgefüllte Dauer, die aber doch gemessen ist: drei Tage! Solche drei Tage rufen die symbolische Ausdeutung, die sie später gefunden haben, geradezu herbei. See for example Delaney, C.L. *Abraham on Trial: Social Legacy of Biblical Myth* (Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ. 1998) on the vast tradition of reading the Akedah.
Erzählung selbst; ein jeder kennt sie…). Auerbach conspicuously truncates his summary at Genesis 22.8, the point at which father and son reach the appointed place for the sacrifice and Abraham is relieved of the awful obligation of having to kill Isaac by a last minute divine substitution of lamb for son. The omission of the end of the episode is perhaps motivated by the desire to avoid the hermeneutic quagmire of the trickiest part of the sacrifice narrative. Auerbach also skips over the young serving men, mentioned at Genesis 22.5, who accompany father and son and to whom Abraham gives the order to stay with the donkey whilst he goes to perform the sacrifice. This further omission allows Auerbach to present the episode in its most stripped-back terms, a portrait of one man’s psychological struggle in reckoning with the demands of his god. As a critical component of the sublime, Auerbach underscores the fraught ‘ethico-theological’ nature of this relationship between Abraham and his god by pointing out that Abraham’s response in Hebrew is Hinne-ni (‘here I am!’) a term expressing ethical relations between man and God rather than any specific location.

Equally, Auerbach’s choice and presentation of Odyssey 19’s recognition scene dismisses the idea that Homeric poetry represents ‘ethico-theological’ material, that is, properly sublime content. In the primary sense, there is no representation of a god in action (as in the passages that Auerbach chooses for his comparison of the sublime in “Camilla”) or in relation to a human (as in the Akedah). Given that the Odyssey has a number of humans interacting with divine and semi-divine beings, Auerbach’s choice

61 “Narbe” 11.
62 Mimesis 9, “Narbe” 11 In this atmosphere it is unthinkable that an implement, a landscape through which the travelers passed, the serving men or the ass should be described…they are serving men, ass, wood, and knife and nothing else. (Undenkbar wäre es hier, ein Gerät, das gebraucht wird, eine Landschaft, die man durchquert, die Knechte oder den Esel, die den Zug begleiten, zu beschreiben…es sind Knechte, Esel, Holz und Messer, weiter nichts…).
of a moment in the epic poem between two people as representative of its content calibrates Homeric poetry as separate from the notion of the sublime that *Mimesis* argues for. Auerbach sees no ethically valuable content in the episode either. Odysseus forcibly silences Euryclea so that she will not reveal his identity to Penelope. Auerbach grants that a premature revelation of the hero’s identity is a kind of crisis but he insists that it does not touch the hero’s psyche: the silencing of Euryclea prompts no ethical deliberation from Odysseus. The Homeric hero’s instinctive use of force against his nurse is directly opposed to the difficulty of Abraham’s predicament about intimate violence. Auerbach does not prematurely cut short the scar episode as he did with the presentation of the Akedah. Auerbach outlines how the Homeric narrative deals with the inset episode in which Odysseus recalls the boar hunt in which he received his leg wound and then resumes the interaction between hero and nurse. Auerbach thereby directs us to read the *Odyssey* as a smoothly worked out narrative – in fact, a ‘too smoothly’ organized narrative. Thus in his choice and presentation of episode from the *Odyssey*, Auerbach manoeuvres Homeric poetry away from the constitutive components of his notion of the sublime, that is, the theological and the ethical.

For the Old Testament to hold water as an example of Auerbach’s new Judeo-Christian sublime, he is forced into risky territory by arguing that Homeric poetry has complex relationships between linguistic units, though its philosophy of history is not

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64 *Mimesis* 19, “Narbe” 22 …it is…quickly recognizable by its composition. 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 course of action and the simple orientation of actors, has disappeared. (...ist sie doch meist an ihrem Aufbau schnell zu erkennen. Sie verläuft übermässig glatt. Alles Querlaufende, aller Reibungswiderstand, alles Sonstige, Sekundäre, welches in die Hauptereignisse und Hauptmotive hineinspielt, alles Unentschiedene, Gebrochene und Schwankende, welches den klaren Gang der Handlung und die einfache Richtung der handelnden Personen verwirrt, ist ausgewaschen).
integrated. Thus Auerbach discloses syntactical analysis as a priority. In discussing how Penelope and Euryclea’s thoughts are presented, Auerbach observes that:

Feelings though they are, with only a slight admixture of the most general considerations upon human destiny, the syntactical connection (Verbindung) between part and part is perfectly clear, no contour blurred.

*Mimesis* 3

Auerbach develops this emphasis on syntactical connection. It becomes the key characteristic of Homeric representation of reality: Auerbach underscores how Homeric poetry has any number of syntactical mechanisms that attend and reflect the integrated harmony of the relationships between objects and speakers:

…no speech is so filled with anger or scorn that the particles which express logical and grammatical connection are out of place. This … is true of course not only of speeches but also of the presentation in general. The separate elements of a phenomenon are most clearly placed in relation to one another; a large number of conjunctions, adverbs, particles and other syntactical tools, all clearly circumscribed and delicately differentiated in meaning delimit persons, things, and portions of incidents in respect to one another, and at the same time bring them together in a continuous and flexible connection; like the separate phenomena themselves, their relationships – their temporal, local, causal, final, consecutive, comparative, concessive, antithetical, and conditional limitations – are brought to light in perfect fullness; so that a

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65 “Narbe” 5: ...obgleich es Gefühle sind, ein wenig nur mit allgemeiner Betrachtung des Menschenschicksals vermischt, ist die syntaktische Verbindung zwischen ihren Teilen vollkommen klar; kein Umriss verschwimmt.
continuous rhythmic procession of phenomena passes by…”

*Mimesis 6* (my emphasis)\(^{66}\)

Auerbach’s emphasis on the interconnectedness of Homeric syntax implies that it is hypotactic. He does not go as far as explicitly drawing that conclusion, which would patently be false. However, it is worth attending to the broader argument about the sublime that requires such characterization. The interconnected nature of Homeric syntax discloses a philosophy of history that is averse to interconnection. Thus, Auerbach argues that Homeric poetry is connected in terms of immediate relationships between things but with no consideration of their temporal relations. Auerbach’s proof is how the excursus of the scar’s origin is introduced:

To the word scar [v. 393] there is first attached a relative clause [“which once long ago a boar…”], which enlarges into a voluminous syntactical parenthesis; into this an independent sentence unexpectedly intrudes [v.396: “A god himself gave him…”], which then quietly disentangles itself from syntactical subordination, until, with verse 399, an equally free syntactical treatment of the new content begins a new present which continues unchallenged until, with verse 467 [“the old woman now touched it…”], the scene which had been broken off is now resumed.

\(^{66}\)“Narbe” 8-9: …keine Rede ist so angst- oder zornerrfüllt, dass in ihr die Instrumente der sprachlich-logischen Gliederung fehlten oder in Unordnung geraten wären. Dies letztere gilt natürlich nicht nur von den Reden, sondern von der Darstellung überhaupt. Die einzelnen Erscheinungsglieder werden überall auf das klarste miteinander in Beziehung gesetzt; eine grosse Anzahl von Konjunktionen, Adverbien, Partikeln und anderen syntaktischen Werkzeugen, alle in ihrer Bedeutung klar umschrieben und fein abgestuft, grenzen die Personen, Dinge und Ereignisteile gegeneinander ab, und bringen sie zugleich miteinander in ununterbrochene, mühelos fliessende Verbindung; wie die einzelnen Erscheinungen selbst, so treten auch ihre Verhältnisse, die zeitlichen, örtlichen, kausalen, finalen, konsekutiven, vergleichenden, konzessiven, antithetischen und bedingenden Verschränkungen in vollendeter Bildung ans Licht; so dass ein ununterbrochenes, rhythmisch bewegtes Vorüberziehen der Erscheinungen stattfindet…
The philosophical purpose of elucidating the syntactical skeleton of these lines is to demonstrate that the shift from primary narrative to inset narrative and back again does not create historical depth. Though Auerbach points out that the syntax is complex within the parenthesis, this is secondary to the argument about the relationship between the parenthesis and the narrative in which it appears. Auerbach insists that there is no temporal relationship between the two. Rather, the Homeric style of introducing the excursus into the narrative consciously avoids making the connection of temporal ‘perspective’. The excursus is not designed to create historical depth but rather: ‘The story of the wound becomes an independent and exclusive present’. Auerbach proves his point by showing how the excursus could have been arranged to indicate historical depth. He suggests that the excursus of the scar could have been explicitly presented as Odysseus’ own recollection. Auerbach even suggests his own emendation:

it would have been perfectly easy to do; the story of the scar had only to be inserted two verses earlier, at the first mention of the word scar, where the motifs of “Odysseus” and “recollection” were already at hand.

Mimesis 7
In order to render Homer as the embodiment of the ancient Greco-Roman sublime, it is crucial for Auerbach that the lengthy excursus (Od. 19.399-466) is a stand-alone event, creating its own present time. Auerbach points out that though diversion has been pleasant and charming, the unruffled surface of the main narrative is not disturbed. From an analysis of syntactical arrangement, Auerbach moves to an indictment of a lack of historical depth in Homeric poetry. Auerbach’s choice of episode can therefore be seen as the most provocative iteration of this charge. At the very moment at which the epic poem appears to create historical depth, Auerbach argues for its temporal uniformity: the historical excursus is a discrete moment of time. Overlooking the scar itself as the embodied historical connection between narrative and excursus, Auerbach argues that we are reading two discrete moments of “full present” (volle Gegenwart). Thus he characterizes the historical force of Homeric style is characterized by an aversion to making connections.

Turning to the Hebrew Bible, we see that Auerbach assigns the qualities of parataxis and interconnection in diametrically opposite manner to the way in which he has described Homeric literary style and philosophy of history. Far less controversially than his assessment of Homeric literary style, Auerbach is in safe waters when he asserts that the style of the Akedah is simple. It refuses epithets for people or places (Mimesis 9), it has no episodic structuring, its syntactical connections are ‘of the most rudimentary sort’ and so the sentences are short and mostly independent, and there are very few temporal or geographical markers to indicate Abraham’s journey to the place where he has been directed to sacrifice Isaac. So stripped back is the text that Auerbach concludes, after pointing out how little direct speech there is in this episode and how heavy the silences are between Abraham and Isaac: “Everything remains
unexpressed”. \(^{71}\) Auerbach attends to the smallest deviation from this austere rule of representation, that is, the adjective used to describe Isaac. The descriptive term is significant because, though small, it illustrates how the paratactic style of the Bible represents an integrated view of history. Thus it is important that the thing we know about Isaac is that God describes him to Abraham as the son “whom you love”:

he may be handsome or ugly, intelligent or stupid, tall or short, pleasant or unpleasant—we are not told. Only what we need to know about him [Isaac] …is illuminated, so that it may become apparent how terrible Abraham’s temptation is, and that God is fully aware of it.

*Mimesis* 10-11 \(^{72}\)

For Auerbach, the Old Testament’s integrated view of history depends on the number of relationships that the epithet cues up in this context. It signals the relationships not just between father and son but also between God and man – it also signals the ethical tensions that inhere in those relationships.

Auerbach determines that the Old Testament and Homer respectively express starkly different philosophies of history. On the one hand, the Old Testament articulates a deeply interconnected philosophy of history in which all phenomena must be subsumed into the divine plan. On the other hand, Homeric poetry, in its lack of theologically inflected claims to universal history, expresses a philosophy of history in which phenomena are ultimately disparate and contingent. Thus Auerbach’s sublime

\(^{71}\) *Mimesis* 11, “Narbe” 13: Alles bleibt unausgesprochen.

\(^{72}\) “Narbe” 13: …er mag schön oder hässlich, klug oder dumm, gross oder klein, gefällig oder abstossend sein – das wird hier nicht gesagt. Nur dasjenige, was jetzt und hier, innerhalb der Handlung von ihm bekannt sein muss, wird beleuchtet – damit hervortrete, wie schrecklich die Versuchung Abrahams ist, und dass Gott sich dessen wohl bewusst ist.
is constituted precisely by a paratactic style of language expressing a complex and integrated philosophy of history. The critical energy that Auerbach directs towards an integrated Homeric style is in service of a wider argument about how style and history go together in diametrically opposed fashion. In these terms, the positioning of Homer as *counterexample* of Auerbach’s sublime becomes explicit.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has been concerned with how Auerbach’s politics of exemplarity are organized along the axes of the sublime. My two key concepts, ‘exemplarity’ and the ‘sublime’ lie beneath the surface of Auerbach’s readings of the historical shape of the Western literary tradition. Throughout this chapter I have suggested that Auerbach’s Judeo-Christian sublime operates in subterranean fashion in *Mimesis* as a counterpart to Auerbach’s much more explicitly flagged concept of ‘realism’. In both realism and the sublime Auerbach attempts to work out an ethics of representation: what subject matters deserves literary attention and in what manner? To conclude this chapter I will show how Auerbach recruits the sublime in tandem with his core argument about his philosophy of representation in *Mimesis*. I will also indicate what is at stake in Auerbach’s mobilization of Homer as counter/example.

In the second chapter of *Mimesis* (*Mimesis* 24-49, “Fortunata” 31-55) Auerbach directly contrasts two ancient examples of realism (the description of the host’s wife, Fortunate in Petronius’ *Cena Trimalchionis* and the revolt of the Germanic legions in
Tacitus’ *Annals* with an example of realism (Peter’s denial of Christ in the Gospel of Mark). The former two texts are as close as ancient literature can get to realism:

Petronius’ literary ambition… is to imitate the random, everyday, contemporary milieu with its sociological background, and to have his characters speak their jargon without recourse to any form of stylization. Thus he reached the ultimate limit of the advance of realism in antiquity…

Now if Petronius marks the ultimate limit to which realism attained in antiquity, his work will accordingly serve to show what that realism could or would not do.\(^73\)

Auerbach goes on to make the case that Petronius could only present his subject matter comically, excluding “everything problematic, everything psychologically or sociologically suggestive or serious, let alone tragic, complications”. He goes on to describe why this ancient mode of realism is damaging:

If (the literature of antiquity) was unable to represent everyday life seriously… if it could only represent it in the low style… statically and ahistorically, the implication is that these things mark the limits not only of the realism of antiquity but of its historical consciousness as well.\(^74\)

\(^73\) *Mimesis* 30-1, “Fortunata” 34: Dieser setzt… seinen künstlerischen Ehrgeiz daran, ein beliebiges, alltägliches zeitgenössisches Milieu mit seinem gesellschaftlichen Unterbau ohne Stilisierung nachzuahmen und die Personen ihren Jargon sprechen zu lassen. Damit hat er die äusserste Grenze erreicht, bis zu der antike Realismus vorgedrungen ist… Wenn nun Petronius die äusserste Grenze zeigt, bis zu der der antike Realismus vorgedrung ist – so lässt sich an seinem Werk auch erkennen,\(w\) as dieser Realismus nicht geben konnte oder mochte.

\(^74\) *Mimesis* 33, “Fortunata” 37: Wenn die antike Literatur das alltägliche Leben nicht ernsthaft, \(…\) sondern nur im niederen Stil, \(…\) geschichtslos und statisch darzustellen vermochte, so liegt darin nicht nur eine Grenze ihr Realismus, sondern auch, und vor allem, eine Grenze ihres Geschichtsbewusstseins.
In arguing that ancient realism is a mode of representation lacking in historical consciousness, Auerbach indicates how the notions of the sublime and realism intersect in his argument. Auerbach takes his understanding of the Judeo-Christian sublime, as I showed earlier, from Augustine’s *sermo humilis*, an attempt to deal with and communicate effectively the difficult problem of Christ’s historical existence. Against ancient realism, which is limited with respect to the historical consciousness, Auerbach introduces ‘tragic realism’ as the first iteration of a stylistic principle that is the main quarry of *Mimesis*. For Auerbach, the Gospel of Mark is of a piece with the Akedah, sharing in a similar ethico-theological philosophy of representation in which historical consciousness is a priority and the humble and everyday can be presented in a serious and tragic way. There is a sense then in which (tragic) realism and the sublime track a similar set of mimetic concerns. Tracing the notion of the sublime allows us to examine how Auerbach is formulating his philosophy of representation in opposition to the values of Greco-Roman literature as they are instilled in and projected onto Homer. Auerbach’s definitions of realism leave this polemic latent.

This chapter has been able to show that Auerbach’s sublime is derived with Homer as counter-example. I have thereby been able to elucidate the extent to which *Mimesis* undermines classicizing histories of literature and philosophies of representation.

In making the argument of this chapter, I have articulated counter-exemplarity as the mode of polemic in which Auerbach frames a relationship with pagan antiquity. Counter-exemplarity is not a concept that Auerbach gives particular attention to as part of the history of rhetoric. Nevertheless, in Auerbach’s positioning of Homer as *Gegenbeispiel* in the *Epilegomena*, this chapter has insisted that the rhetorical framing

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of example and counterexample puts the reader into the mode of evaluation. The argumentational strategy of “Odysseus’ Scar” compels us to take seriously the claim that an historical and ethical vacuity operates at the heart of Homeric poetry. In effect, the rhetorical force of establishing example and counterexample of modes of literary representation “stages an instance of judgment”. 76 Far from a balanced comparison then, Auerbach offers us a passionate argument about the cultural status of both texts.

If Mimesis had followed the strategy of the Dantebuch, that is, to trace realism as the single strand of through the history of Western literature, the stakes of such a reading would remain submerged. However, “Odysseus’ Scar” illuminates precisely the mode of representation that Auerbach rejects: since the history of classicism is not traced in the rest of the book, Homeric poetry embodies der Antike (pagan antiquity) and the postclassical cultural modes that affiliate themselves with antiquity. The notion of Homer’s sublimity forces us to think explicitly about how the reception of the poet orients our readings. Auerbach’s formulation of the Judeo-Christian sublime are the grounds on which he is able to de-prioritize Homer as the aesthetic, as well as the ethical, highpoint of the Western literary tradition. In these terms, Auerbach’s rhetorical achievement is to write an integrated history of Western literature that trenchantly refuses the intellectual and political co-ordinates set by German philhellenism. In the following chapter, I will show how Adorno and Horkheimer are much more explicit about the politics of reading Homer and the rejection of German philhellenism.

76 Gelley, A. Unruly examples: on the rhetoric of exemplarity (Stanford University Press, Palo Alto CA. 1995) 14: “The rhetorical force of the example stages an instance of judgment, and the reader, in order to grasp the point at issue, must be capable of occupying however provisionally the seat of judgment. The reader does not simply occupy a post of reception...but is drawn into the process of weighing alternative arguments or cases. Yet the scandal of the example...lies in the fact that this ethical summons – the obligation to judge – is predicated not on a law or a rule ...but on the instance in its particularity...this situation is in no sense exceptional. As readers, as interpreters, we are continually and inescapably called upon to make judgments on insufficient grounds.”
philhellenism. Though Auerbach’s politics are less antagonistically articulated, there can be no doubt about the polemical force behind rendering Homer the definitive counterexample of European culture.
Chapter Two: Homeric Naïveté in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment.*

This chapter is concerned with Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s 1944 *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* (Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments). Unremittingly focused on the critical formation of modernity, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* takes up Homer’s *Odyssey* to formulate its broad-ranging critique. This chapter inquires into how Adorno and Horkheimer read the *Odyssey.* For them, the Homeric epic is deeply implicated in the history of domination they are seeking to trace. I argue that we should also see in Adorno and Horkheimer’s reading the recognition of the *Odyssey* as an aesthetic object. Therefore, I will show how Adorno and Horkheimer’s reading of the *Odyssey* is dialectical, since as a work of art, the epic poem contains the potential to elude structures of domination.

To explore this subversive element of the *Odyssey* as art, this chapter examines how Adorno formulates a concept of ‘epic naïveté’ by collapsing Schiller’s distinction of naïve/sentimental in which Homer is the paradigmatically naïve artist. In a characteristically brilliant and counter-intuitive move, Adorno zeroes in on the dialectical potential of Schiller’s concepts of naive and sentimental. He defines ‘epic naïveté’ as a feature of Homeric style, that is, when epic narration becomes self aware of the limits of representation. Adorno’s attention to Homeric style and the concept of

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77 Adorno, T.W. and Horkheimer, M. *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* (Social Studies Association, Inc., New York) 1944 in *Theodor W. Adorno, Gesammelte Schriften* Band 3 (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1981); trans. Cumming J. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Verso, London. 1997). Schmidt, J “Language, Mythology, and Enlightenment: Historical Notes on Horkheimer and Adorno’s Dialectic of Enlightenment” traces how the various fragments of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* coalesced into a book. Once compiled, the book was out of print for many years in Germany, circulated only in pirated copy. An English translation was only published decades later, with some recalcitrance. (Accessed01/19/18) [https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/dd3b/8fb764fe99d5a11d3693d3a7811996e2fd6c.pdf](https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/dd3b/8fb764fe99d5a11d3693d3a7811996e2fd6c.pdf)
epic naïveté, this chapter claims, is important in understanding how the reading of the *Odyssey* is situated in the wider argument of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Finally, this chapter turns back to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to investigate how ‘epic naïveté’ has a bearing on the status of the *Odyssey*. I suggest that Adorno and Horkheimer identify two mechanisms in the Homeric narrative (reticence and omission) that allow them to read the *Odyssey* as an (epically) naïve text, that is, as an aesthetic object that contains the resources for liberation as well as documenting the original moment in the history of domination.

The major intervention of this chapter is to show that Adorno and Horkheimer offer a reading of Homer that not only documents civilizational violence but also is deeply sensitive to suffering as a consequence of this violence and the problem of how to represent suffering.

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*Dialectic of Enlightenment* discloses the historical, cultural, and physical circumstances of its composition explicitly. Central to Adorno and Horkheimer’s interrogation of the Western culture that had produced the Holocaust is critique of 1940s America, for example, in its analysis of the glossy mainstream cultural productions of Hollywood. Composed over the course of the Second World War, the text also declares itself as the product of the completely combined intellectual energies of both Adorno and Horkheimer. After a brief introduction, the Frankfurt

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78 Hullot-Kentor, R., “Back to Adorno” *telos* no. 81 (1989) 5-29 sets up an authoritative case that Adorno wrote the Odysseus excursus, Horkheimer the Juliette excursus, mainly based on the presence of Odyssey material in only Adorno’s posthumous notes. Hullot-Kentor also works out how *Dialectic of Enlightenment* bears witness intellectual and stylistic differences between the Frankfurt pair, though
thinkers offer an essay on “The Concept of Enlightenment” (Begriff der Aufklärung), flagging it as an exploration of two ‘theses’: how “myth is already enlightenment; and enlightenment reverts to mythology.” 79 Two “excurses” then explore the “concrete phenomena” in which this radical claim about Enlightenment is manifested. The first excursus is probably composed by Adorno and takes up a reading of Homer’s Odyssey to examine more closely the relationship between myth and enlightenment. The second excursus is probably composed by Horkheimer and attends to Marquis de Sade’s novel L’Histoire de Juliette, ou les Prospérités du vice (1797-1801) in pursuing the relationship between ‘enlightenment and morality’. The second half of Dialectic of Enlightenment operates in a different critical mode: rather than performing close reading of a text to formulate a critique, Adorno and Horkheimer undertake essays on the ‘culture industry’ (Kulturindustrie) and a psychoanalytical investigation of anti-Semitism. The book concludes with “Notes and Drafts” (Aufzeichnungen und Entwürfe), short and pithy observations that are generically close to Adorno’s aphoristic approach to philosophy in Minima Moralia (1951).

This variety of generic formats (the excursus, the essay, the note, the very idea of a fragment) gives notice of Adorno and Horkheimer’s project in Dialectic of Enlightenment. Rather than a traditional magnum opus, the Frankfurt thinkers opted for shorter form of critique to communicate a profound vote of no-confidence in philosophy. For Adorno and Horkheimer, critical thought had failed in its primary task – the genocidal violence of National Socialism was proof that philosophy had

79 DE xvi, DA 16: … zwei Thesen…: schon der Mythos ist Aufklärung, und: Aufklärung schlägt in Mythologie zurück.
abandoned any oppositional relationship to human institutions of power and instead had become identical with or subordinated to the worst parts of civilization:

…we had set ourselves nothing less than the discovery of why mankind, instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.\(^{80}\)

As the authors observe, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* offers a “critique of philosophy (that) refuses to abandon philosophy”.\(^{81}\) While *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is unsparing in its analysis of philosophy’s failure to operate critically on the world, Adorno and Horkheimer announce that the unerring critical focus on ‘enlightenment’ (*Aufklärung*) aims at the recuperation of this concept:

The dilemma that faced us in our work proved to be the first phenomenon of our investigation: the self-destruction of the Enlightenment. We are wholly convinced – and therein lies our *petitio principii* – that social freedom is inseparable from enlightened thought. Nevertheless…the notion of this very way of thinking, no less than the actual historic forms – the social institutions, with which it is interwoven, already contains the seed of the reversal universally apparent today. If enlightenment does not accommodate reflection on this recidivist element, then it seals its own fate…In the enigmatic readiness of the technologically educated masses to fall under the sway of any despotism, in its self-destructive affinity to popular paranoia, and in all

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\(^{80}\) DE xi, DA 11: Was wir uns vorgesetzt hatten, war tatsächlich nicht weniger als die Erkenntnis, warum die Menschheit, anstatt in einen wahrhaft menschlichen Zustand einzutreten, in eine neue Art von Barbarei versinkt.

\(^{81}\) DE x, DA 10: Als Kritik von Philosophie will sie Philosophie nicht preisgeben.
uncomprehended absurdity, the weakness of the modern theoretical faculty is apparent.\footnote{DE xiii, DA 13: Die Aporie, der wir uns bei unserer Arbeit gegenüber fanden, erwies sich somit als der erste Gegenstand, den wir zu untersuchen hatten: die Selbstzerstörung der Aufklärung. Wir hegen keinen Zweifel - und darin liegt unsere petio principii -, daß die Freiheit in der Gesellschaft vom aufklärenden Denken unabtrennbar ist. Jedoch glauben wir, genauso deutlich erkannt zu haben, dass der Begriff eben dieses Denkens, nicht weniger als die konkreten historischen Formen, die Institutionen der Gesellschaft, in die es verflochten ist, schon den Keim zu jenem Rückschritt enthalten, der heute überall sich ereignet. Nimmt Aufklärung die Reflexion auf dieses rückläufige Moment nicht in sich auf, so besiegelt sie ihr eigenes Schicksal... An der rätselhaften Bereitschaft der technologisch erzogenen Massen, in den Bann eines jeglichen Despotismus zu geraten, an ihrer selbstzerstörerischen Affinität zur völkischen Paranoia, an all dem unbegriffenen Widersinn wird die Schwäche des gegenwärtigen theoretischen Verständnisses offenbar.}

For all the pungency of the critique to follow, Adorno and Horkheimer explicitly understand enlightened thought as the path to ‘social freedom’ (\textit{die Freiheit in der Gesellschaft}). Without sufficient self-reflection on the part of enlightened thought, however, they also understand that philosophy cannot realize this liberatory potential. Worse, the failure to engage in self-reflexive critique turns enlightened thought towards violent ends. Self-reflexive critique is therefore necessary for \textit{Aufklärung} to participate in the construction, rather than the violent destruction, of civilization. At this point the Frankfurt thinkers identify the first dialectical characteristic of enlightened thought: despite it ostensible aims, enlightened thought is structured by ‘the seed of reversal’ (\textit{der Keim zu jenem Rückschritt}), that is, self-destruction (\textit{die Selbstzerstörung}). Though this is an acute and painful aporetic moment\footnote{“Die Aporie” which Cumming translates as “dilemma”.} for enlightened thought, it does not entirely give up hope.

The other element in the above citation that directly concerns this chapter is the ambivalent historical position of \textit{Aufklärung} in Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique. It is possible to see one of the historical articulations in operation here: enlightenment (\textit{Aufklärung}) and enlightened thought (\textit{aufklärenden Denken}) are linked to facets of
Western culture that characterize industrial and post-industrial modernity (for example, in the connection made between the attraction of “technologically educated” masses (technologisch erzogenen) to extreme political ideology.) It is clear then that part of Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique is aimed at the historical period of the Enlightenment, that is, the eighteenth century in Western Europe in which questions of culture and progress were explicitly thematized as the guiding concerns of philosophy as it sought to define itself as ‘modern’. However it is also apparent that Adorno and Horkheimer conceive of enlightenment as a feature of a particular kind of thought that is manifested at several historical times and in various social formations (der Begriff eben dieses Denkens, nicht weniger als die konkreten historischen Formen). Thus Adorno and Horkheimer operate Aufklärung as a concept belonging to the thought of a particular historical time and place, as well as a recurring characteristic of rational thought that emerges at different times and places. Looking ahead, Adorno and Horkheimer mobilize epic naïvete as a species of enlightened thought that is constituted precisely in these historically specific and flexible terms, exploiting the dialectical potential in Schiller’s distinction between the naïve and the sentimental. Historical ambiguity also informs the kind of thought that enlightenment characterizes: the Frankfurt thinkers frequently toggle between ratio and Vernunft, that is, between a concept of reason that has given shape to Western thought for millennia and the specifically Kantian articulation of reason. Adorno and Horkheimer’s concept of Aufklärung is constituted by a certain degree of historical ambivalence. This chapter seeks then to work out how this historical ambivalence organizes Dialectic of Enlightenment’s reading of the Odyssey.
If enlightened thought has within it the potential for freedom but fails to realize it, it must therefore collude in systems of domination. This sets up the key philosophical move that Adorno and Horkheimer make in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. As Jay points out, Adorno and Horkheimer distance themselves from the classic Marxist critique of history, namely, that the motor of history is class struggle. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* replaces this with the claim that man’s domination of nature drives the historical development of civilization. Furthermore, Adorno and Horkheimer insist that man’s domination of nature comes to be the model for the domination of certain human subjects by others. In deprioritizing the central Marxist analyses of class struggle and labour, the Frankfurt thinkers transform the critical Marxist narrative in which the telos of history is emancipation. Instead, Adorno and Horkheimer critique the basic idea that the shape of history tends towards civilizational improvement – they indict the very idea of progress, as well as the conceptual apparatuses that produced idea of progress.

Adorno and Horkheimer offer a speculative anthropology to explain how human domination of nature came into existence. Thus they identify magic and shamanism, ritual and animism as the first strategies by which man attempted to affect the environment around him for the sake of self-preservation, though without seeking to

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84 Jay, M. *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950* (Heinemann, London 1973) 256 “Disillusioned with the Soviet Union, no longer even marginally sanguine about the working classes of the West, appalled by the integrative power of mass culture, the Frankfurt School traveled the last leg of its long march away from orthodox Marxism. The clearest expression of this change was the Institut’s replacement of class conflict, that foundation stone of any truly Marxist theory, with a new motor of history. The focus was now on the larger conflict between man and nature, both within and without, a conflict whose origins went back to before capitalism and whose...intensification, appeared likely after capitalism.” Susan Buck-Morss pushes back on this reading, though she concedes: “What seems clear is that at least Adorno never considered the theory of class struggle as the essential element of dialectical materialism...that he conceived of the dialectic in accord with Marx’s paradigm of the dialectic of labor rather than the history of class struggle, as a process between man and nature, consciousness and reality, present knowledge and past history.” *The Origins of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (The Free Press, Macmillan Publishing, New York 1977) 63.
dominate nature. From these non-dominating strategies came ‘myth’ as a species of, as well as a precursor to, enlightened thought. This is an important feature of the claim to a dialectical relationship between myth and enlightenment – the recognition that myth is a type of enlightened thought, a rational strategy for sorting out and defining the universe. Using Weber’s concept of ‘disenchantment’ (*Entzauberung*), Adorno and Horkheimer argue that enlightenment began properly when man began to conceive of himself as a subject dominating over nature, even if nature was manifested in the guise of personified divinities that man himself had made and worshipped:

The categories by which Western philosophy defined its everlasting natural order marked the spots once occupied by Oncus and Persephone, Ariadne and Nereus. The pre-Socratic cosmologies preserve the moment of transition. The moist, the indivisible, air, and fire, which they hold to be the primal matter of nature, are already rationalizations of the mythic mode of apprehension.  

Here the Frankfurt thinkers imply a transition (*Übergang*) from mythological accounts of natural phenomena to the more abstract conceptual apparatuses developed by the pre-Socratic philosophers. Separating philosophy from myth was an abiding concern for the eighth to sixth century BCE Greek thinkers – that is, they were acutely aware of their proximity of myth and sought to reject it as a non-rational conceptual apparatus. The later philosophical tradition, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, lacked the self-reflection to perceive that the points of departure it so consistently took

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were precisely those that had been thematized by myth. This is the sense of the ‘everlasting’ (ewig) position of nature, as Adorno and Horkheimer characterize it, in the philosophical tradition. This would seem to mark the cultural milieu of the pre-Socratic thinkers as the original, historical moment at which enlightened thought emerged.

As Adorno and Horkheimer continue their brief history of enlightenment, it emerges that they consider the pre-Socratic thinkers as both part of and substantially separate from enlightenment thought:

The Enlightenment, however, recognized the old powers in the Platonic and Aristotelian aspects of metaphysics, and opposed as superstition the claim that truth is predicable of universals… From now on, matter would at last be mastered without any illusion of ruling or inherent powers, of hidden qualities. For the Enlightenment, whatever does not conform to the rule of computation and utility is suspect… In the process it treats its own ideas of human rights as it does the older universals. Enlightenment is totalitarian.

Enlightenment has always taken the basic principle of myth to be anthropomorphism, the projection onto nature of the subjective… Consequently the many mythic figures can all be brought to a common denominator, and reduced to a human subject. Oedipus’ answer to the Sphinx’s riddle: “It is man!” is the Enlightenment stereotype repeatedly offered as information, irrespective of whether it is faced with a piece of
objective intelligence, a bare schematization, fear of evil powers, or hope of redemption.\(^{86}\)

I have quoted a tranche of Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis here to illustrate their various historical deployments of the notion of enlightenment. In the first instance, the Enlightenment implies a modern vantage point from which one can look coolly back at the history of Greek philosophy and identify how myth persists. This appears to be confirmed in “from now on” (von nun an) that marks out the eighteenth century as the privileged moment of enlightenment. However, in the second instance of Aufklärung in this passage, they appear to have collapsed this historical distinction by moving into the general observation about how enlightened thought promotes utility (Nützlichkeit) as its guiding principle and harbours suspicion towards the incalculable. Once more, the historical referent shifts in the bold announcement that the reflexive desire in enlightened thought to liquidate what cannot be brought under its control is ‘totalitarian’. Given the historical context of the Dialectic of Enlightenment, the force


of this statement is clear: the horrors of National Socialism are not the antithesis of enlightened thought but rather its ultimate realization.

As they shift gears to observe the anthropocentrism of enlightened thought, Adorno and Horkheimer identify a critical failure in the philhellenism of the Enlightenment. They are critical of the tendency to position Oedipus as the *Aufklärer par excellence*, perhaps most prominently found in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*. They insist that the answer ‘it is man’ is not a careful out-witting of the Sphinx but rather a reflexive answer that indicates his stunted ability to reason (as well as his self-absorption). Adorno and Horkheimer were of course not the first to recognize that Sophocles’ tragedy contained within it the philosophical resources to undermine the Enlightenment’s formulation of man as rational subject.87 Whilst the Frankfurt pair considered using *Oedipus Tyrannos*, rather than the *Odyssey*, to mount their critique of the enlightenment88, the choice to mobilize Homer implies that the historical specificity of their key terms is central to the argument of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Odysseus is the vehicle for Adorno and Horkheimer’s critical purposes because the idea of Homer is uniquely resonant as a foundational moment of Western civilization: the idea of Sophocles and tragedy does not signal an originary point of culture in the same way. Thus in taking up the figure of Odysseus and the idea of Homer, the Frankfurt pair articulate a root and branch critique of the shape of Western civilization.

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88 Hullot-Kentor, R. (1989) 18 notes that ‘In the collected transcripts of the discussions between Horkheimer and Adorno, Adorno’s first mention of the intention that would direct the writing of “Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment” actually refers to Oedipus rather than to Odysseus”. Hullot-Kentor then goes on to stress that the historical position of Homer at the border ‘between history and pre-history’ was the motivation for developing the critique of enlightenment through the figure of Odysseus. He also links the choice of Odysseus to the critique of cunning in Adorno’s first book on *Kierkegaard* (1933). Gandesha, S. “Enlightenment as Tragedy: reflections on Adorno’s ethics” *Thesis Eleven* 65 (2001) 109-130 argues that Oedipus remains (the) important critical figure in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. 
In their concern about the historical configuration of enlightened thought, Adorno and Horkheimer take aim at its universalizing tendencies. Thus they collapse historical and cultural distance in order to parse ‘enlightened thought’ as a way of thinking and approaching the world that remains consistent from Greek antiquity onwards. For example, Adorno and Horkheimer append a footnote to the observation about anthropomorphism as the ‘basic principle of myth’: “Xenophanes, Montaigne, Hume, Feuerbach, and Salomon Reinach are at one here”. If a pre-Socratic Greek thinker like Xenophon can make the same kind of rationalizing argument about myth and the origins of religions as a nineteenth century French archaeologist like Reinach, then the movement of enlightened thought is recursive.

Thus, the historical force of Aufklärung in this critique goes well beyond the eighteenth and nineteenth century intellectual and cultural phenomenon of ‘the Enlightenment’, implicating a whole history of thought going back to the pre-Socratic thinkers. This vacillation around the historicity of the notion of Aufklärung has a direct effect on Adorno and Horkheimer’s choice to turn to the Odyssey in illustrating a dialectical relationship between ‘enlightenment’ and ‘myth’. Thus the historical specificity of Homeric epic is fundamental to anchoring the Frankfurt thinkers’ critique of Enlightenment. And yet, in mobilizing the Odyssey for a critique of the philosophical tradition, Adorno and Horkheimer render it an essentially modern text, narrating the emergence of bourgeois subjectivity. In the following, I’ll turn to examine how the vacillation about the historicity of Aufklärung shapes the analysis of the Odyssey as epic poetry.
Reading the *Odyssey* for Dialectic: Epic and Enlightenment.

For the most part, Adorno and Horkheimer focus on the first half of the *Odyssey*, paying particular attention to Odysseus’ encounters with the lotus eaters, the Cyclops Polyphemus, the ghosts of the underworld, the Sirens, as well as Scylla and Charybdis. The Frankfurt thinkers understand the *Odyssey*’s narration of the hero’s adventures as the story of his breaking of the mythical cycles of repetition: whilst phenomena such as Scylla and Charybdis are fated to do the same thing over and over again, Odysseus attempts a one-way trip home, ultimately, a progressive journey. They insist that the subject constitutes and reconstitutes himself as a dominating force over nature in the encounters with uncontrollable instantiations of myth, defeating them by means of his cunning. Thus Adorno and Horkheimer understand the *Odyssey* as narrating the procedures of instrumental reason, wielded by the bourgeois subject.

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89 A significant exception is discussed below. Adorno and Horkheimer briefly attend to Penelope’s testing of Odysseus in Book 23 (DE 74-5, DA 91-3) concluding finally that ‘Marriage belongs to the primal rock of myth in the basis of civilization. But its mythic hardness and fixity stand out from myth as the small island kingdom from the infinite sea’. Adorno and Horkheimer’s allegorical interpretation of Odysseus and Penelope’s encounter in Book 23 is taken one step further in Adorno’s essay “On Epic Naïveté”, discussed in the second part of this chapter. In fact the essay opens with an allegorical interpretation of the simile of the spouses reuniting at Od 23. 233 ff. (Homer compares Penelope greeting Odysseus to a shipwrecked sailor making landfall). Adorno in EN understands this as ‘not just a simile inserted into the narrative but as the substance appearing in naked form as the story nears its end.’ (nicht als einer bloss eingeschobenen Metapher sondern als an dem gegen Ende der Erzählung nakrt erscheinenden Gehalt) EN 24, *Noten zur Literatur* 1 34. As I shall explore, the appearance of ‘substance’ (Gehalt) is only possible in this simile in which the analogical relationships have been confused, that is, when the enlightened impetus of epic narrative has abandoned meaning.

90 Adorno and Horkheimer do not explain their hermeneutic strategy towards the *Odyssey* in depth. In framing their reading of the Sirens episode, they offer a rare methodological statement - their approach is to parse the original ‘entanglement’ (*Verschlingung* DE32, DA 49) of domination, myth and labour that has been preserved (*aufbewahrt*) in the *Odyssey*. Within their reading of their episode however, they note that: “(m)easures such as those taken on Odysseus’ ship in regard to the Sirens form ominous allegory of the dialectic of enlightenment” (DE 34, DA 52) [translation modified]. ‘Allegory’ posits a much looser historical relationship between the *Odyssey* and the dialectic of enlightenment, suggesting that the Frankfurt pair engage with *Aufklärung* as a “modern” concept with which the Homeric epic shares some similar features. These occasional methodological comments attest to the historical ambivalence in their reading.
The Frankfurt pair’s turn back to the *Odyssey* (as both a foundational and a paradigmatic moment in the history of domination) is motivated by the demand that enlightened thought engage in self-reflexive critique:

The issue is not that of culture as a value, which is what critics of civilization, Huxley, Jaspers, Ortega y Gasset and others, have in mind. The point is that Enlightenment must examine itself, if men are not to be totally betrayed. The task to be accomplished is not the conservation of the past, but the redemption of the hopes of the past.\(^{91}\)

At the opening of Excursus One, before delving into the close reading of the *Odyssey*, Adorno and Horkheimer articulate the position of Homeric poetry with respect to myth. Here they understand the *Odyssey* as a superlatively clear example of the dialectical relationship between enlightenment and myth:

There is no work which offers more eloquent testimony of the mutual implication of enlightenment and myth than that of Homer, the basic text of European civilization.\(^{92}\)

The Frankfurt thinkers consistently deploy ‘testimony’ (*das Zeugnis/die Zeugnisse*) as the framing term for the *Odyssey* implying that it is the best example that can be derived to illustrate the dialectic of enlightenment and myth. Identifying Homeric

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\(^{91}\) DE xv, DA 15: Es geht nicht um die Kultur als Wert, wie die Kritiker der Zivilisation, Huxley, Jaspers, Ortega y Gasset und andere, im Sinn haben, sondern die Aufklärung muss sich auf sich selbst besinnen, wenn die Menschen nicht vollends verraten werden sollen. Nicht um die Konservierung der Vergangenheit, sondern um die Einlösung der vergangenen Hoffnung ist es zu tun.

\(^{92}\) DE 46, DA 63: Kein Werk aber legt von der Verschlingungen von Aufklärung und Mythos beredteres Zeugnis ab als das homerische, der Grundtext der europäischen Zivilisation.
epic as the “foundational text of European civilization” (*der Grundtext der europäischen Zivilisation*), however, posits it as the original moment that this civilizational dynamic emerged.93 There is a tension then in how Homer is positioned in their reading: at times as a paradigmatic moment, at other times as the original moment of the dialectic of enlightenment. This tension shapes their reading precisely because it makes the historical status of the epic poem ambiguous.

Adorno and Horkheimer suggest that there is a connection between epic as a literary form and enlightened thought, that is, more than a document of, or original container, for the dialectic of enlightenment. Thus they adduce the rationalizing operation of Homeric epic:

The epic narrative, especially in the most ancient of its various layers, clearly exhibits its close relation to myth: its component adventures have their origin in popular tradition. The Homeric spirit takes over and “organizes” the myths, but contradicts them in the process. Philosophical criticism shows that the usual identification of epic and myth (refuted, in any case, by modern classical philology) is wholly illusive. *Epos* and *mythos* are two distinct concepts, and indicate two stages in an historical process which can still be discerned where the disparate elements of the *Odyssey* have been editorially reconciled.

If it does not already presuppose a universality of language, the Homeric

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93 In a letter dated 20 March 1943 to Friedrich Pollock, his elder colleague and the dedicatee of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer writes, “We decided that this work must be done because the *Odyssey* is the first document on the anthropology of man in the modern sense, that means, in the sense of a rational enlightened being. What we learn from this study will also be of some value for the (anti-Semitism project) since the idea of ritual sacrifice which Odysseus tries to overcome will probably play a dominant role in the psychology of anti-Semitism” (cited in Wiggerhaus, R. [1995] 324) Therefore he appears to confirm their interest in Homer as the original moment of the emergence of the dialectic of myth as and enlightenment. Interestingly, Horkheimer also indicates how the critique of the history of cunning orients the critique that evidently became the chapter “Elements of Anti-Semitism: Limits of Enlightenment” (DE 168-208, DA 192-234 “Elemente des Antisemitismus: Grenzen der Aufklärung”).
narrative affects one; by using an exoteric form of representation, it dissolves
the hierarchical order of society in the very process of glorifying it.94

Whilst Adorno and Horkheimer do not render epic as co-extensive with enlightened
thought, they do separate ‘epos’ and ‘mythos’ in such a way that implicitly connects
epic and enlightened thought. This small and relatively unflagged manoeuvre is an
essential claim underpinning their reading of the *Odyssey*. We can make a good guess
that when Adorno and Horkheimer declare that their approach is ‘philosophical’
rather than in line with ‘modern philological criticism’, they have in mind Ulrich von
Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, who appears frequently in the footnotes of the *Odysseus*
excursus as a textual authority and only prominently in the body of the excursus at the
end – I will discuss this appearance in further detail at the end of this chapter. For
now, when the Frankfurt pair gesture towards Wilzamowitz as the exponent of
modern classical philology, they understand that the scientific approaches to Homer
are exclusively concerned with finding a connection between epic poetry and
enlightened thought. Adorno and Horkheimer ultimately characterize this as an
undialectical approach to Homer and thus to an (interpretative) politics of violence.

While Adorno and Horkheimer agree that that Homeric poetry contains a substantial
non-mythological element95, they establish this as the predicate of any dialectical

94 DE 43, DA 61: Das Epos zeigt, zumal in seiner ältesten Schicht, an den Mythos sich gebunden: die
Abenteuer stammen aus der volksmässigen Überlieferung. Aber indem der homerische Geist
der Mythen sich bemächtigt, sie »organisiert«, tritt er in Widerspruch zu ihnen. Die gewohnte
Gleichsetzung von Epos und Mythos, die ohnehin von der neueren klassischen Philologie aufgelöst
ward, erweist sich vollends der philosophischen Kritik als Trug. Beide Begriffe treten auseinander. Sie
markieren zwei Phasen eines historischen Prozesses, der an den Nahtstellen der homerischen Redaktion
selber noch sich erkennen lässt.

95 In terms of the historical position of the Homeric epics, this passage demonstrate that Adorno and
Horkheimer were aware that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were poems that were composed over time (in
acknowledging the layers of text ‘in seiner ältesten Schicht’), that the transmitted text draws from and
relationship between epic and myth. This enlightened element of epic is evident in the observation about the social status of epic language that immediately follows the claim of epos/myth separation. The force (whether Geist or the even more abstracted notion of Rede) behind Homeric poetry, the one that acts on myth, aims at universality (Allgemeinschaft) and a form that allows for wide communicability. Adorno and Horkheimer claim that this organizing drive, folding smaller mythological episodes into a coherent narrative of adventure, is contradictory to the logic of myth. In understand that epic creates a single narrative structure and then develops a language to render this narrative as widely intelligible as possible, Adorno and Horkheimer observe that there is an enlightened element in Homeric poetry.

Adorno and Horkheimer attribute their analysis of the Odyssey to Nietzsche, whom they insist is one of the few readers of Homer to have observed the dialectic of enlightenment and myth in operation in the epic. Continuing to draw on Nietzsche, the Frankfurt thinkers insist the dialectical make-up, that is, the fundamental duality, of enlightened thought makes it amenable to projects of either liberation or domination. In the same way, they argue, there are those who read Homer solely as a communication of established norms, as completely and only as an expression of Enlightened thought. The dialectical reading of the Odyssey, therefore, attempts to account for the historical place of Homeric poetry as culturally advanced in terms of the operation it undertakes on the past:

To celebrate the anger of Achilles and the wandering of Odysseus is already a wistful stylization of what can no longer be celebrated; and the hero of the

has amalgamated folk tradition, and that there are later interventions by editors attempting to make good on discrepancies that arise from amalgamating processes.
adventures shows himself to be a prototype of the bourgeois individual, a
notion originating in the consistent self affirmation which has its ancient
pattern in the figure of the protagonist compelled to wander.96

In their recognition that the epics have preserved older stories as ‘wilful stylization’,
Adorno and Horkheimer privilege the historical position of Homeric poetry. In this
citation the pivot from historical observation to (paradigmatic) interpretation is
evident: the *Odyssey* offers us the prototype of the bourgeois individual (*als Urbild
eben des bürgerlichen Individuums*). The notion of *Urbild* reveals the fundamentally
paradoxical historical situation of the Homeric epics in Adorno and Horkheimer’s
reading: they mark a definite border between pre-history and history proper, and yet
they mark a condition of modernity. The *Odyssey*, read as an allegory of the
emergence of the bourgeois subject attempting to extricate itself from myth, is read as
the origin point of modern subjectivity. Furthermore, this reading requires a
backdating of the concept of the bourgeoisie (“the lines from reason, liberalism, and
the bourgeois spirit go incomparably farther back than historians who date the notion
of the burgher only from the end of medieval feudalism would allow.”)97

It is a central contention of this chapter that the politics of literary form are important
in Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of enlightened thought. I want to confront the
idea that the Frankfurt pair interpret Homeric epic as a normative distillation of the
dialectic of enlightenment. Reading the *Odyssey* as an aesthetic object reconfigures

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96 DE 43, DA 61: … vom Zorn des Achill und der Irrfahrt des Odysseus Singen ist bereits sehnsüchtige
Stilisierung dessen, was sich nicht mehr singen lässt, und der Held der Abenteuer erweist sich als
Urbild eben des bürgerlichen Individuums, dessen Begriff in jener einheitlichen Selbstbehauptung
entspringt, deren vorweltliches Muster der Umgetriebene abgibt.

97 DE 45, DA 62-3: In der Tat erstrecken die Linien von Vernunft, Liberalität, Bürgerlichkeit, sich
unvergleichlich viel weiter, als die historische Vorstellung annimmt, die den Begriff des Bürgers erst
vom Ende der mittelalterlichen Feudalität her datiert.
the relationship of the epic poem to the violence it seeks to represent. This is important in terms of how Adorno and Horkheimer’s argument about the historicity of epic intersects with the relationship between epic and myth. The ostensible task of the *Odyssey* is to represent the myth of Odysseus’ wanderings: the primary thematic content of the epic is the violence that Odysseus commits in the name of reason and self-preservation. The violence of the epic form is in its relationship to mythological material by pressing it into language and drawing it into history. Adorno and Horkheimer show that epic poetry, as art, refrains from becoming identical with its thematic content in its refusal to reinscribe the violence of the epic hero at the level of form.

I show how Adorno and Horkheimer observe moments of narrative form that manouevre subversively against the heroic content. I argue that Adorno and Horkheimer perceive the *Odyssey* as aware of and sensitive to consequences of the violence it represents. This sensitivity is manifested in the various mechanisms that Adorno and Horkheimer identify in epic narrative that allow suffering to emerge at the surface of the narrative. These disruptive mechanisms prevent us from construing the Frankfurter thinkers’ reading of the *Odyssey* as co-extensive with enlightened thought. Furthermore, in demonstrating that Adorno and Horkheimer position the *Odyssey* as art, I argue that they indicate how epic poetry can become part of the wider project of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that is, recuperating the liberatory potential of enlightenment. Freedom here is not a constructive notion or a fleshed out programme: the freedom that Adorno and Horkheimer cling to begins with recognizing suffering as the consequence of violence. To acknowledge suffering fully, even for a brief moment, are the slim grounds of freedom that Adorno and
Horkheimer observe in the *Odyssey*: this potential is only available when the epic is construed as an aesthetic object.

The structure of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* demonstrates this in the first instance: Adorno and Horkheimer situate their critique of enlightened thought under two dark readings: one is the Homeric epic and the other is Marquis de Sade’s novel. The Frankfurt thinkers explicate how the Marquis de Sade critiques bourgeois morality in his subversive mobilization of the novel as the bourgeois literary form par excellence. Moreover, the *Odyssey* replaces *Justine ou les Malheurs de la Vertu* as the partner of *Juliette*. If the structure of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* directs us to read equivalence between Juliette and Odysseus as the paradigmatic *Aufklärer* in Excurses One and Two, then Adorno and Horkheimer also argue for a formal continuity between the epic and novel.

For the *chronique scandaleuse* of Justine and Juliette, with its production-line methods, and its foreshadowing in an eighteenth century style of the nineteenth century shockers and twentieth century mass literature, is the Homeric epic with its last mythological covering removed: the history of thought as an organ of domination.98

Though this observation is made at the end of the second excursus, Adorno and Horkheimer set up the continuity of epic and novel as an explicit part of their analysis of Excursus One.99

The epic is the historico-philosophical counterpart to the novel and eventually displays features approximating those characteristic of the novel. The venerable cosmos of the meaningful Homeric world is shown to be the achievement of regulative reason, which destroys myth by virtue of the same rational order in which reflects it.100

It is not clear where the generic boundary lies nor how historical development operates between epic and novel if they are distinct but overlapping genres. It is important however, that Adorno and Horkheimer understand epic as a literary expression of enlightened thought (Homerian poetry as “the achievement of regulative

99 Adorno and Horkheimer also draw a specific parallel between the Odyssey and one of the first novels in English, Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719) that anticipates and encapsulates major themes of Enlightenment thought, such as individual survival, resourcefulness (DE 61-2, DA 80-81): “The wily solitary is already homo oeconomicus, for whom all reasonable things are alike. Both Odysseus and Crusoe, the two shipwrecked mariners, make their weakness (that of the individual who parts from the collective) their social strength… They embody the principle of capitalist economy…what they preserve materially from the past for the furthering of their new enterprise is evidence that the entrepreneur has always gone about his competitive business with more initial capital than his mere physical capacity… Odysseus lives by the original constitutive principle of civil society: one had the choice between deceit and failure… Hence universal socialization, as outlined in the narratives of the world traveler Odysseus and the solo manufacturer Crusoe, from the start included the absolute solitude which emerged so clearly at the end of the bourgeois era. Radical socialization means radical alienation’” (Der listige Einzelgänger ist schon der homo oeconomicus, dem einmal alle Vernünftigen gleichen: daher ist die Odyssee schon eine Robinsonade. Die beiden prototypischen Schiffbrüchigen machen aus ihrer Schwäche - der des Individuums selber, das von der Kollektivität sich scheidet - ihre gesellschaftliche Stärke… Sie verkörpern das Prinzip der kapitalistischen Wirtschaft… was sie aber an gerettetem Gut zur neuen Unternehmung mitbringen, verklärt die Wahrheit, dass der Unternehmer in die Konkurrenz von je mit mehr eingetreten ist als dem Fleiss seiner Hände… Odysseus lebt nach dem Urprinzip, das einmal die bürgerliche Gesellschaft konstituierte. Man hatte die Wahl, zu betrügen oder unterzugehen… Daher gehört zur universalen Vergesellschaftung, wie sie der Weltreisende Odysseus und der Solofabrikant Robinson entwerfen, ursprünglich schon die absolute Einsamkeit, die am Ende der bürgerlichen Ära offenbar war. Radikale Vergesellschaftung heisst radikale Entfremdung.)

100 DE 43-4, DA 61: Am Epos, dem geschichtsphilosophischen Widerspiel zum Roman, treten schliesslich die romanähnlichen Züge hervor, und der ehrwürdige Kosmos der innerfütten homerischen Welt offenbart sich als Leistung der ordnenden Vernunft, die den Mythos zerstört gerade vermöge der rationalen Ordnung, in der sie ihn spiegelt.
Whilst the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* does treat the *Odyssey* as a historical distillation of enlightened thought (whether original or an exemplary iteration), the acknowledgement of the *Odyssey*’s literary features, such as genre, opens up the possibility in Adorno and Horkheimer’s reading of understanding a critical ambivalence in Homeric poetry. I turn now to explore how Adorno’s analysis of the *Odyssey* attends to particular features of Homeric style. I hope to show how Adorno’s literary analysis allows him to formulate a concept of ‘epic naïveté’. Ultimately the identification of epic naïveté in Adorno and Horkheimer’s reading of the *Odyssey* will illuminate how the literary form of epic has the resources for imagining liberation as well as documenting the history of domination.

**After Schiller: Adorno’s concept of ‘epic naïveté’**

I turn now to examine *Über epische Naivität* (hereafter EN), a brief essay that forms a counterpart to the argument of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Adorno composed this essay in 1943 while he was working on the *Odyssey* excursus but he did not publish it in conjunction with *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in 1944. Instead EN found publication in the first volume of Adorno’s collected essays *Notes on Literature*.101 Instead EN found publication in the first volume of Adorno’s collected essays *Notes on Literature*.102

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101 Adorno provided the following publication note at the end of *Noten zur Literatur I*: “‘Über epische Naivität’, geschrieben 1943, aus dem Komplex der gemeinsam mit Max Horkheimer verfassten ‘Dialektik der Aufklärung’. Unveröffentlicht’. It remains unclear to me why Adorno did not publish EN until nearly fifteen year after its composition. It could have been appended, in note form, to the final section of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ‘Notes and Drafts’. However, since Adorno himself curated the pieces for publication of *Noten zur Literatur*, EN must have importance for Adorno’s reading of the *Odyssey* in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. EN reads to me as an significant offshoot of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that is, not the analytical mode for which the collaboration with Horkheimer could allow but nevertheless a style of analysis that Adorno leveraged often (to which the broad range of essays on literary authors, features of style, and problems of interpretation compiled in the three volumes of *Noten zur Literatur*, bear witness).


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An exploration of EN’s literary analysis will illuminate the ambivalence of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*’s historical positioning of the *Odyssey*, that is, at the border of pre-history and history, as well as its literary reading of the *Odyssey*, that is, specifically as an epic poem. EN renders explicit what the argument of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* implies throughout: the connection between the epic form and enlightened thought is forged around the concept of ‘epic naïveté’. Adorno considers certain features of Homeric style as key indicators of enlightened thought. I’ll show how Adorno derives his concept of epic naïveté by destabilizing a division of naïve and sentimental poetry as articulated by Friedrich Schiller in which Homer is paradigmatic figure of the naïve poet. In rendering Homer a poet of *epic* naïveté, Adorno further complicates the relationship of the organizing epic impulse to the mythological subject matter that it seeks to represent. With this in mind, it will be possible to turn back to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and observe how Adorno’s reading of an epically naïve *Odyssey* operates, that is, as a text that marks the limitations of representation and contains the resources for dialectical critique of enlightened thought.

In the first instance, a brief sketch of the argument of EN will be helpful. Adorno takes up two longstanding features of Homeric style that have perplexed commentators since antiquity: the extended simile and the not quite logical connecting particle. Traditionally, these have been understood as a sign of epic poetry’s “objectivity or material concreteness” (*Gegenständlichkeit*) or evidence of its “primal stupidity” (*Urdummheit*). Adorno claims that both interpretations of these quirks of Homeric style agree that Homeric narrative lacks self-awareness (*eine

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bewusstseinsfeindliche Ideologie). Epic naïveté should be understood instead, Adorno argues, as a sign of formal sophistication. These features of Homeric style demonstrate how the epic narrative is aware of its limited capacity to distil myth into particular and concrete formations of language.

The fundamental difference between epic and myth is that the epic is intentional in what and how it chooses to represent. Adorno draws attention then to the manner of epic’s representation, that is, its style. Where, for the most part, epic processes myth in ‘unrelentingly strict’ manner that produces a stylistically uniform literary product, Adorno is interested in ‘epic naïveté’ as a departure from this stylistic uniformity. The mimetic desire of epic form has always rested on a contradiction, Adorno claims, because the mythological material it works on is always resistant to specificity.\textsuperscript{103} Instances of epic naïveté are the formal indications that the epic is aware of the contradiction of its mimetic task and the fraught relationship it has with myth.

EN therefore explicitly links epic poetry to enlightened thought and therefore describes it as substantially different from the mythological material upon which it operates:

As an anti-mythological enterprise, epic naïveté emerges from the enlightenment-oriented and positivist effort to adhere faithfully and without

\textsuperscript{103} EN 24, \textit{Noten zur Literatur} I 34: The amorphous flood of myth is the eternally invariant, but the telos of narrative is the differentiated…” (Die gestaltlose Flut des Mythos ist das Immergleiche, das Telos der Erzählung jedoch das Verschiedene…). Adorno goes on to parse how the identitarian inclination of myth differs from the identitarian impulse of epic narrative: “the unrelentingly strict identity in which epic subject matter is held serves to achieve its non-identity with what is simply identical, with unarticulated sameness”. Adorno’s dense language around identity in the logic of myth and epic encapsulates how closely situated these two modes of processing the past are. (…und die mitleidslos strenge Identität, in der der epische Gegenstand festgehalten wird, dient gerade dazu, dessen Nichtidentitaet mit dem schlecht Identischen, dem unartikulierten Einerlei, seine Verschiedenheit selber, zu vollziehen.)
distortion to what once was as it was, and thereby break the spell cast by what has been, by myth in its true sense… For what occurred once and only once is not merely a defiant residue opposing the encompassing universality of thought; it is thought’s innermost yearning, the logical form of something real that would no longer be enclosed by social domination and the classificatory thought modeled upon it: the concept reconciled with its object. A critique of bourgeois reason dwells within epic naïveté.  

Adorno insists that the aim of epic narrative is to distil “something as it happened once” (was einmal war so). He claims that this desire sits in tension with the mythological material that epic works on because myth represents “what has been” (das Gewesene). Here one can see how EN takes on the baton from the analysis offered in Dialectic of Enlightenment: the operation that enlightened thought performs on myth is disenchantment (Entzauberung/ den Zauber sprengen).

However, EN breaks new ground in arguing that, in the friction between the respective historical frameworks of epic and myth, epic contains the possibility for critiquing “thought’s innermost yearning…the concept reconciled with object” (dessen innerste Sehnsucht…der Begriff, der sich versöhnt). Adorno explains how this critique of bourgeois reason articulates the paradoxical relationship that epic has to the

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104 EN 25-26, Noten zur Literatur I 36: Wie sie, als antimythologische Anstrengung, aus dem aufklärerischen, gleichsam positivistischen Bestreben hervorgeht, treu und unverstellt was einmal war so festzuhalten, wie es war, und damit den Zauber, den das Gewesene ausübt, den Mythos im eigentlichen Sinn zu sprengen, bleibt ihr in der Beschränkung aufs Einmalige ein Zug eigentümlich, der Beschränkung tranzendiert. Denn das Einmalige ist nicht blass der trotzige Rückstand gegen die umfassende Allgemeinheit des Gedankens, sondern auch dessen innerste Sehnsucht, die logische Form eines Wirklichen; das nicht mehr von der gesellschaftlichen Herrschaft und dem ihr nachgebildeten klassifizierenden Gedanken umfasst wäre; der Begriff, der sich versöhnt mit seiner Sache. In der epischen Naivität lebt die Kritik der bürgerlichen Vernunft.

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past, and how the resources for this critique are available and are expressed at the level of representation:

Through epic naïveté, narrative language, whose attitude towards the past always contains an apologetic element, justifying what has occurred as being worthy of attention, acts as its own corrective. The precision of descriptive language seeks to compensate for the falseness of all discourse. The impulse that drives Homer to describe a shield as though it were a landscape and to elaborate a metaphor until it becomes action, until it becomes autonomous and ultimately destroys the fabric of the narrative – that is the same impulse that repeatedly drove Goethe, Stifter, and Keller, the greatest storytellers of the nineteenth century, to draw and paint instead of writing... The attempt to emancipate representation from reflective reason is language's attempt, futile from the outset, to recover from the negativity of its intentionality, the conceptual manipulation of objects, by carrying its defining intention to the extreme and allowing what is real to emerge in pure form, undistorted by the violence of classificatory ordering. The narrator’s stupidity and blindness – it is no accident that the tradition has it that Homer was blind – expresses the impossibility and hopelessness of this enterprise.105

Narrative language expresses the contradictory situation in which epic discourse finds itself with respect to its mythological material and the attempt to impose form on that material. Narrative logic falls slack in recognition of this ‘futile’ mimetic situation: the relationship between language and reflective reason breaks apart in both the Homeric simile that gets away from itself (or indeed the extended ecphrasis of Achilles’ shield in *Iliad* 18) and in the coordinating particle that makes little to no sense (Adorno adduces an example from *Odyssey* 24. 152 in which the particle does little to clarify whether it was Odysseus or Telemachus who was in the lead). Adorno insists that in both cases language cedes control to the (mythological) image and strategically allows itself to be pulled astray, reversing for a moment the relationship of power between language and image. More than controlled concessions, these moments are instances in which narrative form threatens to completely abandon itself. Adorno observes that the autonomy of the metaphor threatens to ‘destroy the fabric of the narrative’ (*das Gewebe der Erzählung zerreisst*), where the nineteenth century authors he cites turned to plastic media in order to remove themselves from the mimetic impasses that language involves.

In the final instance, Adorno indicates that the mechanisms of epic naïveté directly confront epic narrative’s problem of representing the past in a discrete and ordered narrative. Insisting that epic always takes up this task with a bad conscience (*in dessen Habitus dem Vergangenen gegenüber immer ein Apologetisches... lebt*), Adorno points to how this sophisticated literary form has developed ways to mitigate ‘the negativity of its intentionality’ (*vom Negativen ihrer Intentionalität*) and act as a corrective (*Korrektur an sich selber*) to the instrumental function of language in general and the task of epic in particular. Adorno implies that the sophistication of
epic poetry is constituted by its capacity for critical self-reflexive examination – and the resources it has developed to manifest this criticism within the poetic form itself.

Having sketched the argument of EN, I turn now to explore how Adorno recuperates his notion of epic naïveté from the history of German literary criticism. With Schiller as the major point of reference for the notion of naïveté, I will be able to show how Adorno’s formulation of epic naïveté provides a crucial insight to the critical mobilization of the Odyssey qua literary text in Dialectic of Enlightenment.

In “On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry” (Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung, 1795)106, Schiller marks a conceptual distinction between his key terms in the figure of the poet: the naïve and sentimental artist differ in their respective relationships to nature. On the one hand, Schiller observes that the naïve poet has a carefree relationship to nature, characterized by a “child-like simplicity” (kindliche Einfalt). So close is the relationship between the naïve poet and his natural environment that this poetry does not have to reflect on its status as a cultural product, that is, the possibility that it is different from nature. Furthermore, naïveté is closely aligned with Greek antiquity as a culture that experienced nature directly. On the other hand, sentimentality indicates a general characteristic of modern poets who experience and attempt to overcome estrangement from nature. Schiller insists that where the naïve poet is identical with nature, the sentimental poet is engaged in a (futile) attempt to


http://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/schiller_naive01_1795
http://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/schiller_naive02_1795
http://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/schiller_naive03_1796

recuperate this harmonious relationship.\textsuperscript{107} Thus the sentimental poet is required to reflect on his estrangement from nature as the first step towards recuperation. Sentimentality is therefore a quality of fraught textual self-consciousness; naïveté indicates literature that foregoes this anxiety.\textsuperscript{108}

As Peter Szondi has influentially argued, however, the naïve and the sentimental can be understood as much more closely related in Schiller’s argument: he insists that there is a dialectical, rather than dichotomous, relationship between the concept of the naïve and the sentimental. It is useful to observe how Adorno’s notion of epic naïveté recuperates and advances the potential dialectical reading of naïveté from Schiller. In the first instance, Schiller resists straightforwardly tracking the dichotomy of naïve/sentimental to a historical distinction between antiquity and modernity. In the first instance, Schiller provides the possibility that naïveté is not exclusively found in the ancient Greek past:

It is perhaps not superfluous to recall that, if the modern poets contrasted with the ancient poets here, it is not so much the difference in the age as the difference in the manner that is to be understood. In modern times, indeed, even in the most recent times we also have naive poetry in all classes even if no longer of the completely pure sort. Among the ancient Latin poets and in fact even among the ancient Greek poets there is no shortage of sentimental

\textsuperscript{107} (Part 2: 8) Der Dichter…ist entweder Natur, oder er wird sie suchen. Jenes macht den naiven, dieses den sentimentalischen Dichter; ‘The poet…either is nature, or he will seek it. The former produces the naive, the latter the sentimental poet.’

poets. Not only in the same poet, even in one and the same work one encounters both tendencies, just as in ‘The Sorrows of Young Werther’. If Goethe’s epistolary novel can display both traits of naïveté and sentimentality, Schiller opens up the conceptual traffic between these two traits. In observing that there are sentimental poets to be found in both Greek and Roman poets, Schiller blocks a straightforward correspondence between antiquity and naïveté, modernity and sentimentality. Schiller’s resistance to a straightforward historical discrimination between naïveté and sentimentality can be most clearly seen in the paradigmatic literary figures of naïveté he adduces. Where Homer is positioned as the naïve poet par excellence, then Schiller also insists Shakespeare is an exemplary naïve artist because he, like Homer, has the ability to narrate events at an emotional distance from them:

When, at a very early age, I first became acquainted with Shakespeare, I was infuriated by the coldness and insensitivity that allowed him to joke at a point of the greatest pathos and let some buffoon disrupt the heartrending scenes in Hamlet, in King Lear, in Macbeth, and so forth. The same insensitivity restrained him where my feelings carried me away… I was misled by my acquaintance with more modern poets into first looking for the poet in the work, encountering his heart and reflecting in common with him on his subject

matter. In short I was misled into looking at the object in the subject... I encountered the same phenomenon with Homer...

Schiller claims that his culturally sentimental conditioning had trained him to ‘look for the poet in the work’. It is only upon later reflection that he understands this initial, powerfully negative response to the sudden shifts in tone in Shakespearean tragedy as an encounter with poetic objectivity, understood as an emotional distance from the material (*seine Kälte, seine Unempfindlichkeit... kaltherzig*). Schiller goes on to recall his reaction to reading the battlefield encounter between Glaucus and Diomedes (*Iliad* 6.120-232) and how he felt outraged that the swapping of armour is described unemotionally. He observes a strategic withholding of editorial comment on the episode and interprets it as a similar lack of emotionality in Homer that he had identified in Shakespeare:

Hardly would a modern poet ... even have waited as far as here, to attest to his joy in this action. We would pardon him all the more easily, since our heart comes to a standstill in the reading of it, and willingly distances itself from the object, in order to look into itself. But no trace of all of this in Homer: as if he had been reporting something which occurs everyday, indeed as if he himself bore no heart in his bosom, he continues with dry truthfulness...  

110 (Part 1: 72-3) Als ich in einem sehr frühen Alter den letztern Dichter (Shakespeare) zuerst kennen lernte, empörte mich seine Kälte, seine Unempfindlichkeit, die ihm erlaubte, im höchsten Pathos zu scherzen, die Herzzerschneidenden Auftritte im Hamlet, im König Lear, im Makbeth u.s.s. durch einen Narren zu stören, die ihn bald fest hielt, wo meine Empfindung fortteilte... Durch die Bekannschaft mit neuer Poeten verleitet, in dem Werke den Dichter zuerst auszusuchen, seinem Herzen zu begegnen, mit ihm gemeinschaftlich über seinen Gegenstand zu reflektieren; kurz das Objekt in dem Subjekt anzuschauen... Dasselbe ist mir auch mit dem Homer begegnet...

111 (Part 1: 75) Schwerlich dürfte ein moderner Dichter... auch nur biss hierher gewartet haben, um seine Freude an dieser Handlung zu bezeugen. Wir würden es ihm um so leichter verzeihen, da auch unser Herz beim Lesen einen Stillstand macht und sich von dem Objekte gern entfernt, um in sich
Schiller drives his point home about “dry truthfulness” (*trockenen Wahrhaftigkeit*) in Homer’s narrative by drawing a contrast with an episode in Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* (1516) in which two rival warriors demonstrate generosity towards one another. The key difference between the two texts’ treatment of a common theme is the emotional distance that the naïve Homeric narrator has towards the material he is narrating, which can seem bewilderingly disjunctive with the emotional effect it has on the reader. Thus Schiller understands that the naïve artist’s objectivity is constituted in the relationship he has to the material he treats.

To turn back to EN, we can observe how Adorno responds to Schiller’s configuration of naïveté. In the first place, Adorno exploits the historical ambivalence that exists in Schiller’s formulation of naïveté. Thus the epically naïve Homeric text is not saddled with *Urdummheit* merely by virtue of its historical situation. Secondly, and more polemically, Adorno dismantles Schiller’s idea that naïveté is connected to a lack of poetic self-reflexivity. Adorno jettisons the objectivity in Schiller’s sense, that is, of the artist looking down on his material with a bird’s eye view. Instead Adorno transforms ‘objectivity’ into the central strategy by which epic narrative comes to terms with itself and the instrumental operation it performs on myth. The conclusion of EN explicitly makes the connection between epic naïveté and its self-reflexive objectivity:

> In great narrative, the relationship between plot and image tends to reverse itself… But in those poems (i.e. the Homeric epics) the force (*Gewalt*) of the historical tendency at work in the language and in the subject matter is so
strong that in the course of proceedings taking place between subjectivity and
mythology human beings and things are transformed in mere arenas through
the blindness with which epic delivers itself over to their representation, arenas in which that historical tendency becomes visible precisely where the
pragmatic linguistic context reveals its inadequacy… It is the objective
transformation of pure representation, detached from meaning, into the
allegory of history that becomes visible in the logical disintegration of
epic language, as in the detachment of metaphor from the course of the
literal action. It is only by abandoning meaning that epic discourse comes to
resemble the image, a figure of objective meaning emerging from the
negation of subjectively rational meaning.\textsuperscript{112}

Epic discourse, in pursuit of its aim to isolate and distil the past into communicable
and discrete discourse, performs violence (\textit{Gewalt}) on that which it seeks to represent.
Adorno figures epic discourse here as a machine of history, processing ‘human beings
and things’ into abstracted sites of representation (\textit{Schauplaetze}). It is in this sense
that Adorno understands the “blindness” (\textit{Blindheit}) of epic discourse: it does not
understand that its mimetic procedure on mythological image erodes something vital
about the subject matter. It is only at the moments in which epic discourse abandons
meaning and fails in its basic aim to communicate sensibly, Adorno claims, that it is
able to represent the past in a sensuous, non-violent way. In this paradoxical scenario

\textsuperscript{112} EN 28-9, \textit{Noten zur Literatur} I 39-40: In der grossen Erzählung kehrt tendenziell das Verhältnis von Bild und Handlung sich um… Aber die Gewalt der geschichtlichen Tendenz in Sprache und Sachgehalt ist in ihnen so gross, dass im Lauf des Prozesses zwischen Subjektivität und Mythologie Menschen und Dinge vermöge der Blindheit, mit der das Epos ihrer Darstellung sich überlässt, in blosse Schauplaetze sich verwandeln, ueber denen jene Tendenz sichtbar wird, gerade dort, wo der pragmatische und sprachliche Zusammenhang brüchig sich zeigt… Der objective Umschlag der reinen bedeutungsfernen Darstellung in die Allegorie der Geschichte ist es, der am logischen Zerfall der epischen Sprache wie an der Ablösung der Metapher vom Gang der buchstäblichen Handlung sichtbar wird. Erst durch Sinnverlassenheit ähnelt die epische Rede dem Bilde sich an, einer Figur objektiven Sinnes, die aus der Negation von subjektiv vernünftigem Sinn aufsteigt.
in which epic is only able to fulfill its goal by defeating itself, Adorno identifies ‘the objective transformation of pure representation into the allegory of history’ (Der objective Umschlag der reinen bedeutungsfernen Darstellung in die Allegorie der Geschichte ist es). Epic naïveté is the moment when epic discourse is properly objective about the limits of representing the past – by abandoning rational communication, epic discourse comes close to “resembl[ing] the image”, that is, fulfill its mimetic aim (durch Sinnverlassenheit ähnelt die epische Rede dem Bilde sich an). In articulating the concept of epic naïveté, Adorno identifies how the epic text has a strategy for allowing myth, material and image to take priority over the impetus of rational thought: epic naïveté, in other words, demonstrates that epic itself contains the resources for escaping its complicity with enlightened thought.

Finally epic naïveté demonstrates how we might be able to understand the reading of the Odyssey in Dialectic of Enlightenment as properly dialectical. Read simply as a document of enlightened thought, the Odyssey is simply the template for the domination of reason. Adorno’s recognition of a textual feature like epic naïveté introduces the dialectical element of this reading, because it opens up the possibility that the Odyssey contains the resources for language to escape its instrumental function of communicating meaning and thus to unyoke itself from enlightened thought. The very term by which Adorno articulates the Odyssey, that is, as Urbild, hints at this possibility, gesturing towards the Homeric epic as both the prototype and the primal image of reason that might be allowed to escape. Adorno addresses the critical potential of Homeric poetry explicitly when discussing epic naïveté more broadly:
Epic naïveté is a critique of bourgeois reason since it holds fast to the possibility of experience that is destroyed by bourgeois reason that ostensibly grounds it. Its restrictedness in the representation of its one subject is the corrective to the restrictedness that befalls all thought when it forgets its unique subject in its conceptual operations and covers up the subject instead of coming to know it.\footnote{EN 38, Noten zur Literatur I 36: In der epischen Naïvetät lebt die Kritik der bürgerlichen Vernunft. Sie hält jene Möglichkeit von Erfahrung fest, welche zerstört wird von der bürgerlichen Vernunft, die sie gerade zu begründen vorgibt. Die Beschränktheit in der Darstellung des einen Gegenstandes ist das Korrektiv der Beschränktheit, die jeglichen Gedanken ereilt, indem er den einen Gegenstand kraft dessen begrifflicher Operation vergisst, ihn überspinnt, anstatt ihn eigentlich zu erkennen.}

Here then is the deep ambivalence of Adorno’s attitude towards Homer: at the innermost level of narrating the emergence of the modern subject, Homeric poetry simultaneously confirms and has within itself the potential to subvert bourgeois modernity. Adorno’s attention to the \textit{Odyssey} as a literary text identifies and mobilizes this potential.

\textbf{Epic Naïveté in the \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}}

“Thought originated in the course of the liberation from a terrifying nature which in the end was wholly mastered. Pleasure is, so to speak, nature’s vengeance. In pleasure men disavow thought and escape civilization.”\footnote{DE 105, DA 125: Denken entstand im Zuge der Befreiung aus der furchtbaren Natur, die am Schluss ganz unterjocht wird. Der Genuss ist gleichsam ihre Rache. In ihm entledigen die Menschen sich des Denkens, entrinnen der Zivilisation.}(Translation modified)
EN identified two features that embodied epic naïveté: the nonsensical connecting particle and the simile that runs amok. Adorno understood these features as moments when the Homeric narrative abandons its instrumental function of communicating meaning and instead cedes control to the mythological image. Having demonstrated how Adorno derives a concept of epic naïveté as a sign of the self-consciousness of the epic narrative, I turn to examine how epic naïveté emerges in the analysis in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. I focus on two moments in which the *Odyssey* as an aesthetic object comes to the fore in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and claim that it is precisely these literary qualities of the Homeric text that render it meaningfully ambivalent for Adorno and Horkheimer. I argue that these moments allow for an escape from the dominating tendencies of enlightened thought and thereby for dialectical possibilities to emerge. Here I examine how two further features of Homeric style emerge in the analysis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: one is narrative reticence and the other is significant omission. I argue that these operate as further evidence of epic naïveté, that is, as mechanisms that depart from language’s instrumental purpose, that therefore indicate narrative textual self-consciousness and thus can be read as potential moments of dialectical liberation.

**Holding in violence and the Schein von Freiheit**

It is true that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* does not give much room in its analysis to the possibility that the Homeric text can become aware of its complicity with the domination of enlightened thought. However, towards the end of the Odysseus excursus, Adorno and Horkheimer make the following observation about how the epic
occasionally breaks out of regular and regulating processes of narration and arrives at a kind of self awareness (Selbstbessinung). Simultaneously, they emphasize the manner of epic narration (Rede) as central to their analysis:

The shift of myths into the novel, as in the adventure story, does not so much falsify the myths as sweep myth into time, revealing the abyss that separates it from homeland and reconciliation… It is self-awareness which causes violence to hold off for a moment in the narrative. Speech itself, language in contradistinction to mythic song, the possibility of retaining in the memory the disaster that has occurred, is the law of Homeric escape, and the reason why the escaping hero is repeatedly introduced as narrator. The cold distancing of narration…allows horror as such to appear for the first time that in song is confused with fate. Reticence in narrative, however is the caesura, the transformation of what is reported into something long past, by means of which the semblance of freedom glimmers that since then civilization has not wholly succeeded in extinguishing.\(^{115}\)

(Translation modified)\(^ {116}\)


\(^{116}\) ‘Revealed’ has been substituted here for Cumming’s ‘concealed’ to translate ‘aufdeckend’. This follows the suggestion made in Hullot-Kentor’s note on the translation of Dialectic of Enlightenment (1989) 28.
Adducing Odysseus the narrator of his own adventures as the prime example of enlightened discourse shaping myth, Adorno and Horkheimer demonstrate once more that they understand epic language as a form of enlightened thought. This is also a moment in which the *Odyssey* clearly emerges as an aesthetic object - in the first instance, with respect to its generic qualities. So closely have Adorno and Horkheimer identified the genres of epic and the novel, however, that they claim that it is the novel that \textit{“sweep(s) myth into time”} \textit{(Die Versetzung der Mythen in den Roman...als dass sie den Mythos mitreisst in die Zeit.)} The historical ambivalence around the status of the *Odyssey* is explicitly manifested here: on the one hand Adorno and Horkheimer observe that Homeric poetry performs a unique operation on myth, in ushering it into quantifiable temporality. And yet, they have made such a complete generic elision between epic and novel that it is the *Roman* that does this temporalizing work on myth, effectively rendering Homeric poetry a modern literary form. The philosophical stakes of these generic elisions become clear when we note that this is a rare instance in which Adorno and Horkheimer are also ascribing a literary form to myth. They place mythic song (\textit{Gesang}) against epic language (\textit{Sprache}). \textit{Gesang} cannot do what \textit{Sprache} does: it presents even horrific events (\textit{das Grauen}) as under its discursive control and does so with \textit{“cool distance”} (\textit{kalte Distanz}). The organizing and memorializing functions of epic are fundamentally related to the qualities of the language (\textit{Sprache}) that it employs.

Certain formal elements of epic narrative indicate how it interrupts the smooth and dispassionate shaping of material. Adorno and Horkheimer identify one strategy by which epic interrupts its primary purpose: \textit{“reticence”} (\textit{das Innehalten}). As a concrete example, the Frankfurt thinkers discuss a small remark that the Homeric narrator
passes on Telemachus’ punishment of the female slaves in Odysseus’ household for their involvement with Penelope’s suitors, as told in *Od. 22.465* ff. After a simile comparing the slave women to doves hunted with nets, the Homeric narrative resumes:

they kicked out with their legs for a little while, but not for long.\(^{117}\)

Adorno and Horkheimer focus on the comment ‘not for long’ (οὐ τι μάλα δήν), understanding this as a pause in the narrative in counterpoint to the calmness with which the violent execution has been described in the previous lines:

But after the “not for long” the inner flow of the narrative is arrested. Not for long? The device poses the question, and belies the author’s composure. By cutting short the account, Homer prevents us from forgetting the victims and reveals the unutterable agony of the few seconds in which the women struggle with death.\(^{118}\)

*Innehalten* allows epic to organize myth into narrative - but epic is not able (or not willing) to perform this task completely. *Innehalten* therefore constitutes a ‘holding in’ of the violence that epic narrative seeks to represent, a momentary pause that allows the reader to reflect on the nature of the women’s suffering. The caesurae created by instances of *Innehalten* are therefore supremely dialectical, in which violence is both suppressed and brought to the surface of the narrative. Without these

\(^{117}\) *Od.* 22.473 ἦσπαρον δὲ πόδεσσι μίνυνθά περ οὐ τι μάλα δήν.

pauses, the human cost of violence would have been omitted in the irresistible narrative progress of Odysseus’ homecoming.

Thus Adorno and Horkheimer identify a device that allows for the emergence in epic narrative of “the semblance of freedom …that civilization has not wholly succeeded in putting out” (der Schein von Freiheit aufblitzt, den Zivilisation seitdem nicht mehr ganz ausgelöscht hat). This ‘glimmer of freedom’ appears not in spite of epic narrative but rather as a result of its acute self-awareness, when it disengages from the project of communicating with economy and efficiency.\textsuperscript{119} Schein (‘semblance’ or ‘appearance’) of freedom is glimpsed fleetingly when epic narrative holds back the violence that Adorno and Horkheimer insist is fundamental to the purpose of epic storytelling.

Tucked into a footnote, the Frankfurt thinkers observe how Wilamowitz-Moellendorf understood “not for long” in his 1927 \textit{Die Heimkehr des Odysseus}:\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{119} The Frankfurt pair reiterate this analysis of Telemachus’ execution of the slave women and their identification of the dialectical possibility of liberation within moments of extreme violence in \textit{Elements of Anti-Semitism: the Limits of Enlightenment} (DE 183, DA 208):

In the chaotic flight responses of the lower animals, in the shapes of the swarm, and the convulsive gestures of the martyred, we see the mimetic impulse which can never be completely destroyed. In the death struggle of the creature, at the opposite pole of freedom, freedom still shines out irresistibly as the thwarted destiny of matter. (Translation modified)

In den chaotisch-regelhaften Fluchtreaktionen der niederer Tiere, in den Figuren des Gewimmels, in den konvulsivischen Gesten von Gemarterten stellt sich dar, was am armen Leben trotz allem sich nicht ganz beherrschten laesst: die mimetische Impuls. Im Todeskampf der Kreatur, am äussersten Gegenpol der Freiheit, scheint die Freiheit unwiderstehlich als die durchkreuzte Bestimmung der Materie durch.

I am grateful to Oliver Browne for bringing this passage to my attention.

\textsuperscript{120} Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, U. \textit{Die Heimkehr des Odysseus: neue homerische Untersachen} (Weidmannsche Handlung, Berlin 1927).
Wilamowitz is of the opinion that the sentence is “related with relish by the poet [Heimkehr 67]”. Even though the authoritarian philologist is delighted to find that the simile of the bird-net is “just and modern in its appropriateness to the jerking of the hanged women” [Heimkehr 76], the relish seems to be mostly his own. Wilamowitz’s writings are among the most emphatic documents of the German intermingling of barbarism and culture erected on the basis of modern philhellenism.  

As Porter points out, up until this point in the analysis, Wilamowitz has been a key authority for Adorno and Horkheimer on myth. In this closing part of the Odysseus excursus, they turn emphatically on der autoritäre Philologe for projecting his sadistic pleasure in the violent execution of the slave women onto the Homeric narrative. By noting Wilamowitz’s reading, they set their own reading of this moment as an instance of epic naïveté squarely in opposition to the “German intermingling of barbarism and culture erected on the basis of modern philhellenism”. As the sole appearance of the term Philhellenismus in Dialectic of Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer’s connection of it to violence is surely significant. Reading dialectically and against Wilamowitz here, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that Innehalten is one strategy by which Homeric poetry holds out the slim hope of redemption from

121 DE 77 n. 61, DA 378: Wilamowitz meint, das Strafgericht sei »vom Dichter mit Behagen ausgeführt«. Wenn freilich der autoritäre Philologe sich dafür begeistert, das Gleichnis des Dohnenstiegs gebe »trefflich und... modern wieder, wie die Leichen der gehenkten Mägde baumeln« so scheint das Behagen zum guten Teil sein eigenes. Die Schriften von Wilamowitz gehören zu den eindrücklichsten Dokumenten der deutschen Verschränkung von Barbarei und Kultur. Sie liegt auf dem Grunde des neueren Philhellenismus.

violence by allowing suffering to emerge, fully and awfully, at the surface of narrative, just for a moment.

Strategic omissions, or the radical pleasures of (reading) the Sirens

I turn now to the second epically naïve feature of Homeric style that emerges in the analysis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The epically naïve feature I have identified as ‘strategic omission’ is not Adorno and Horkheimer’s term of analysis. However it fits the bill for epic naïveté: omission can be construed as *Urdummheit* or a careless forgetting by the epic narrative in the shaping of its mythological material. I argue instead that, though it goes unflagged in their reading, Adorno and Horkheimer have identified another mechanism demonstrating the formal sophistication of Homeric narrative. In the non-reporting of a crucial detail, the epic narrative commits a similar dialectical operation as *Innehalten*. In both formal mechanisms, epic narrative simultaneously reveals and conceals the violence it seeks to represent. Moreover, strategic omission as a feature of the sophistication of Homeric style draws attention to the status of aesthetic objects within their critique. I shall outline Adorno and Horkheimer’s reading of Odysseus’ encounter with the Sirens first so that the importance of aesthetic objects as potential sites of resistance to hegemonic structures of thought becomes clear. Having done so, it will make sense to return to how the Frankfurt thinkers observe strategic omission as a moment in which the *Odyssey* discloses *itself* as precisely one of these sites of resistance to dominating thought, that is, as an aesthetic object.
As the only Homeric episode that appears twice in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it is clear that Adorno and Horkheimer understand Odysseus’ encounter with the Sirens as important.\(^\text{123}\) Firstly, the double appearance marks the importance of the Sirens in the context of the wider argument about how the rational, telos-orientated subject interrupts the recursive pattern of myth. However I also understand the double appearance of the Sirens as a sign of the Frankfurt thinkers’ close attention to how the encounter is narrated in the *Odyssey*, firstly in the inset report of Circe’s advice and then the hero’s own report of how he survived. This constitutes the first way in which Adorno and Horkheimer’s reading of the Sirens episode disclose the *Odyssey* as an aesthetic object. The Frankfurt thinkers, however, give an explicit reason for their attention to the Sirens:

The entanglement of myth, domination and labour is preserved in one of the Homeric narratives. Book XII tells of the encounter with the Sirens. Their allurement is that of losing oneself in the past… What Odysseus left behind him entered into the nether world; for the self is still so close to prehistoric myth from whose womb it tore itself, that its very own experienced past becomes mythic prehistory.\(^\text{124}\)

Odysseus’ interaction with the Sirens is the moment in which the protagonist of reason comes closest to succumbing to the lures of pre-history. Adorno and Horkheimer suggest that Odysseus’ personal experience of Troy becomes just as

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\(^{123}\) The first treatment of the Sirens is situated in the programmatic opening essay as Adorno and Horkheimer lay out the argument for a dialectical relationship between myth and enlightenment. Adorno and Horkheimer return to the Sirens in Excursus I.

mythological to him as he wanders, as it is for the reader or listener of Homeric poetry. In order to understand why the enlightened subject might choose to do something as unreasonable as to go out of his way to encounter the Sirens and to jeopardize his progress, Adorno and Horkheimer focus on the lure of the Sirens’ song. While the pleasures that the Sirens offer Odysseus have been understood in various ways, the Frankfurt thinkers insist that the Sirens’ song fascinates Odysseus because the narration of his past deeds gives him pleasure rather than pain (as, for example, when he hears Demodocus’ song of Troy at the court of Alcinous, Od.8 521-535). Moreover they point out that the Sirens are dangerously alluring because they offer Odysseus a return to his own past as a mythology. Taking these two elements together, Adorno and Horkheimer understand the Sirens’ song as offering Odysseus the pleasure “of losing oneself” (des sich Verlierens im Vergangenem) in his own mythologized autobiographical past.

Adorno and Horkheimer then turn to the content of the Sirens’ song. In focusing on actual song itself, they offer a slightly different reading of why the song is attractive to Odysseus. Rather than the epistemic attractions of his past as myth, they focus on the Sirens’ future-orientated claim:

125 I do not explore here the gendered nature of the interaction of Odysseus and the Sirens. Adorno and Horkheimer acknowledge that the Sirens constitute a threat to the patriarchal logic of historical progress but do not go further than that. Therefore I have not discussed the erotic (that is, sadomasochistic) possibilities of pleasure that the Sirens offer Odysseus. See Cormay, R. “Adorno’s Siren Song” New German Critique 81 (2000) 21–48.
126 Od. 12.184-91:
δεδρ᾽ ὧν ἱών, πολύων Ὀδυσσέως, μέγα κόδος ἀκαυών,
νημα κατάστησον, ἵνα νοετέρη ὑπ᾽ ἄκούσῃς,
οὐ γάρ πώς τις τηδε παρῆλας νη μελανήν,
πρὶν γ᾽ ἡμῶν μελέτησιν ὁπό στομάτων ὑπ᾽ ἄκοϕισαι,
όλλ᾽ ὅ γε τερψάμενος νείται καὶ πλείον εἰδός,
ἰδον τό πάνθ᾽ ὃς ἐνι Τροίῃ εὐτείρη
Ἀργεῖοι Τρόώς τε θεῶν ἱπτή μόηςαν,
ἰδον δ᾽ ὅσαι γένεται ἐπὶ χθονὶ πολυβοτείρη...
Even though the Sirens know all that has happened, they demand the future as the price of that knowledge, and the promise of the happy return is the deception with which the past ensnares the one who longs for it.\textsuperscript{127}

The lure of these compounded pleasures exposes in Odysseus the crisis of modern subjectivity: the parallel drives of the modern subject both towards self-preservation and to self-destruction.\textsuperscript{128} Odysseus’ way out of this crisis of subjectivity plays out in what Adorno and Horkheimer perceive as the allegory of alienated labour relationships: the social relations aboard Odysseus’ ship are the blueprint for the division in modernity between those required to labour (the proletariat) and those few who are allowed to enjoy aesthetic pleasure (the bourgeois). Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis of Odysseus’ encounter with Sirens has enormous implications for art:

The compulsion to rescue what is gone as what is living instead of using it as the material of progress was appeased only in art, to which history itself appertains as a presentation of past life. So long as art declines to pass as cognition and is thus separated from practice, social practice tolerates it as it

\textsuperscript{127} DE 33, DA 50: Wenn die Sirenen von allem wissen, was geschah, so fordern sie die Zukunft als Preis dafür, und die Verheissung der frohen Rückkehr ist der Trug, mit dem das Vergangene den Sehnsüchtigen einfängt.

\textsuperscript{128} Specifically, Adorno and Horkheimer read the encounter with the Sirens as the scene for the decisive split in modern labour between manual and cerebral, contingent on diverging relationships to aesthetic pleasure. The social relations between Odysseus and his crew that arise from dealing with the Sirens become fundamental to the critique of contemporary culture as ‘culture industry’ (Kulturindustrie), as offered in other parts of Dialectic of Enlightenment. (“Kulturindustrie: Aufklärung als Massenbetrug” DE 120-167, DA 146-204).
tolerates pleasure. But the Sirens’ song has not yet been rendered powerless by reduction to the condition of art.\textsuperscript{129}

Adorno and Horkheimer derive two concepts of art. In one concept, art is identical with dominant social structures and is therefore tolerated because it poses no threat or challenge. In the other concept, Adorno and Horkheimer suggest that art can be a place for radical, non-identitarian thought. Two criteria differentiate between tolerable and non-tolerable art: the representation of the past and relatedly, whether this representation can provide an alternative epistemology (Erkenntnis). The first kind of art approaches the past instrumentally, using it as the ‘stuff of progress’ (als Stoff des Fortschritts) – Adorno and Horkheimer claim that this kind of art conforms to dominant institutions and structures of power. As Erkenntis, the second kind of art, into which category the Sirens’ song must surely fall, is capable of non-instrumentally representing the past. In offering Odysseus knowledge of the future and his own past fed back to him as myth, the Sirens hold out the promise of relationships (to nature, to the world, and to other creatures) that are not inflected by domination. In showing that the Sirens still have the power to seduce the protagonist of reason, Adorno and Horkheimer open up the possibility that art, if it attends to the task of knowing the world in non instrumental ways, can challenge social realities and practice that are governed by instrumental reason. In short, the Sirens’ song holds out the promise that art-as-knowledge can politically and pleasurably subversive.

\textsuperscript{129} DE 32-33, DA 50: Der Drang, Vergangenes als Lebendiges zu erretten, anstatt als Stoff des Fortschritts zu benützen, stillte sich allein in der Kunst, der selbst Geschichte als Darstellung vergangenen Lebens zugehört. Solange Kunst darauf verzichtet, als Erkenntnis zu gelten, und sich dadurch von der Praxis abschliesst, wird sie von der gesellschaftlichen Praxis toleriert wie die Lust. Der Gesang der Sirenen aber ist noch nicht zur Kunst entmächtigt.
Despite observing these two kinds of art and locating this radical potential in the Sirens’ song, Adorno and Horkheimer do not attempt to change the narrative core of this story in which Odysseus’ successfully passes by the Sirens. In th Frankfurt thinkers’ two readings of the episode, they equivocate as to what this inevitability means for the Sirens, their dangerously beautiful song and the possibility of imaging escape from the dominating subject’s progress into history. Does it mean, as in the citation just given from the first reading, that the Sirens’ song is not completely rendered powerless (entmächtigt)? Or, as they observe in their second reading, does Odysseus’ cunning win out after all? This is how Adorno and Horkheimer conclude their second reading:

The Sirens have their own quality but in primitive bourgeois history it is neutralized to become merely the wistful longing of the passerby. The epic says nothing of what happened to the Sirens once the ship disappeared. In tragedy, however, it would have been their final hour, as it was for the Sphinx when Oedipus solved the riddle fulfilling its command and thus disenchanting it.  

Both possibilities are active. Adorno and Horkheimer concede that the Sirens have been neutralized and in some sense deprived of autonomy (as producers of meaningful art) since they have been reduced to a function of Odysseus’ story, merely the instantiation of the “wistful longing of the passerby” (neutralisiert zur Sehnsucht dessen, der vorüberfährt). And yet the Frankfurt thinkers insert a caveat to their

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130 DE 59, DA 78 Die Sirenen haben das Ihre, aber es ist in der bürgerlichen Urgeschichte schon neutralisiert zur Sehnsucht dessen, der vorüberfährt. Das Epos schweigt darüber, was den Sängerinnen widerfährt, nachdem das Schiff entschwunden ist. In der Tragödie aber müsste es ihre letzte Stunde gewesen sein, wie die der Sphinx es war, als Ödipus das Rätsel löste, ihr Gebot erfüllend und damit sie stürzend.
reading of Odysseus’ ineluctable journey as the protagonist of reason. In the only other mention of Oedipus that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* makes, the specificity of epic narrative is realized in the significant omission of what happened to the Sirens as Odysseus disappeared over the horizon. In leaving this loose narrative thread untied, the organizing force behind epic narrative allows for the opportunity for any other number of narrative possibilities. In this ambiguity, the dialectical possibilities of epic naïveté, that is, revealing and concealing the logic of domination, are allowed to operate. What if the Sirens, like the Sphinx, did go on to kill themselves? What if the Sirens fell silent, or sang a different tune, or changed key? As with the caesurae created by instances of *Innehalten*, strategic omissions momentarily pause the ‘inner flow’ of epic narrative and create the space in which other narrative possibilities might float to the surface. In this particular case, the strategic omission of the detail of the Sirens’ fate mitigates the conclusion that they have been totally reduced to the wistful longing of the passer-by (*Sehnsucht... der vorüberfährt*).

If the mechanisms of epic naïveté are also characterized by allowing language to abandon its instrumental purpose, then in their final remark on Odysseus’ encounter with the Sirens, Adorno and Horkheimer also suggest that the Sirens, and the possibilities for the resistive capacity of aesthetic objects, have fundamentally altered the texture of Western culture:

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131 Franz Kafka’s short story "Das Schweigen der Sirenen" (“The Silence of the Sirens” 1931) is an excellent exploitation of this opportunity.
Since Odysseus’ successful-unsuccessful encounter with the Sirens, all songs have been infected and Western music as a whole suffers from the contradiction of song in civilization.\(^\text{132}\)

(Translation modified)

In this concluding remark on Odysseus’ encounter with the Sirens, we can also see the ambivalence around the historical place of the *Odyssey* emerge once more. The Sirens both mark an exemplary instance of the radical potential of pleasure and the original moment when art split into the socially amenable and the socially antagonistic. The specific claim here is about music as a particular form of art and aesthetic object – it would take me too far from the main quarry of this chapter to flesh out here the significance of this statement for Adorno.\(^\text{133}\) This differentiation notwithstanding, Adorno and Horkheimer identify that the encounter is “successful-unsuccessful” (*glücklich-misglückten*). It is not really clear what constitutes success and failure here: if they mean that the radical potential of art has been neutralized, then indeed this would be a failure, and this would seem to be the implication of denoting that all songs have been ‘infected’. However, Adorno and Horkheimer must reserve a sliver of hope that aesthetic objects retain a glimmer of this radical oppositional potential, in articulating the place of song in civilization as *Widersinn*. More than a place of “contradiction”, we could understand this as the nonsensical situation of art, that is, as having a much more antagonistic relationship to the domination of instrumental reason. Adorno and Horkheimer have provided us with a truly dialectical reading of

\(^{132}\) DE 59-60, DA 78: Seit der glücklich-misglückten Begegnung des Odysseus mit den Sirenen sind alle Lieder erkrankt, und die gesamte abendländische Musik laboriert an dem Widersinn von Gesang in der Zivilisation, der doch zugleich wieder die bewegende Kraft aller Kunstmusik abgibt.

the poem. Thus in observing the epic naïveté of the *Odyssey*, I suggest that the attentive reader of the *Odyssey* might avail herself of its radical pleasures, engaging with a text occupying its own aesthetic, political and historical position of *Widersinn* in the history of domination that Adorno and Horkheimer have written.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has addressed how Adorno and Horkheimer understand the relationship of Homeric epic to the logic of domination at the level of formal presentation, content and the politics of representation. It is clear that the *Odyssey* provides Adorno and Horkheimer with the opportunity to formulate a historical critique of Western civilization, positioning Homer at the threshold moment at which mankind attempted to wrench himself free from pre-history and to dominate terrifying nature. I have also shown how elastic Adorno and Horkheimer’s key terms are: *Aufklärung*, for example, retains the 18th and 19th century German thought as its referent, even as it is deployed to describe the operations of Homeric epic on myth. Observing this conceptual elasticity in Adorno and Horkheimer’s analytical terms has allowed me to trace a more nuanced reading of Homer in the dialectic of enlightenment and myth.

Prompting the search for a more literary reading of Homer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is the belief that Adorno is an imaginative and attentive reader of literature. In other contexts, close readings are central to making big arguments about literature’s relationship to the philosophical and the political, for example, his thinking about genre (“On Lyric Poetry and Society”) or syntax (“Parataxis: On
Hölderin’s Late Poetry”). I have been able to show that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* offers a complex and dialectical reading of Homeric epic. Feeding the notion of ‘epic naïveté’ back into *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it is possible to see how the Frankfurt thinkers consider Homer as so much more than the original point for the dialectical entanglement of enlightenment and myth. In Adorno’s understanding, epic naïveté is a sign of the sophistication of epic narrative: he identifies it as a highly developed art form, with mechanisms that allow form and content to stand at odds with one another. In epic naïveté, Adorno understands that epic is able to strategically ‘arrest its inner flow’, that is, to make space and time to allow images to emerge beyond the grasp of instrumental reason. I have identified two further mechanisms of epic naïveté in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: omission and reticence create the room for narrative and interpretative ambiguity to arise, thereby placing the epic narrative at odds with enlightened thought and instrumental reason.

By turning to Adorno’s formulation of epic naïveté as a sign of formal sophistication and sensitivity to the complicity of epic narrative with the logic of domination, I have shown how Homer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* also contains the resources for the liberatory potential of self-reflexive enlightened thought. Just as the Homeric epic narrates the emergence and operations of domination as a civilization force, epic naïveté demonstrates formally how ‘the critique of bourgeois reason dwells’ within epic. This argument depends on showing how Adorno and Horkheimer appreciate the *Odyssey* as an aesthetic object, that is, able to be non-identical with the structures of domination in which it is embroiled. The Frankfurt thinkers’ reading of the Siren song discloses the possibility that the radical potential of art is to imagine modes of non-
identical reasoning (non-sense), that is, possibilities of liberation from the domination of rational thought.

To close, I shall draw attention to Adorno’s literary-philosophical reading of a Homeric simile. Adorno opens EN by interpreting the way in which the epic narrative frames Penelope and Odysseus’ (proper) reunion:

As when the land appears welcome to men who are swimming after Poseidon has smashed their strong built ship on the open water, gladly they set foot on the shore, escaping the evil; so welcome was her husband to her as she looked at him, and she could not let him go from the embrace of her white arms

*Od. 23.233-240*

Adorno is by no means the first to recognize that Homeric simile is inverted in Penelope’s relief at her husband’s return to the relieved sailor making landfall.

Appearing at the start of EN, however, this simile can readily constitute a case of *Widersinn*, where the epic narrative interrupts its instrumental purpose (to communicate sensibly about Odysseus’ return). The simile pauses the inner flow of the narrative and lingers for a second on (the release of) Penelope’s emotional distress

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134 *Od. 23.233-240:*

> ὡς δ’ ὀτ’ ἐν ἀσπάσιος γῇ νηριμένοις φανήη, ὃν τε Ποσειδάων εὐεργέα νῇ ἐν πόντῳ ἔλεος ἠτε τε πεπρόντε νηριμένοι, πολύλη δὲ περὶ χρόνο τέτροφεν ἄλμη, ἀσπάσιοι δ’ ἐπέβαν γαῖης, κακότητα φυγόντες: ὡς ἄρα τῇ ἄπαστος ἔτης πόσις εἰσοροφότη, δειρὴς δ’ ὧ πε πάμπας ἔριπτο πήρεε λευκό.

135 A classic example is Foley, H.P. “‘Reverse Similes’ and Sex Roles in the Odyssey” *Arethusa* 11 (1978) 7-26.
in the twenty years of her husband’s absence. Since Adorno is at the opening of the essay, he interprets this simile more broadly, that is, in terms of how epic relates to myth.

If we gauged the *Odyssey* by these lines… taking it not simply as the simile inserted into the narrative but as the substance appearing in naked form as the story nears it end, then the *Odyssey* would be none other than the attempt to attend to the endlessly renewed beating of the sea on the rocky coast, and to patiently reproduce the way the water floods over rocks and then streams back from them with a roar, leaving the ground glowing with deeper colour. This roaring is the sound of epic discourse, in which what is solid and unequivocal comes together with what is ambiguous and flowing, only to immediately part from it again.  

Adorno interprets the relationship of epic and myth in gorgeous and vivid terms: the nonsensical or reversed simile does a better job of representing the core of myth than epic narrative. His complex critical metaphor (describing epic mimesis as the beating of the sea on the shore) directs us to understand the epic form as operating separately to the instrumental function of language as part of the logic of domination. The almost painterly way in which Adorno understands the simile (“leaving the ground glowing with deeper colour”), as well as the observation that epic discourse is like “roaring” allows us to grasp how the epic form works beyond the logic of reason. Once we have

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136 EN 24, *Noten zur Literatur I* 34: Misst man die Odyssee an diesen Versen, dem Gleichnis für das Glück der wieder vereinten Gatten, nicht als bloss eingeschobenen Metapher sondern als an dem gegen Ende der Erzählung nackt erscheinenden Gehalt, so wäre sie nichts anderes als der Versuch, dem stets erneuten Anschlagen des Meeres auf die Felsenküste nachzuhören, geduldig nachzuzeichnen, wie das Wasser die Klippen überflutet, um rauschend von ihnen zurückzuströmen und in tieferer Farbe das Feste leuchten zu lassen. Solches Rauschen ist der Laut der epischen Rede, in dem das Eindeutige und Feste mit dem Vieldeutigen und Vielfliessenden zusammentrifft, um davon gerade sich zu scheiden.
noticed that Adorno’s reading of the *Odyssey* is profoundly responsive to it as a work of art, we can see how the reading of the Homeric epic in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is properly dialectical, in showing us how epic as aesthetic object offers us the resources for critiquing bourgeois reason, even as it narrates its emergence.
Part Two: Oblique Receptions
Chapter Three: The World in Auerbach’s Mouth.

This chapter seeks to understand how Auerbach’s refunctioning of *Weltliteratur* emerges from an attempt to resist the seemingly inevitable march of historical progress towards a homogeneous global culture. Specifically, Auerbach’s notion of *Weltliteratur* uses the (European) past as a resource to imagine possible alternative patterns of modernity in his injunction that those who are committed to cultural difference should “return, albeit under different conditions, to what the pre-nation state culture of the Middle Ages already possessed.” Auerbach adds that this would consist in privileging “knowledge that the human spirit itself is not national”. The critical stimulus for this chapter is to work out how Auerbach’s injunction to return to the Middle Ages constitutes a polemical claim about the value of classical antiquity as a paradigm for modernity. Though I do not imagine that Auerbach advocates for a literal return to the Middle Ages, this chapter takes seriously Auerbach’s intention to re-invigorate the possibilities for philology by re-orientating its model of historical consciousness away from a philhellenic modernity. Therefore I shall explore how Auerbach’s intensely ambivalent politics around classical antiquity on the one hand and the idea of the nation on the other hand subtend his notion of *Weltliteratur*.

137 Unless indicated otherwise, all translations given here are from *Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach: Time, History and Literature* Newman, J. O. trans., ed. Porter J.I., (Princeton University Press Princeton NJ. 2014) 253-265. I have decided to use O. Newman’s translation over one produced by Edward and Maire Said, that is, the first English translation of *Philologie der Weltliteratur* (*The Centennial Review* Vol. XIII No. 1 Winter, 1969, 3-17) because it seems to me that the translation is also part of and inflected by Edward Said’s critical engagement with Auerbach as the symbol of ‘secular criticism’. Auerbach also appears in programmatic parts of Said’s *oeuvre* (for example, *The World, The Text, The Critic* Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA. 1983). Said also wrote the introduction to the fiftieth anniversary edition of *Mimesis* (Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ. 2003) ix-xxxii. Edward Said’s extensive engagement with Auerbach, and the even more extensive critique of Said’s humanism through Auerbach in World Literature studies, Comparative Literature and post-colonial studies is fascinating but ultimately tangential to the concerns of this chapter.
The first part of this chapter will examine how Auerbach derives Weltliteratur in strikingly different terms from those of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), the figure originally and most closely associated with Weltliteratur. I shall show how philhellenism lies at the heart of the Goethean concept of Weltliteratur, as it was formulated by Auerbach’s senior colleague and fellow Romance philologist, Fritz Strich (1882-1963). This will illuminate the politics of Auerbach’s rejection of Greek antiquity as the model for his critical re-programming of Weltliteratur. The second half of this chapter investigates how Auerbach’s notion of Weltliteratur depends on an attempt to recuperate the idea of the nation, specifically around the concept of Volksgeist. I will trace how Auerbach separates the idea of Volksgeist out from German Romanticism and re-grounds it in the philosophy of history of seventeenth century Italian thinker Giambattista Vico (1668-1744). Therefore I will show how Auerbach strategically insists on the importance of the idea of the nation without rendering it part of the hypostatized apparatus of nationhood. The overarching claim of this chapter then is that, since Auerbach cannot think about Greco-Roman apart from an idealized aesthetic paradigm or its role in the history in the making of German (hyper) nationalism, he conspicuously rejects it as a model for Weltliteratur. This chapter will conclude with some reflection on how Auerbach’s critical re-programming of Weltliteratur complements and coincides with the concerns of Mimesis.
Auerbach’s diagnosis

“Radical alternatives, systematic transformations, cannot be theorized or even imagined within the conceptual field governed by the word ‘modern’.”

Frederic Jameson

*A Singular Modernity: An Essay on the Ontology of the Present.*

In his essay “Philologie der Weltliteratur” (1952), Auerbach sounds the alarm for the condition of culture under increasingly globalized modernity:

The eclipsing of local traditions, a process that originated in Europe and which persists today, is leading to their universal erosion. Of course, the calls for national self-determination are also now stronger and louder than ever before. Yet, in each and every case, everyone who defends the national will is in fact focused on reaching exactly the same goal, namely: modern forms of life. It is thus clear that everywhere – as any impartial observer can tell – the underlying spiritual foundations of individual national identity are in the process of fading away. The civilizations of Europe… continue to be the most successful in maintaining their independence from one another; first because they have been accustomed to fruitful

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interaction for so long, and then because each of them is of course also sustained by a conscious belief in its own modernity and prestige.\textsuperscript{140}

“The Philology of World Literature” 253 (my emphasis)

Auerbach understands the emergence of and progress towards a single dominant form of modernity as national self-consciousness gone wrong. Newman’s translation splits up Nationalwille, that is, the subject of the two ideas that form the paradox that Auerbach outlines: how can the nation’s identity (Dasein) be in a state of decay when the multiple Nationalwille are stronger than ever before? The reason, according to Auerbach, is that because these calls are fundamentally misdirected in seeking “modern forms of life” (modernen Lebensformen)\textsuperscript{141} What precisely Auerbach intends in gesturing to ‘modern forms of life’ is not easy to construe. Perhaps most straightforwardly it indicates the telos of the dominant march of world history, as Auerbach sees it:

Even here (that is, Europe) the leveling process is advancing more rapidly than before. Everywhere else, standardization is spreading, regardless of whether it follows the Euro-American or the Soviet-Bolshevist pattern. Moreover no matter how different from each other these two patterns may be, the distinctions between them are relatively minor when compared, in their current forms, with the patterns that underlie the Muslim, South Asian, or Chinese traditions. Should the human race in the end succeed in surviving the

\textsuperscript{140} Weltliteratur 39: Der Überlagerungsprozess, der ursprünglich von Europa ausging, wirkt weiter und untergräbt alle Sondertraditionen. Zwar ist überall der Nationalwille stärker und lauter als je, aber überall treibt er zu den gleichen, nämlich den modernen Lebensformen, und es ist für den unparteiischen Beobachter deutlich, dass die inneren Grundlagen des nationalen Daseins überall im Zerfallen sind. Die europäischen … Kulturen, an langen fruchtbaren Verkehr miteinander gewöhnt und überdies durch das Bewusstsein ihrer Geltung und Zeitgemässheit gestützt, bewahren noch am besten ihre Eigenständigkeit gegeneinander…

\textsuperscript{141} The Saids’ translation here gives: “standards and forms of modern life” 3.
shock of so violent, enormously rapid, and poorly conceived a process of contraction, then we will have to accustom ourselves to the thought that only a single literary culture may survive in this homogenized world. It may even happen that, within a comparatively short period of time, only a limited number of literary languages will continue to exist, soon perhaps only one. If this were to come to pass, the idea of world literature would simultaneously be realized and destroyed.142

“The Philology of World Literature” 253-4

Auerbach’s ideal of Europe as the model of fruitful interaction (fruchtbaren Verkehr) in the last citation is sustained here. He is specifically appreciative of the way in which European cultural and literary traditions were able to develop their own identities whilst engaging with one another. Auerbach extrapolates from the process of cultural homogenization in Europe to diagnosing a problem of increasing uniformity in the trajectory of culture of the entire world (einer einheitlich organisierten Erde).

Within this nightmarish prediction of a singular and culturally undifferentiated modernity, Auerbach alludes to a means of escape. His claim that European nations were able to traffic profitably with one another by preserving an internal and specific

142 Weltliteratur 39: … auch hier der Ausgleichprozess weit rascher fortschreitet als früher. Über alles andere aber breitet sich die Standardisierung, sei es nach europäisch-amerikanischem, sei es nach russisch-bolschewistischem Muster; und so verschieden die beiden Muster auch sind, der Unterschied wird vergleichsweise gering, wenn man beide, in ihren gegenwärtigen Formen, mit den jeweiligen Substraten vergleicht, etwa den islamischen, oder den indischen, oder den chinesischen Traditionen. Sollte es der Menschheit gelingen, sich durch die Erschütterungen hindurchzuretten, die ein so gewaltiger, so reissend schneller und innerlich so schlecht vorbereiteter Konzentrationsprozess mit sich bringt, so wird man sich an den Gedanken gewöhnen müssen, dass auf einer einheitlich organisierten Erde nur eine einzige literarische Kultur, ja selbst in vergleichsweise kurzer Zeit nur wenige literarische Sprachen, bald vielleicht nur eine, als lebend, übrigbleiben. Und damit wäre der Gedanke der Weltliteratur zugleich verwirklicht und zerstört.
sense of cultural identity is tied up with a secondary claim that each European nation believed in its own modernity. Auerbach in fact mourns the loss of a profusion of modernities in the oncoming tide of a singular global modernity, which is a symptom of the loss of the correct sense of nationhood. Auerbach makes the connection between the ‘right’ idea of national culture and the possibilities of envisioning modernity in many different modes. By turning back and re-grounding individual nations in their own history, he insists that there is hope for resisting a singular modernity. Auerbach’s suggestion of the Middle Ages as the appropriate model for Weltliteratur implies a turn towards the cultures that found their sources in Rome rather than in Greece. Therefore I suggest that it is the Latin Middle Ages of Western Europe that Auerbach has in mind when he nominates it as the alternative model for Weltliteratur, as the historical moment when the diversity of national cultures and literary traditions did not conflict with the fruitful interactions between them.

The key concern of this chapter is constituted by the politics and valences of Auerbach’s urge to turn back to national histories that are simultaneously ‘pre-modern’ and contain the seeds for alternative modernities. Auerbach’s fascinating manouevre in this conception of Weltliteratur therefore enacts Jameson’s claim at the head of this chapter: he does indeed fashion radical alternatives by seeking fields beyond the ‘modern’. However this chapter additionally insists that Auerbach is deeply attuned to the politics of mobilizing antiquity and the possibilities disclosed by strategically rejecting philhellenic models of interpretation, as Mimesis brilliantly demonstrated. Therefore this chapter seeks to understand how and why Auerbach makes a critical turn away from Greek antiquity as a resource for re-fashioning Weltliteratur. In order to salvage the historical specificity of national cultures and
literary traditions, Auerbach first prises apart Weltliteratur from its original Goethean co-ordinates as a philhellenic concept.\textsuperscript{143}

Fritz Strich and Goethe’s philhellenic Weltliteratur

The time has come to ask what meaning the phrase “world literature” can still have if we take it, as Goethe did, to refer to the present and to what we can expect in the future.\textsuperscript{144}

“The Philology of World Literature” 253

The opening of “The Philology of World Literature” emphasizes how historical conditions have changed since Goethe’s definitive intervention into the concept of Weltliteratur. Furthermore, Auerbach insists that Goethe could never have conceived of these movements of history in propagating the concept of Weltliteratur:

If I am correct in my assessment that this situation is both inevitable and the result of large-scale movements, it is clearly not what Goethe intended\textsuperscript{145} (sehr ungoethisch).

“The Philology of World Literature” 254

\textsuperscript{143} Apter (2013) 1-17 gives an excellent account of the re-emergence of World Literature in literary disciplines from 2000 onwards. Her monograph leads the rear guard action against this recent flourishing of world literature, or at least, it tries to focus its purview. Apter also gives a more far-reaching account of the conceptual genealogy of Weltliteratur than this chapter offers: “As momentum increased in translation studies, Weltliteratur – with its Euro-Romantic, neo-Hegelian, Marxist and humanist pedigree, from Goethe to Lukacs, Auerbach to Said – also gained renewed attention” 5. See also the chapter on Auerbach in the same volume “Auerbach’s Welt-theology” 193-210.

\textsuperscript{144} Weltliteratur 39: Es ist Zeit sich zu fragen, welchen Sinn das Wort Weltliteratur, in Goethescher Weise … noch haben kann.

\textsuperscript{145} Weltliteratur 40: Diese Lage, wenn ich sie richtig sehe, ist in ihrer Zwangsläufigkeit und ihrer Bedingtheit durch Massenbewegungen sehr ungoethisch.
Whether one reads *ungoethisch* with Newman’s translation, or with the Saids’ milder formulation of “not what Goethe had in mind”, ¹⁴⁶ Auerbach does not elucidate here what he means by this striking negative compound. Therefore this section will argue that the force of ‘ungoethisch’ lies in his critical refunctioning of the model of *Weltliteratur*. I shall make this argument by exploring the philhellenic construction of Goethe’s concept – Auerbach’s ‘ungoethisch’ constitutes a critical downgrading of Greek antiquity as the model for *Weltliteratur*.

Though he quickly became the cultural figure most closely associated with *Weltliteratur*, Goethe himself did not offer an extended treatment of the concept. ¹⁴⁷ Rather, Auerbach’s fellow German Romance philologist Fritz Strich, in whose seventieth birthday celebratory volume Auerbach’s “The Philology of World Literature” essay appears, synthesized Goethe’s concept of *Weltliteratur*. In Goethe

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¹⁴⁶ “Philology and World Literature” *The Centennial Review* 13.1 (1969) 1-17. Others have noticed that Edward and Maire Said’s widely read translation is not without its problems: Apter (2013) 198 points to the Saids’ choice of title, in which the “suppress(ion of) the preposition der…lose(s) the genitive, and with it, the sense that Auerbach’s philology belonged to World Literature; that World Literature engendered its own very particular philology; or that languages implied specific modes of world-having that stood outside national, patrimonial or identity claims”.

¹⁴⁷ GWL 70-71: Strich gives a composite account for Goethe’s reluctance to treat Weltliteratur in an extended fashion: Why did Goethe not carry out these plans although he has this idea (that is, *Weltliteratur*) so much at heart during the last ten years of his life …? We can only suggest that Goethe always showed a certain disinclination for any systematic exposition of philosophical subjects… But there was also a special reason why no full and systematic exposition of his work for world literature was possible. In 1827, he wrote to Streckfuss, the translator of Dante: “… the productions of the different nations tumble over each other so fast that we must find some new way of getting to know them and discussing them.” This gathering speed of material and intellectual traffic between the nations was characteristic of the time and had always been one reason for Goethe’s confidence in the advent of world literature. (*Goethe* 87: Warum aber hat Goethe keinen dieser Pläne ausgeführt, … wo doch diese Idee ihm so am Herzen lag und seine Gedanken im letzten Jahrzehnt seines Lebens sie ständig umkreisten? Als Antwort kann nur dieses angedeutet werden: Goethe hatte überhaupt eine gewisse Scheu vor systematischer Darstellung auf geisteswissenschaftlichem Felde… Fuer seine weltliterarische Tätigkeit aber kam noch ein besonderer Grund hinzu, um eine ausführliche und systematische Darstellung auszuschliessen. Er schreibt einmal, 1827, an Streckfuss, den Uebersetzer Dantes: <<< … Die Produkte der verschiedenen Nationen gehen jetzt so veloziferisch durcheinander, dass man sich eine neue Art, davon Kenntnis zu nehmen und sich darüber auszudrücken, verschaffen muss.>>> Der veloziferische Charakter seiner Zeit, die immer zunehmende Schnelligkeit des materiellen wie geistigen Verkehrs zwischen den Völkern war ja von Anfang an ein Grund für seine Erwartung auf einer Weltliteratur une seine Hoffnung auf sie.)
und die Weltliteratur (hereafter GWL in English, Goethe in German), Strich collects in an appendix the twenty-one references to and discussions of Weltliteratur across Goethe’s writings; exposition of these fragments forms the basis for the monograph’s three parts. He finds that many articulations of Weltliteratur appear in Kunst und Altertum (GWL 15, 77) a journal that Goethe established in 1816 to explore the broad remit of Weltliteratur covering essays on comparative literary history, translations etc. The journal’s name indexes the nature of this intellectual project, that is, as primarily concerned with aesthetics and with antiquity. However we can say definitively that Goethe’s Weltliteratur valorized ancient Greece in particular. In chapter four of GWL, “History” (GWL 52-80) Strich comments expressly on why Goethe rejected Latin literary culture as the model for Weltliteratur:

In the Middle Ages and the Age of Humanism there existed a universal language, Latin… Although Goethe himself refers expressly… to the beneficial influence which this had on the intellectual coherence of Europe, Latin literature cannot be claimed as world literature in Goethe’s sense. For, in the first place, the circle which knew and used it was limited to scholars, and in the second place world literature ought to be not a colourless unity but a lively conversation… Goethe saw in ancient Greece a universal model for all literatures. When he developed his idea of world literature in conversation

149 GWL 349-351, Goethe “Anhang” 369-372.
150 GWL 77: “We see that Goethe sought by all means to draw attention to the beginnings of world literature and to foster its growth; and for this work his most important medium was his journal Kunst und Altertum”. This statement appears only in Sym’s English translation.
151 Strich points to Schiller’s journal Die Horen as a prior attempt at a similar project of providing a central venue for intellectual exchange across Germany and Europe (GWL 78). That journals could circulate widely and could be reproduced cheaply was a key motivation for Goethe to establish his own. In Kunst und Altertum Vol 6. Part 2 (1828) Goethe explains: ‘These journals, as they gradually reach a wider public, will contribute most effectively to the universal world literature we hope for… the aim is simply that (nations) shall grow aware of one another, understand each other and, even where they may not be able to love, may at least tolerate one another’ (cited in GWL 350).
152 “Geschichte”, Goethe 66-98.
with Eckermann, and spoke of the need for acquainting oneself (as he did) with foreign literatures, he added that, however much one admired them, none could serve as a pattern. If we look for a model we must turn to the ancient Greeks, in whose works the perfection of human endeavor was represented.\footnote{Goethe 67: Dass es im Mittelalter und in der Zeit des Humanismus eine Weltsprache gegeben hat, das Latein… das wird wohl im Goetheschen Sinne nicht als Welitlitatur anzusprechen sein, wenn auch Goethe selbst auf die segensreiche Wirkung der lateinischen Weltsprache für die geistigen Beziehungen in Europa nachdrücklich hingewiesen hat… Aber erstens war der Kreis, der diese Sprache schreiben, sprechen und verstehen konnte, denn doch nur auf die gelehrte Welt beschränkt, und zweitens soll ja doch die Weltliteratur nicht eine farblos einheitliche sein, sondern ein lebendiges Gespräch zwischen den Nationen, die ihre Eigentümlichkeit dadurch nicht verlieren, sondern sich nur in gegenseitiger Bildung aneinander allgemein menschlich läutern und reinigen und einander dulden lernen sollen. Goethe sah wohl in der Antike ein allgemeines und für alle Literaturen gültiges Vorbild. Als er Eckermann gegenüber am 31. Januar 1827 seine Idee der Weltliteratur entwickelte und von der Notwendigkeit sprach, dass man sich auch in fremden Literaturen umsehen müsse, wie er selbst es tue, bemerkte er dazu, dass doch bei aller Schätzung der fremden Literaturen keine etwa als mustergültig angesehen werden dürfe, sondern im Bedürfnis nach einem Muster müssen wir immer zu den alten Griechen zurückgehen, in deren Werken stets der schöne Mensch dargestellt ist.}

Strich offers two reasons for Goethe’s preference for ancient Greece over Rome as a model for \textit{Weltliteratur}. In the first place, Strich observes that after the classical period, the literary public that accessed Latin as a common cultural resource was limited to a small elite.\footnote{This argument bears a striking affinity to Auerbach’s own argument about the rise and fall of the public nature of Latin writing in the post classical period in \textit{Literary Language and its Public in Late Antiquity and in the Middle Ages} (1958) which is discussed extensively in the previous chapter.} The second reason implies that the animating cultural relevance of Latin had long slipped away. Whilst Strich does not specify in the German original that it is Greece rather than Rome that ‘provides a universal model for all literatures’ (merely stating \textit{in der Antike}), the translation also occludes the specific instance in Goethe’s \textit{oeuvre} that Strich is marshalling as evidence for his

\textit{GWL} 52-3 (my emphases)
claim here, that is, a conversation with his disciple Eckermann on January 31st 1827:155

I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise every one to do the same. National literature does not bear much meaning nowadays; the epoch of World literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.

But, while we thus value what is foreign, we must not bind ourselves to anything in particular, and regard it as an example. We must not attribute this to the Chinese, or the Serbian, or Calderon, or the Nibelungen; but if we really want a model, we must always return to the ancient Greeks, in whose works the beauty of mankind is constantly represented. As for the rest we must treat it historically, appropriating for ourselves what is good, as far as it goes.156

Strich’s gloss exactly reproduces Goethe’s language: “in deren Werken stets der schöne Mensch dargestellt ist” – this verbatim citation re-grounds the aesthetic claim that Goethe makes for positioning the Greeks as the model for Weltliteratur. In doing so, Strich underscores the idea that Goethe’s notion of Weltliteratur is predicated on a

155 In his GWL appendix, Strich cites only the first sentence of the citation I have given here from Eckermann’s Gespräche mit Goethe, that is, the claim that the epoch of world literature is at hand.

156 Ich sehe mich daher gerne bei fremden Nationen um und rate jedem, es auch seinerseits zu tun. Nationalliteratur will jetzt nicht viel sagen, die Epoche der Weltliteratur ist an der Zeit, und jeder muss jetzt dazu wirken, diese Epoche beschleunigen. Aber auch bei solcher Schätzung des Ausländischen dürfen wir nicht bei etwas Besonderem haften bleiben und dieses für musterhaft ansehen wollen. Wir müssen nicht denken, das Chinesische wäre es, oder das Serbische oder Calderon oder die Nibelungen; sondern im Bedürfnis von etwas Musterhaftem müssen wir immer zu den alten Griechen zurückkehren, in deren Werken stets der schöne Mensch dargestellt ist. Alles übrige müssen wir nur historisch betrachten und das Gute, so weit es gehen will, uns daraus aneignen.

valorization of Greek antiquity specifically, rather than the Greco-Roman past or the model supplied by any other national literature (such as the Chinese or the Serbian), a national literary icon (such as Calderón) or any particular art work that could represent a national literary tradition (such as the Nibelung poems). It is precisely this deeply grounded, aesthetic claim to a philhellenic Goethean Weltliteratur against which Auerbach positions his articulation of Weltliteratur.

In Goethe’s aesthetic valorization of Greek antiquity, Strich identifies a particular kind of model. Later in the section “History” (GWL 75, Goethe 91), he hails Goethe as the somewhat reluctant father of the comparative method. He goes on to trace how Goethe’s development of the comparative element of Weltliteratur constituted an intervention into the querelle des anciens et des moderns. Strich names a number of intellectual combatants who took up arms in this intellectual struggle to establish the dominance of either ancient or modern poetry. He goes on to describe how the comparative method became a strategy, developed by German Romanticists to think their way out of the evaluative procedures and entrenched biases, produced by the querelle:

However, the first truly objective and unbiased comparison of difference, as well as similarity, in the character of national literatures was J.E. Schlegel’s “Comparison of Shakespeare and Andreas Gryphius”. Herder pioneered comparison as a methodological principle for investigating the characteristics of national literatures, and thus also their tolerance and mutual

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157 The passage I cite here (connecting Goethe’s Weltliteratur to resolving the seemingly intractable querelle des anciens et des moderns) does not appear in Sym’s translation of GWL. I have therefore provided my own.
comprehension, in his Shakespeare essay, in his comparison of Homer and Ossian - he perfected it in “Lieder der Voelker”. His successor was Goethe.\textsuperscript{158}

Strich argues that the comparative method arose out of the desire to recognize difference \(\text{Unterschied}\) as well as similitude \(\text{Ähnlichkeit}\) between various national literatures. His examples of Goethe’s forerunners and their comparative projects indicate that Strich sees comparison as a way of acknowledging difference across national traditions either in more recent European literary history (J.E. Schlegel’s juxtaposition of the roughly synchronous writers operating in Germany and England) or in the ancient, almost mythological, past (Herder’s comparison of Homer and Ossian). Strich casts comparison as a hermeneutic method that rises above factionality in describing it as \textit{objectiv} and \textit{unparteiisch}. And yet, directly following on from this claim, Strich observes a certain note of antipathy in Goethe’s thought about comparison as an objective way of reading literature across cultures:

Goethe had often deprecated comparisons, as he did in the “Warnung” among the notes to \textit{West-Eastern Divan}. Here he bids us compare the oriental poets with each other, honour them by their own standards and forget all about the Greeks and Romans. We ought not to compare Firdusi with Homer, for he certainly would be the loser in every way… Goethe claims that we have done untold harm to our glorious \textit{Nibelungen} by this kind of comparison, measuring it by the yardstick of Homer, which was absurd.\textsuperscript{159}

\textsuperscript{158} \textit{Goethe} 92: Der erste Vergleich aber, der wirklich objectiv und unparteiisch auf den Unterschied wie auch die Ähnlichkeit nationaler Literaturcharaktere hinwies, war J.E. Schlegels <Vergleichung Shakespeares und Andreas Gryphs> und der Vergleich als methodischer Weg zur Characteristik und damit auch zur Duldung und zum Verständnis nationaler Literaturen wurde von Herder in seinem Shakespeare-Aufsatz, in seiner Vergleichung von <Homer und Ossian> und von Liedern der Völker auf den Gipfel geführt. Sein Jünger war Goethe.

\textsuperscript{159} \textit{Goethe} 92: Nun hat wohl Goethe manchmal auch entschieden vor Vergleichen gewarnt, so etwa in der <Warnung>, die in den Noten zum <West-östlichen Divan> steht. Man vergleiche, so heisst es hier, die orientalischen Dichter mit sich selbst. Man ehre sie in ihrem eigenen Kreise und vergesse doch
Here, Strich defines the limits to the ‘objectivity’ of the comparative method, even as he points out that Goethe’s commitment to a philhellenic Weltliteratur must also be exercised with caution. He points out how Goethe had observed that too zealous a valorization of the ancient Greeks was counterproductive, using a strategic example from the German tradition. Strich infers from Goethe’s comment that a too stringent adherence to classicism led to under-evaluation, or at very least, an under-appreciation of the Nibelungen poetry, the Middle High German epic song cycle that held the greatest claim to being the heir (or rival) to the Homeric tradition.

Strich insists that Goethe recognizes that philhellenic classicism, when too rigorously applied as an aesthetic goal, inhibits the recognition of aesthetic excellence in later national traditions, European or otherwise (the Persian tradition suffers in comparison to Homer, just as the German). On Strich’s reading here, Goethe inscribes Homeric poetry into the conceptual apparatus of Weltliteratur as an impossible to achieve, yet nevertheless spectrally present, standard (Massstab). The radical objectivity of comparison, that Strich had moments before announced as a way out of the intellectual impasse of evaluating antiquity or modernity, sits cheek by jowl with the subsequent claim that Goethe’s ultimate aesthetic standard, around which he organized Weltliteratur, continued to be Homer. Thus the operations of relativism (Strich’s claim that Goethe urged readers “to honour them by their own standards”)

are nonetheless governed by a fundamental recognition of Homer as the aesthetic ideal for Goethean *Weltliteratur*.

*Weltliteratur* was an abiding concern for Strich throughout his career. Strich’s key interventions however are an essay entitled “Goethe und die Weltliteratur” and a 1946 monograph of the same title. Since Strich synthesizes Goethean *Weltliteratur* for Auerbach, it is worth examining how he, Strich, organizes the concept itself, paying attention to the philhellenism at its core. It is also worth observing at this point that Strich, like Auerbach, was an assimilated German Jew whose abiding focus on Goethean *Weltliteratur* in particular and more generally whose arguments about Goethe’s cosmopolitanism must be seen as strategies to get around the exclusionary anti-Semitic logic of nineteenth and twentieth German thought.

In the preface to *GWL*, Strich reflected on the monumental political and historical changes that occurred in the intervening period between his key interventions into *Weltliteratur*, that is, between his 1932 essay and the publication of the book in 1946:

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160 In the late 1920s, Strich composed a number of essays investigating Goethe’s turn to non-European canonical literary works as attempts to transcend and stabilize the limits of European literature under a programme of *Weltliteratur*. A number of the analytical themes appear first in essays such as “Goethes Idee einer Weltliteratur”, “Goethe der West-Ostliche” (1928), and “Weltliteratur und Vergleichende Literaturgeschichte” (1930).

161 Hertmand, J. “H.Heine’s Relationship to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe” in eds. Berghahn, K.L. and Hertmand, J. *Goethe in German-Jewish Culture* (Camden House, Rochester NY. 2001) 44-64, 58. Hertmand observes that Strich could be quite critical of Goethe, pointing to Strich’s 1947 essay “Goethe und Heine” in which he claims that “the political and social development of the German people” would have been better served by Heine than by Goethe. See also Kilcher, A.B. “‘Jewish Literature’ and ‘World Literature’: Wissenschaft des Judentums and its Concepts of Literature” in eds. Gotzmann, A and Wiese, C. *Modern Judaism and historical consciousness: identities, encounters, perspectives*. (Brill, Boston MA. 2007) 299-326, 321-323 understands Auerbach and Strich’s strategies as broadly similar with respect to *Weltliteratur*: “…like Strich… Auerbach did not want … world literature to be understood as a specifically Jewish one: he, too, transformed Jewish literature into a universalistic cosmopolitanism of literature, liberated from any kind of particularistic dialectics”.

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Being invited in 1932 to the Goethe centenary celebrations at Weimar, I naturally spoke there on the subject of Goethe and world literature.

But even then, even in Weimar, ominous signs were to be seen. One could not help feeling that these were funeral rites doing honour to a dead Goethe. Shortly afterwards, catastrophe broke upon the world. Everything that Goethe had proclaimed as the aim of world literature fell in ruins; and it was his own people that had brought this upon the human race! It is understandable that thereafter I had no longer any thought of publishing my book…

Now peace is here again; but what kind of peace? Today we have reached a moment in world history when everything can be lost or won, a moment of limitless possibilities. Therefore this seems to me to be the moment for Goethe, that greatest of Europeans, greatest of world citizens, to rise in all his symbolic might and fill with the spirit of his peace the house that the peoples must build anew from its foundations. For without such a spirit the house must collapse again.\footnote{Goethe 11: Als ich 1932 zur Goethefeier nach Weimar eingeladen wurde, war es selbstverständlich, dass ich dort wieder über dieses Thema: Goethe und die Weltliteratur, sprach. Aber damals schon in Weimar taten sich düstere Zeichen kund, und schon damals musste man den Eindruck haben, dass es wirklich eine Totenfeier, die Feier eines toten Goethe war. Ganz kurz darauf brach denn auch die Katastrophe über die Welt herein. Alles, was Goethe als das Ziel der Weltliteratur verkündigt hatte, stürzte in Trümmer, und es war Goethes Volk, welches dies über die Menschheit brachte! Man wird verstehen, dass ich seitdem nicht an die Veröffentlichung meines Buches mehr dachte. … Nun ist der Frieden da; aber welch ein Frieden? Wir stehen heut in einem Augenblick der Geschichte, in welchem alles verloren und alles gewonnen werden kann, in einem Augenblick der unbegrenzten Möglichkeiten, und damit scheint mir auch der Augenblick gekommen, dass Goethe, dieser grösste Europäer und Weltbürger, sich in seiner ganzen Vorbildlichkeit erhebe und das von Grund auf neu zu bauende Völkerhaus mit seinem Friedensgeist erfülle, ohne den es ja doch wieder zusammenstürzen müsste.}
Unlike Auerbach’s forestalling of any explicit discussion of the circumstances of the composition of *Mimesis* till the end of the book, Strich explicitly orients his book within the historical conditions and the personal experience of composition. Earlier in the preface, Strich had announced this as a firmly interwar book. Where he had originally taken up study of Goethean *Weltliteratur* in the wake of the First World War, Strich observes that the cultural fragmentation of Europe in the 1920s made it impossible, or at least inappropriate, to continue this research. The implication here is that Strich understands cultural context as determinative for his intellectual operations. Goethe emerges in Strich’s preface, as he does in the monograph, as a pivotal figure whose cultural stock acts as a seismograph for global harmony or hostility.

In the concluding section “Prospect” (*GWL* 319-348, “Ausblick” *Goethe* 335-367), Strich reflects further on the 1932 centenary celebrations for Goethe in Weimar:

> For where could one find a mind more clearly representative of Europe as a whole than that of Goethe who, in the marriage of Faust and Helena, the Germanic spirit with the spirit of antiquity, had not only created a poetic symbol but had given it embodiment in his own person and in his poetry.

> … it was no less distinguished a man than Paul Valéry who gave the festival speech at the Sorbonne, “En l’honneur de Goethe”. The great French writer and thinker honoured Goethe as the hope of a world that longed for a

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163 See *Mimesis* 557-6.
164 *GWL* vii: After the First World War I was invited to give a series of lectures at London University, and it was there that I spoke for the first time on the subject of Goethe and World Literature. That seemed to me the most suitable subject for a scholar… using his special knowledge in the cause of better international understanding.
European civilization based on the Greek ideals of beauty and understanding… For, thanks to the sublime freedom of his spirit, Goethe had been able to rise above the contrasts of fact and inspiration, observation and intuition, botanical science and lyricism, Classicism and Romanticism, criticism and demonic impulse, Apollo and Dionysus, Heaven and hell, thought and action, and to achieve their synthesis.

This predilection for Greece as the model for Weltliteratur is evident in the antinomies that Strich explicitly names. His list extrapolates from divisions in modes of thought, inquiry and disciplinary to more fundamental differences in the nature of the world. Amongst these, Strich nestsles “Apollo and Dionysus” as a division bridged by Goethe. His inclusion of this Nietzschean pair of co-ordinates amongst the basic tenets of human condition is striking: it formulates precisely an idealized and coherent image of Greek antiquity that can be reconciled in the figure of Goethe. Indeed Strich’s observation that Goethe’s ‘personhood …and poethood’ (Menschentum …Dichtertum) embodies a perfect synthesis of ancient Greek and German ideals makes sense in the context of discussing Weltliteratur only if we are able to follow the elisions by which Strich renders German philhellenism its model. Finally, it is clear that Strich does not see a contradiction between the historicism of the concept of 165


*Weltliteratur* that we saw earlier in the preface and the kind of trans-historical idealizing of Goethe here as a symbol able to heal a range of national, cultural, epistemological, intellectual, and eschatological divisions through the national philhellenism that he embodies.

Thus the scholars who made contributions to Strich’s *Festgabe* around *Weltliteratur* were dealing with a concept that was first and foremost Goethean, that is, geared towards a project of cultural unification. We can begin to grasp the force of Auerbach’s claim that the present historical situation of *Weltliteratur* is ‘ungoethisch’, in responding to historical conditions that Goethe could not have foreseen and in its resistance to universalizing narratives of culture, even under the sign of Goethe.

If we turn back to the question Auerbach poses for himself (“the time has come to ask what meaning the phrase “world literature” can still have if we take it, as Goethe did, to refer to the present and to what we can expect in the future”), I suggest that Auerbach confirms the place of *Weltliteratur* by radically excising the philhellenic core of Goethean *Weltliteratur*. To that end, *ungoethisch* glosses Auerbach’s ref functioning of *Weltliteratur* that depends on turning away from ancient Greece as its aesthetic model. As Vali Yashin observes: “What is at issue (in *Weltliteratur*) is a privileged relation to the world… and to time… that would have linked up the past, present, and future in the continuity of a single and singular path (for which the name Goethe stands metonymically”).

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difference within Weltliteratur is a pressing one, since Auerbach grounds his refusal of ‘a single and singular’ vision of history in the profusion of national cultures.

Beyond German Romanticism: Towards a Vicovian Volksgeist

In Auerbach’s political and intellectual climate, making an argument for the preservation of national cultures ran the risk of conceding ground to or even reaffirming the hypostatized idea of the nation that operated at the heart of National Socialism to various ends: as the basis for its quasi-religious political ideology, its jurisprudence, as a component part of extreme ethno-nationalism. This risk must motivate Auerbach’s insistence that a return to the epistemic pose and historical self-consciousness of the Middle Ages would take up the knowledge that ‘the human spirit is not national’. Auerbach’s concept of Weltliteratur therefore strives to recuperate the idea of the nation from contemporary poisonous political ideology on the one hand and on the other hand maintain the specificity of national traditions that might provide the grounds for variegated cultural notions of modernity. To observe how Auerbach negotiates these two pitfalls, I shall examine more closely how he runs the idea of the nation through the concept of Volksgeist.

Volksgeist is one of the key elements that Auerbach recuperates from the Neapolitan thinker Giambattista Vico’s philosophy of history. Auerbach attends to the concept Volksgeist in Vico’s early history of man: poetry is a fundamentally a very early human activity, rather than a sign of cultural advancement. Thus Auerbach finds in

Vico the poetry as a primary human activity, that is, how humans make sense of their reality, rather than an esoteric or intellectual activity of the few. Specifically the notion of *Volksgeist*, as a kind of popular historical consciousness that finds its form in poetic expression, is how Vico arrives as his greatest breakthrough, according to Auerbach, namely that Homer was not a person. Thus Auerbach observes:

The poetic *Volksgeist* can be found where Vico speaks of “Homers”. Homer was not an individual person but, rather … (*New Science* 323): ‘a heroic character of Grecian men insofar as they told their histories of song’, and these blind “Homers” possessed extraordinarily strong memories (*New Science* 324): [these rhapsodes] sustained life by singing the poems of Homer throughout the cities of Greece, and they were the authors of the poems as much as they were part of these peoples who had composed their histories in the poems.\(^{171}\)

The Vicovian formulation of *Volksgeist* speaks to Auerbach’s understanding of the production and interpretation of literature as the product of the historical consciousness of particular time and place, as well its profoundly public or popular character and finally as an expression of the sensuousness of reality. Auerbach’s recuperation of a Vicovian *Volksgeist* is important for my purposes because it also discloses how he removes the philhellenic inclination of his own method of historicism. Thereby Auerbach illuminates a more anthropological understanding of

*Volksgeist* that allows him to circumvent the chauvinism arising from more nationalist understandings of the term.

This section focusses on “The Idea of the National Spirit as the Source of the Modern Humanities” (hereafter *Source*) and “Vico and the National Spirit” (hereafter *VNS*). These essays, both composed in 1955, give overlapping accounts of the simultaneous emergence of historical perspectivism and the notion of *Volksgeist* with slightly different philosophical emphases. *VNS* traces how the idea of *Volksgeist* emerged in Italy with the thought of Giambattista Vico earlier than it did in Germany in the philosophy of Johann Gottfried Herder. Auerbach also claims that historicism is fundamentally connected to the framework of the modern German nation. *Source* provides an account for how *Volksgeist* shaped the modern formation of the academy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Taken together, these essays demonstrate that determining the conceptual formation of the nation was an urgent project for Auerbach not only in its own terms but also for the task of re-programming of *Weltliteratur* away from a philhellenic ideal.

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172 *VNS* (THL 46-55) and *Source* (THL 56-61)
173 “Vico und der Volksgeist” (hereafter *VDV*) first published in *Wirtschaft und Kultursystem: Alexander Rüstow zum siebzigsten Geburtstag* ed. Eismann, G. (E. Rentsch, Zurich 1955) 40-60. In part this can be explained as a function of a difference in publication contexts. Thus *VDV* appeared in a volume for Rüstow (a sociologist) hence the scaffolding of the essay as a phenomenon in intellectual history. With respect to *Source*, Porter gives the following editorial comment (THL 272): ‘‘The Idea of the National Spirit as the Source for the Modern Humanities’’ appears here for the first time anywhere. The German original, a typescript discovered among Auerbach’s literary remains by Martin Vialon in the German Literature Archive in Marbach, is forthcoming.’ At the time of writing, Professor Vialon’s German edition has still not appeared in print and so I cite only from Newman’s English translation.
174 *VNS* 47: There is virtually no idea that is more intimately intertwined with the roots of German historicism…than that of the national poetic spirit. (*VDV* 48: Es gibt kaum eine Vorstellung, die enger mit den Wurzeln der deutschen Bewegung verbunden ist, als die vom dichtenden Volksgeist). Auerbach’s mobilization of Vico here as the originator of ‘historism’ and, as I’m arguing, in a distinctly anti or non-nationalist mode, is just one strand of Vicovian reception. Mali, J. *The Legacy of Vico in Modern Cultural History* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012) argues for the various ways in which Vico’s thought has been taken up (including, via an examination of French historian Jules Michelet, towards nationalist ends).
In the two essays discussed here, Auerbach does not explicitly engage with the privileged place of ancient Greece within the tradition he seeks to overhaul. However, philhellenism formed an important part of the operative intellectual conditions and cultural dynamics in which historicism was developed as a scientific method of approaching the past. If love of the ancient Greek past was definitive part of Winckelmann’s move away from antiquarianism in the middle of the 18th century, thinkers in the Jena circle around Fichte explicitly developed historicism as a scientific method in a philhellenic mode. ‘Historicism’ first appeared in the 1790s in Schlegel’s *Fragments about Poetry and Literature.* Of these fragments, Sußmann points to (one of) the earliest instances of the verb ‘to historicize’ (*historisieren*): “Plato and Aristotle allow themselves only to historicise, not to criticise.” While the “reciprocal relationship between German idealist philhellenism and historicism” was not a straightforward matter of valorizing the ancient Greek past, the idea of Greece continued to have a hold on the German Idealists, even as it had been central to the thinkers of the Enlightenment and would continue to be important for the intellectual movements of Romanticism (and beyond).

Thus the absence of ancient Greece in Auerbach’s various brief sketches of the historiography of historicism is conspicuous. Buried deep in the chapter on Schiller and Goethe in *Mimesis* (“Miller the Musician”, *Mimesis* 395-453) for example, Auerbach undertakes a sketch of what he means by historicism. He broadly follows

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176 ‘Plato und Arist. lassen sich nur historisiren nicht kritisiren’ (Schlegel 1963-71: Vol. 1: 74, No. 542)
Meinecke’s account in *The Origins of Historicism* ([1936] *Mimesis* 444),\(^{179}\) in which Goethe is the key figure of the development of historicism in German thought against the backdrop of and in response to the upheavals of the French revolution. Glossing *The Origins of Historicism*, Auerbach explains “what… appealed to Goethe in the historical: the slow emergence and growth of historical entities through inner urgencies, the development of what is individual from what is typical… Goethe was certainly always aware of the general and vital current of history but … he drew from only those phenomena which – because he loved them – he could master directly by the cognitional principles which were most peculiarly his own”.\(^{180}\) Auerbach only alludes here to the fact that one of the ‘phenomena’ so beloved by Goethe was Greece and that philhellenism was formative for his thought, and for the particular focus of his passage, for the development of German historicism. This oblique statement is the closest Auerbach comes to acknowledging the philhellenism hardwired into the German historicist method. As I move into the examination of Auerbach’s two essays, it is clear that the attempt to extricate the idea of the national spirit from nationalism on the one hand and the philhellenic tendencies of German historicism on the other hand leaves Auerbach in a paradoxical position. By virtue of its philhellenism, turning to German historicism as a method of investigating the past would not Auerbach help to decouple *Volksgeist* and nationalism, but rather to reinforce this connection. Thus I

\(^{179}\) *Mimesis* 444, “Musikus Miller” 413: …the fact remains that (historicism) was thus formed and established in Germany under the age of Goethe. We need not elaborate this, because much excellent material has been published on the subject. Friedrich Meinecke’s book on the origins of historicism…is the finest and most mature treatment I know. In the Germany of those days, the revolt against the classicistic and rationalistic taste was carried further than anywhere elsewhere. (die … Historismus) diese Gestaltung selbst geschah in Deutschland während der Goethezeit. Wir brauchen hier darauf nicht einzugehen, da über den Gegenstand viel und Vorzügliches geschrieben worden ist; Friderich Meineckes Buch über die Entstehung des Historismus…ist die schönste und reifeste Darstellung, die ich kenne. In dem damaligen Deutschland wurde auch die Revolte gegen den klassischen und rationalistischen französischen Geschmack am weitesten getrieben.

\(^{180}\) *Mimesis* 446-7, “Musikus Miller” 415: …was Goethe am Geschichtlichen ergriff: das langsame Werden und Wachsen historischer Gebilde aus inneren Triebkräften heraus, die Herausbildung eines Individuellen aus dem Typischen … Es stände so … dass er den allgemeinen Lebensstrom der Geschichte zwar immer empfand, aber aus ihm nur diejenigen Phänomene herausgriff, die er mit seinen eigensten Erkenntisprinzipien unmittelbar meistern konnte, - weil er sie liebte.
will show how Auerbach re-organizes historicism in terms that emphatically reject the
concepts upon which the valorized idea of the German nation were built.

Auerbach is committed to what he calls ‘historical perspectivism’ - a term, as I
understand it, as co-extensive with his specifically organized meaning of
‘historicism’. He underscores the significance of historical perspectivism as a
development in the intellectual history of the West:

I consider the discovery of historical perspectivism based on the idea of a
national spirit to be one of the most important events in the history of the
humanities. It allowed us to enlarge our understanding of how to orient
ourselves in the historical world in ways not unlike those in which
Copernicus’ discovery allowed us to find our place in the astrophysical world.

Source 60

Auerbach insists that the radical contextualization that historical perspectivism
represents was a revolutionary moment. He argues that Vico in the sixteenth
century made the untimely “discovery” of historical perspectivism in an intellectual
milieu dominated by rationalism. Where in other essays Auerbach is keen to make
Vico into a visionary thinker of some genius whose discoveries and thought
experiments ran directly counter to the prevailing intellectual currents of his day,

181 It is not clear to me that Auerbach’s derivation of historical perspectivism is necessarily operating
the Nietzschean formulation of the concept of ‘perspectivism’ (most obviously in On the Use and
Abuse of History for Life (“Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben” [1874]))
182 Cf. Vico and Aesthetic Historism (1949) 37: ‘This largeness of our aesthetic horizon is a
consequence of our historical perspective; it is based on historicism, i.e. on the conviction that every
civilization and every period has its own possibilities of aesthetic perfection.’
183 For Vico’s untimeliness, see Vico and the Idea of Philology (1936) 35: ‘It would thus be entirely
justifiable to consider the New Science as …the first work of hermeneutical philology that, by the
nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was well ensconced…’; for Vico as out of sync with his
intellectual climate, see Vico and Herder (1931) “the most important difference (between Vico and
Herder) was that Vico was alone. No one prepared the way for him, there was no one on whose work
VNS and Source give historicizing accounts for the emergence of Volksgeist as the conceptual counterpart of historicism itself. In giving compelling arguments for historicism, as well as pinpointing the relationship between historicism and Volksgeist, an examination of these two essays will elucidate how Auerbach resolves the problem of the nation and nationalism in his re-figuring of Weltliteratur.

In Vico and the National Spirit, Auerbach initially frames the problem of how Vico and Herder’s ideas about history can appear so similarly constituted even though there was no direct contact or influence by the Italian philosopher on the German thinker and the tradition of German Romanticism:

He articulated his thoughts about language, poetry, and history a full half-century before Herder, yet his ideas seem so similar to Herder’s that they could be mistaken for them, or for the ideas of the Romantics who took up Herder’s ideas, and even for Hegel’s. Vico was nevertheless all but unknown to Herder and to those among the Romantics who espoused historicism.

Auerbach concedes at the end of the essay that in a “material history of ideas” (materielle Ideegeschichte), Vico and Herder’s historicist interventions are similarly

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he could build, no one to respond to the questions he asked. A superficial and late form of Cartesian rationalism dominated the learned world in Italy in the years when he began his work. …Vico made this discovery (about the nature of primitive man’s relationship to poetry) at a time when natural law and contract theory were in full bloom, a period dominated by Cartesian rationalism that saw the savage as either an innocent child or a beast. And he did so in Naples between 1700-1725, without the least bit of ethnographic information and based only on his knowledge of the works of antiquity and Roman law” 15-17.

184 VDV 46: Schon ein halbes Jahrhundert vor Herders Auftreten hat er Gedanken über Sprache, Dichtung und Geschichte geäußert, die denen Herders und der an ihn knüpfenden romantischen Bewegung (und auch den Gedanken Hegels) manchmal zum Verwechseln ähnlich sehen, und er ist Herder und den romantischen Vertretern des Historismus fast unbekannt geblieben.
(and astonishingly) innovative. He also points out that their respective formulations of historicism are “deeply speculative” (*stark speculativ*). However Auerbach’s way out of the impasse of the absence of direct influence of Vico on German Romanticism is to shift argumentational gears away from the similarities of Vicovian and Herderian philosophies of history. He spends the rest of the essay working out the substantial methodological and philosophical differences between the historicisms of Vico and Herder and the early German Romantics. The key difference for Auerbach is how Vico and Herder construct and mobilize the idea of *Volkgeist*, particularly around the kinds of philosophy of history (cyclical or teleological), views on human nature (static or situated) and cultural evaluation of primordial man (a desirable or even possible paradigm for modern man to emulate or not?) that are disclosed by this concept. Auerbach’s ultimate argument is that Vico does not subscribe to the notion of *Volkgeist* and substitutes instead an idea of *senso commune*. It is clear however that Auerbach’s interest is not in fleshing out Vico’s alternative conceptual formation of *senso commune* but rather in recuperating a notion of *Volkgeist* that is not governed by German Romanticism. In finding alternative co-ordinates for *Volkgeist*, Auerbach seeks to secure the nation as a hermeneutic tool for philology whilst disavowing the trajectories of twentieth century nationalist politics that derived from Herder and the German Romantics.\(^{185}\)

*VNS* starts by pointing out how Vico and Herder respectively imagine the relationships of primordial man to nature and culture, specifically around the status of language and the production of poetry at a formative stage of mankind’s development. Auerbach perceives that Vico’s theory about the origins of the poetry depends on the

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conviction that “poetry was the primordial language of man” (VNS 47; VDV 48 *Vico war überzeugt, dass Dichtung die ursprüngliche Sprache der Menschen sei*). From this hypothesis that primordial man was indeed not rational, but a sensuous and fantastic creature who expressed himself in poetic speech, Auerbach traces how Vico was able to make the bold speculative claim that Homeric epic poetry emerged not as the work of the individual genius but “rather, as the work of all the Greek people who in those poems were writing their own history in and as poetry”. Whilst Auerbach acknowledges that Herder came to similar conclusions about Homer (as did Friedrich August Wolf in his thinking about how to approach the ancient world), he identifies two fundamental differences between Vico’s insistence on production of poetry as a collective endeavor by primordial communities and Herder’s:

…the materials out of which Vico developed the architecture of his system were completely different from those used by Herder and his successors…

From the very start, Herder conceived of the primitive origins of poetry, for example, as something free, lyrical, and unconstrained; this prevented him from discovering any firm political profile in the early stages of human society. Like Vico, he sometimes speaks of the horror and fear that the first humans felt and expressed in song – the terrible gods of nature, the tribal enmities, and the rugged valor of the heroes. But none of this produced a politics.

*VNS 48*

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186 *VDV 49: *…schon das Material, aus dem Vico seine Gedanken aufbaute, was ganz verschieden von dem Herders und seiner Nachfolger…Es ist von Anfang an etwas Freies, Lyrisches und Grenzenloses, was ihn daran hindert, den Anfängen der menschlichen Gesellschaft eine feste politische Gestalt zu geben. Auch Herder spricht zwar zuweilen von Schauder und Schrecken, die die ersten Menschen empfanden und tönend ausdrückten, von krausen Naturgöttern, von den Feindschaften der Stämme, von der rauen Tapferkeit der Helden – aber das alles gibt keinen politischen Zusammenhang.
According to Auerbach, a fundamental difference between Herder and Vico in their respective understandings of the production of poetry by primordial man is whether this was a political phenomenon. He observes that the disagreement about what kind of community early man was capable of forming was borne out of a deeper schism, namely, the position of nature in these speculative anthropologies. Where Herder connects up the prehistory of man with nature, freedom and a social world prior to politics, Auerbach claims that Vico connects primordial communities of men with political or religious institutional contexts because he did not subscribe to Enlightenment narratives of progress in which nature was a state from which man emerged. He insists that Vico’s philosophy of history was informed by a theory of nature that located culture and civilization in the primordial history of mankind as the critical factor that enabled humans to make poetry at this early point of their development. Thus, behind this speculative anthropology of early man as a sensuous and political creature, Auerbach detects a radical philosophical innovation in Vico’s understanding of the concept of nature:

…[Vico] turns the old opposition of natural and positive law, of phusis and thesis, on its head… Their mores (of the poetic age) are everything other than “natural”, in the way that the natural law theorists or Rousseau might have understood the term. Rather, they are based on institutions that immediately became formal, rigorous, and binding. These institutions were of course products of the imagination rather than of reason, and thus poetic – in Vico’s sense of the term.
The Vicovian concept of nature is a significant departure for Auerbach from that of Herder and the German Romantics because it keys into the difference in their conceptions of history. Thus Auerbach maps out precisely how Vico revises the thesis/phusis distinction. In tracking how Vico’s notion of *Volksgeist* emerges, Auerbach identifies how his profound historicism (understanding the character of each epoch as a specific stage) is situated within a universal framework of history that is cyclical and non-teleological: Auerbach alludes here to this universal framework as ‘an ever recurring process of development’. Auerbach has to work hard to understand how Vico’s ultimately universalist *Volksgeist* does not override a commitment to historicist understanding. It is clear that for Auerbach cannot follow certain core parts of Vico’s philosophy of history: one of these is the larger cyclical frame of history, another is the role of Providence is organizing this frame of history. For Auerbach, the key part of Vico’s conceptual formation of *Volksgeist* is the insistence that these mechanisms of history cannot be refracted into individuated national phenomena.

In outlining Vico’s bold reversal of phusis/thesis, Auerbach summarizes that “what he (Herder) is looking for is history’s eternal laws”. In that sense, for Auerbach’s purposes Vico’s philosophy of history is juridical, concrete and rational:

> It is nearly impossible to ignore how foreign this kind of conceptual apparatus is to the *senso commune* of early Romanticism and how different it is to the idea of *Volksgeist*, the spirit of the nation. Vico’s system is derived from legal

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terminology and rises to a level of the purely rational and rarified speculation. Its focus is the universal, not the particular.

In formulating Vico’s philosophy of history and method thus, Auerbach is able to straightforwardly draw the contrast that Herder’s aim is national and individuated, while his method is based on intuition and empathy of a sensuous kind (Herder verhält sich bewusst intuitive, er strebt nach sinnlicher Einfühlung VNS 59). Auerbach’s conclusion is a tour de force display of the power of historicist critique. A ‘material history of ideas’ (materielle Ideengeschichte) was not able to distinguish Vico’s discovery of Volksgeist as separate from Herder’s. Auerbach’s historicist method derived from Vico, however, illuminates how the Italian thinker hit upon a concept of Volksgeist fifty years prior to Herder by attending to how the intellectual contexts of both men were substantially different:

It is nevertheless the case that differences do exist in the points of departure and intentions, differences that throw up a wall between the two worlds of thought that is hard to scale. Rousseau, Ossian, Pietism, and the awakening of the Nordic-German national sentiment created a different set of assumptions from those produced by southern Italian Catholicism, Cartesianism, and natural law.

\[188 VDV 59: \] Wie fremd solch ein Begriffsgebilde wie der senso commune der Frühromantik, wie verschieden er vom Volkgeist ist, wird man kaum verkennen. Er stammt aus der Rechtsterminologie und erhebt sich bei Vico in die Sphäre einer rein rationalen und unsinnlichen Spekulation. Und er zieht auf das Allgemeine, nicht auf das Besondere. 

\[189 VDV 59: \] Es ist trotzdem wahr, dass die Verschiedenheit des Ausgangspunktes und der Absicht eine kaum übersteigbare Mauer zwischen beiden Gedankenwelten errichtet. Rousseau, Ossian, der
Auerbach’s attention to the intellectual climates that respectively produced a Herderian nationally inclined philosophy of history (rational, via Rousseau, to an extent but fundamentally predicated on a story of civilization in which it was desirable for each Volk to return to its pre-rational, primitive past) and Vico’s universally orientated vision of history (juridical and rational even when describing the social life of pre-civilized man) constitutes the grounds for making the claim that Vico articulated a substantially different notion of Volksgeist. Beyond the specific historical, philosophical, and religious currents that Auerbach observes as the context for Vico and Herder’s thinking, Auerbach’s general distinction is between northern and southern European cultures. In aligning his own philosophy of history with Vico’s, Auerbach alters the conceptual trajectory of historical perspectivism away from the approaches to the past taken up by German Romanticism and therefore separates it from any hypostatized idea of the nation. Moreover, in observing how Auerbach reads Vico’s philosophy of history as governed by a universalist frame, it is possible to glimpse why his concept of Weltliteratur is structured by a tension between the historically specific and the universal. Though by no means does Auerbach follow Vico entirely, it does begin to help us make sense of why Weltliteratur is framed in historicist terms and yet also retains jarring elements of an

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Pietismus, das Erwachen des deutsch-nordischen Nationalgefühls geben andere Voraussetzungen als süditalischer Katholizismus, Cartesianismus und Naturrecht.

190 See the essay “Vico and Herder” Vico und Herder (1931) 15 for the explicit working out of this distinction between northern and southern European temperaments.

191 The conclusion of the essay is astonishing in this regard, a wink to Auerbach’s highly selective presentation of his material, for example his omission of Vico’s Platonizing politics VNS 55: What would Herder or the Romantics have said to the idea of an eternal Platonic state, in which individuality – of either the nation or of individual human beings – did not matter in the least? It is just as well, then, that Herder and his supporters paid him no mind. (VDV 60: Was hätten Herder oder die Romantiker wohl zu Vicos ewigem platonischem Staate gesagt, in dem es überhaupt nicht auf die individuelle Einmaligkeit ankommt, weder auf die eines Volkes noch die eines Menschen! Es ist doch wohl ganz in der Ordnung, dass Herder und die Seinen Vico nicht beachteteten).
ambivalent idea of the nation and universalism, in Auerbach’s insistence that the trajectory of Weltliteratur is a nightmare of standardized culture.

In the same year as Vico and the National Spirit appeared in print, Auerbach published “The Idea of the National Spirit as the Source of the Modern Humanities” (hereafter Source). Source traces the great swings of the intellectual historical pendulum between historicism (from Vico through Herder to Auerbach’s own contemporary philologists such as Karl Vossler, Ernst Robert Curtius, Leo Spitzer, Eugen Lerch and Victor Klemperer) and classicism (from Renaissance Humanism through seventeenth century French classicism to fin de siècle French philologists such as Joseph Bédier). Like VNS, Source also addressed Volksgeist as part of setting out the conceptual stall for historical perspectivism.

There are striking differences between Auerbach’s approaches in these essays. In the first instance, where VNS explored Vico as the foundational figure of historical perspectivism and Volksgeist, Source mentions him only once in passing in this regard. Moreover, Source does not do the careful parceling out of philosophical differences that VNS tracked. That is, where VNS sought to parse the conceptual differences between Vico and German Romanticism’s respective articulations of historical perspectivism, Source aims to furnish the philosophical and hermeneutic positioning of historicism against classicism. Thus Auerbach frames French classicism of the seventeenth century as the stimulus that catalyzed the emergence of historicism.¹⁹² Source’s narrative tracking the rise and fall and rise once more of the

¹⁹² Source complements the argumentational thrust of Mimesis, in which the conceptual antagonists are classicism and realism. This is particularly the case in Chapter 15 “The Faux Dévot” (Mimesis 359-394, “Der Scheinheilige” 343-370) which treats Molière, Racine and Corneille as the ‘ultimate extreme in the separation of styles, in the severance of the tragic from the everyday and real, attained by European
fate of historicism takes Auerbach up to the contemporary moment and leads him to reflect on how historicism might be able to form the apparatus for historically informed cultural relativism, that is, the critical parts of Auerbach’s re-programming of Weltliteratur.

Source starts by defining Volksgeist as emerging from poetry and other cultural forms that constitute the formal expression of historical self-consciousness of a community. In pointing this out, Auerbach orients Volksgeist both as a ‘universally human idea and as proper to the traditions of individual nations’. Auerbach’s definition also marks an opposition between Volkgeist (a flowering of man’s creative spirit) and reason (that which wants to organize this creative spirit). Thus Auerbach defines Volksgeist in such a way that he suppresses the conceptual differences between Vico and German Romanticism that were thoroughly worked out in VNS. Tracing the conceptual development of Volksgeist through historical perspectivism from Vico, Auerbach’s story of historicism takes in how Hegel “perfected” this philosophy:

It was a philosophy that discovered in the principles of historicism the dialectical possibility of a history of the present and the future. It was nevertheless also this philosophy that – precisely in perfecting historicism – also began to undermine it in dialectical fashion when it attempted to reshape the irrationality that lay at historicism’s very core into a rational system.

literature.’ (Mimesis 387, “Der Scheinheilige” 364: …stellt das äusserste Mass von Stiltrennung dar, von Loslösung des Tragischen vom Wirklich-Alltäglichen, das die europäische Literatur hervorgebracht hat). Auerbach goes on to make the claim that … “in that realm (i.e. French classicism) the separation of the tragic from the occurrences of everyday and human-creaturial life was carried out in such a radical way as never before, not even during the period whose style served as a model, that is, Greco-Roman antiquity. (Mimesis 370, “Der Scheinheilige” 352: …die Trennung des Tragischen von den Gegebenheiten des täglichen und des menschlich-kreatürlichen Lebens in einer so radikalen Weise durchgeführt worden, wie nie zuvor, auch nicht in der Epoche, deren Stil als Muster diente, der griechisch-römischen Antike.)
Here it is possible to see how dialectically governed Auerbach’s philosophy of history is and the extent to which he has taken on board historical mechanisms in the mode of Hegel. Thus Auerbach’s claim that Weltliteratur would be destroyed in the moment of its realization is strikingly similar to the impetus behind the claim that Hegel’s perfecting of historicism into a dialectical system constituted the realization and working out of its potential, as well as the beginning of its end in driving historicism towards a “rational system”.\(^{193}\) This is the moment at which Auerbach conceives of Weltliteratur and historicism as choreographed in similarly Hegelian historical trajectories of sublation. However, as I will go on to show, Auerbach also conceives of the trajectories of historicism and Weltliteratur as mutually implicated. In excising the philhellenic core of the Goethian concept, Auerbach lays the groundwork for the connection between Weltliteratur and historicism around a non-nationalist concept of Volksgeist.

In claiming that “the idea of the national spirit dominated the entire nineteenth century” (Source 57), Auerbach observes that one of its great achievements was the

\(^{193}\)“The Philology of World Literature” 255, Philologie 41: Despite this critique of Hegel’s dialectical historicism, Auerbach does not disavow a teleological framework of history: The intellectual and spiritual history of the last several millennia is the history of the human race as it has achieved self-expression. It is with this history that philology concerns itself as a historical discipline. Its archive contains the records of the grand and adventurous leap forward that human beings made to becoming aware of their conditions as human and thus to realizing their inner potential. For a long time, humanity had almost no sense of the goal toward which it was being propelled – even in the certainly very fragmented form this goal takes today.

Die innere Geschichte der letzten Jahrtausende, welche Philologie als historische Disziplin behandelt, ist die Geschichte der zum Selbstausdruck gelangten Menschheit. Sie enthält die Dokumente des gewaltigen und abenteuerlichen Vorstosses der Menschen zum Bewusstsein ihrer Lage und zur Aktualisierung der ihnen gegebenen Möglichkeiten; ein Vorstoss, dessen Ziel (auch in der gewiss ganz fragmentarischen Form, in der es sich jetzt darstellt) lange Zeit kaum zu ahnen war, und der doch, in den verschlungenen Windungen seines Verlaufs, wie nach einem Plan vor sich gegangen zu sein scheint.
discovery of the emergence of poetry “out of the depths of a nation’s traditions, out of its folk songs and legends, in the very depths of a nation’s traditions, in the pre-literate periods and as oral traditions” (ibid.). With a brief nod to Vico’s revolutionary speculation about the origins of Homeric poetry, Auerbach indicates the findings of the nineteenth century scholars into Western European medieval poetry as a highpoint of historicist analysis. From there, Auerbach traces the decline of historicism at the turn of the twentieth century as an intellectual missed opportunity. For the concerns of this chapter, it is significant that Auerbach ties the decline of historicism to the rise of nationalism in France:

For the Romantic and post-Romantic philologists, who were otherwise absolutely devoted to particulars, the subject was a free-for-all of often undisciplined (and occasionally also pedantic) speculation. For, since no one could actually observe the medieval national spirit at work (there was very little evidence of its activity, its dating was unreliable, and its interpretation was a matter of debate), there was ample room for conjectures of all sorts. The reaction began to set in around 1900, inspired partly by the ambition to compete with the precision of the natural sciences and partly also by French nationalism – for it seemed that in Europe, the “epic” national spirit meant the German national spirit.

Source 58

As much as he is inclined to be sympathetic towards non-nationalistic formulations of Volksgeist, Auerbach observes that the medieval national spirit, as philologists investigated it up to the twentieth century, was not easy to pin down. Moreover the
medieval national spirit makes an appearance at the very moment that Auerbach acknowledges that concepts such as *Volksgeist* (or for that matter, *Weltliteratur*) are not easily disentangled from their German political, cultural, or intellectual genealogies. The ready elision of the “epic” national spirit with German nationalism is problematic for Auerbach since he is attempting to mobilize *Volksgeist* as a foundational concept for the Western academy as a whole in this essay. This is more than a conceptual issue: in a rare gesture Auerbach points out that the decline of historicism could be traced to ‘the caricature of the idea for which National Socialism is responsible’. Where Auerbach observes that part of the pushback against nineteenth century German historicism is the rise of French nationalism and a push towards scientificity, the brief flash forward to the most recent and poisonous political fruit of *Volksgeist* allows us a glimpse into Auerbach’s motivations for attempting to recuperate the idea of the nation from National Socialism.

Having tracked the fortunes of historicism from Vico through German Romanticism to its contemporary champions (Auerbach himself, Curtius et alii), the essay at this point moves in two directions to supply a defense of historical perspectivism. Both of these arguments are consequential for Auerbach’s articulation of *Weltliteratur*. One defense holds the line for historicism as a species of cultural relativism, the other defense is more specifically about the role of historicism’s relationship to philology. In the first place, Auerbach makes the argument that historicism has created the conditions for a broadly “educated public”, having a cultural impact far beyond the walls of the academy:
A great number of our contemporaries who may be counted among the “educated” do not find it in the least bit difficult to admire, in equal measure, the Gregorian chant, Bach, Mozart, and Ravel. They read Aeschylus, Dante, Chinese poetry, Shakespeare, Racine, and Faulkner, and are equally keen to understand them all. They gaze upon Cretan-Minoan fresco paintings, Byzantine mosaics, Gothic sculpture, Dürer, Rembrandt, and Matisse at exhibits – often in the same day and in the same museum. It would never occur to them to think that a Turkish mosque, the temple to Poseidon at Paestum, and the cathedral at Reims might exclude one another aesthetically. The developments of various means of transportation and numerous ways of producing reproductions has of course contributed massively to this tumultuous confusion of cultures.

*Source 59*

Auerbach’s examples, regardless of genre, skew heavily towards Europe, with the exceptions of undifferentiated ‘Chinese poetry’, a Turkish mosque, and arguably Byzantine mosaics. This observation recalls the Euro-centricity of Auerbach’s presentation of *Weltliteratur* in “The Philology of World Literature”. Thus in making the argument for the relativising power and cultural reach of historicism, Auerbach reaches an impasse at which historicism appears to have laid the grounds for the nightmare of standardization that constitutes the dominant trajectory of world history. If Auerbach’s spread of examples is concentrated geographically for the most part in Western Europe, then the chronological reach of these examples spans millennia from the Minoan period to Auerbach’s contemporary moment.
It is striking that the mechanisms of cultural relativism are a central concern for Weltliteratur as well as for historicism: Auerbach’s final observation that ‘the developments of various means of transportation and numerous ways of producing reproductions’ recalls his insistence in “The Philology of World Literature” that the increasing drive towards a homogenized world culture is owing to the ‘mass movement of people’ (“The Philology of World Literature” 40 Massenbewegungen). Thus historicism and Weltliteratur do not merely run on parallel tracks. Auerbach’s conceptualization of Weltliteratur depends on demarcating the conceptual formation of historicism and its cultural expression. As we have seen, the aim of Auerbach’s Weltliteratur is precisely not the ‘tumultuous confusion of cultures’ for which this dominant iteration of historicism laid the groundwork. Rather, Auerbach attempts to prepare the grounds here for his vision of Weltliteratur by giving an account of how historicism could be compatible with a non-reified idea of the nation, that is, Volksgeist without nationalism.

If we turn to the other strategy by which Source seeks to mount a defense of historicism, we can see how Auerbach organizes the relationship between Volksgeist and philology. It is possible to see more closely here how Auerbach conceives of Volksgeist (in a non-nationalist mode) as operating in relation to philology, that is, as the tool of Weltliteratur:

It is certainly true that Renaissance philologists…had already worked out the technical details of how to engage in critical philology and archeology. But without the turn to the idea of a national spirit undertaken by the Romantics, all this would have led only to learned collections of the sort that abounded in
the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and never to an organically integrated
history of the human race.

Source 60

In this narrative, Volksgeist spiritually animates the fruits of philology. Auerbach
insists that the Romantic development of Volksgeist makes philological work
culturally meaningful, as work produced by and for humans. For Auerbach, the notion
of Volksgeist makes the German Romanticists’ work more pertinent to the human
condition that the Renaissance humanists whose work, though admirable, is recondite
and spiritually impoverished. Moreover, in the claim that the aim of historicism was
“an organically integrated history of the human race”, Auerbach pushes back on the
classicizing impulse of the Renaissance humanists. In the conclusion of Source,
Auerbach spells out the link between these Renaissance humanists (as an instance of
classicism) and Greek antiquity:

One was the admiration of the Humanists for classical antiquity – to the
exclusion of anything else. This led to the notion that only ancient works,
indeed, only the culture of antiquity, could be taken as a model. The result was
an aesthetics based on imitating these models. And nothing is more
antithetical to historical perspectivism, for it proposes absolute standards of
the beautiful and the just and rejects everything that does not correspond to
them. This was the origin of the normative aesthetics of French Classicism,
which was avowedly anti-perspectival.

Source 61
The conclusion of this essay illuminates how Auerbach’s adherence to historicism formulates an antipathy to classicism, which he construes as a suffocating requirement to imitate (Greek) antiquity. Since Source has traced historical perspectivism as the intellectual motor of the European literary tradition, the suggestion here that classicism is “anti-perspectival” is damning. The implication is that classicism stymies the full and vital functioning of the production and interpretation of literature. The inhibiting effect of classicism is twofold: imitative aesthetics require the prioritization of model over sensitivity to the cultural conditions of the historical moment of production. It is, in other words, the wrong kind of mimesis. Classicism therefore does untold damage to the historical specificity of the production of literature (Auerbach’s insistence on the pernicious effects of the aesthetic valorization of antiquity here is reminiscent of Goethe’s reluctance to use Homer as a rule of measure: see page 118). Thus Auerbach insists that the most pernicious legacy is of antiquity as an exclusive and normative model for literature. The jettisoning of philhellenic classicism is therefore the pre-condition for the philological programme that Auerbach formulates under the rubric of Weltliteratur.

In the foregoing, I have attempted to work out how Auerbach explicitly steers away from the German Romantics’ predilection for a reified concept of Volksgeist. By tracing an alternative conceptual genealogy of Volksgeist from Vico rather than Herder et alii, Auerbach attempted to recuperate the idea of the nation and planted it in foreign soil, thereby refusing to make any concession to the politics of German nationalism. Moreover, I have shown that in Vico’s thought, Auerbach finds a deep connection between historicism and the idea of the nation. Thus Auerbach’s turn to Vico is a philosophically strategic, as well as politically astute, move: Vicovian
Historicism provides Auerbach with a powerful anti-classicizing hermeneutic programme. Therefore this section has argued that Auerbach mobilizes Vicovian historicism and Vico’s idea of the nation to undermine the powerful complex of connection between the historicism of the German Romantic tradition of thought, the hyper-nationalism politics it produced and the philhellenism on which it thrived.

Turning back to “The Philology of World Literature”, Auerbach indicates that the foremost writers and thinkers of the medieval period had a particular kind of knowledge (*Erkenntis*), that the human spirit is not national (*der Geist nicht national ist*). He claims that this knowledge allowed twelfth and thirteenth century medieval theologians such as Bernard of Chartres, John of Salisbury and Jean de Meun to formulated a particular attitude to the world: secularizing Hugh of St Victor’s apothegm that “*perfectus vero cui mundus totus exilium est*” (*Didascalicon* 3.20), Auerbach suggests that exile is the ideal attitude for the philologist of *Weltliteratur*. Others have explored the consequences of Auerbach’s inscribing an exilic attitude into *Weltliteratur*, that is, a critical but loving distance from the world as the proper place and object for philology. In complement to this reading, this chapter has tried to show how Auerbach attempts to excise the philhellenism operating in the nexus of ideas around Weltliteratur, that is the core of his own hermeneutic method of historicism and the idea of the nation:

It is an enormous task to make people conscious of themselves within their own history. And yet, it is actually also a limited undertaking – indeed, even a kind of renunciation – if we consider that we live not just on the
earth, but in the world, in the universe… Yet our philological home is
the earth. It can no longer be the nation.

“The Philology of World Literature” 264

Thus the renunciation (Verzicht) that I have argued is operating here is not only giving
up on the hypostatized idea of the nation: for Auerbach, it is also the giving up the
idea that ancient Greece can provide the model for Weltliteratur. Only then will
nations be able to find within their own cultures the moments in which they became
“conscious of themselves within their own history” (in ihrer eigenen Geschichte ihre
selbst bewusst zu machen), that is, the blueprint of how to flourish on their own terms
rather than in thrall to the Greeks.

*   *   *

Auerbach was not alone in surveying the history of European literature just after the
end of the Second World War. In the same year as Mimesis appeared, Ernst Robert
Curtius published European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages (1948). Both
men advocated for a turn back to a post-classical, Latin tradition in order to provide a
coherent frame for European culture. For Auerbach and Curtius, the politics of
receiving and rejecting philhellenic models of literature and interpretation were
acutely bound up with the need to salvage European culture without making

194 Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittlealter (Bern, A. Francke, 1948). European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages trans. Trask, W. (Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ. 2013). Curtius’ attempts to galvanize and re-think humanism had started in the early 1930s (Deutscher Geist in Gefahr [1932]). The earlier book explicitly turned its back on both nationalism and antiquity, seeking to re-root humanism “not in Classicism but Medievalism” (Curtius, E.R. 1990 Author’s forward to the English translation. In European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages) 500. Curtius shared with Auerbach a great antipathy towards nationalism as an organizational tool for the humanities, as well the politics it fostered. His landmark 1948 monograph can be understood as a book length working out of the project that he had proposed in 1932.
concessions to nationalism. Curtius, however, does not offer a diagnosis of the standardization of culture and the narrowing of cultural difference in the way that Auerbach does in his reading of *Weltliteratur*. For Auerbach, the spectre of totalization constitutes an existential threat to the animating spirit of the Western literature. Auerbach’s strategy for preserving the specificity of national traditions without leaving the door open for the politics of intolerance is the refunctioning of *Weltliteratur*. By way of concluding this chapter, I shall connect Auerbach’s preference for the mindset of the Middle Ages at the heart of *Weltliteratur* with the rejection of classicism that subtends his championing of realism in *Mimesis*.

Auerbach does not explicitly use the term *Weltliteratur* in *Mimesis*. This is not entirely surprising: where *Mimesis* aims to present the history of the Western literary tradition, the concept of *Weltliteratur* contains the potential for thinking about the task of interpretation moving forward. However, the retrospective critique of *Mimesis* and the diagnostic stance of *Weltliteratur* overlap in their concern for the contemporary

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195 See “Two responses to the German Crisis of Philology: Ernst Robert Curtius and Erich Auerbach” in Zakai, A. *Erich Auerbach and the Crisis of German Philology: The Humanist Tradition in Peril* (Springer International Publishing, Switzerland 2017) 51-58 for the substantial differences between Curtius and Auerbach. In the first place, Curtius came relatively late in his career to the Middle Ages, where Auerbach has been committed to Dante since the outset of his scholarly career (see my previous chapter). Secondly there is a substantial difference in the politics of both men’s (re)turns to the Middle Ages. Whilst the boundaries of Curtius’ anti-Semitism have not yet been settled by scholarly consensus, it is true that Curtius seeks to restore *Kultur* and *Humanismus* along explicitly Christian lines. The exclusionary politics of this move must be significant in the cultural context. Finally, Leo Spitzer, in the conclusion of his review of *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* observes a substantial difference in the method and critical tone of Auerbach and Curtius’ major works. Thus, having observed Curtius’s synthetic approach, Spitzer states: “In my opinion the admirable work of Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, written by a German in exile without any resentment against current German movements and interpreting, historically and aesthetically, individual text that cover the same span of twenty six centuries as does Curtius’ book… lead(s) us farther into the inner sanctum of medieval poetry. Such books truly interpret the individual work of art while Curtius informs us, more completely than his predecessors about its general background… Curtius’ resentments seem to include the German émigré scholars in Roman who have worked before him in the same direction: there is no mention in his book of Auerbach…” (Spitzer, L. *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (1949) 425-431) 430-1.

196 HaCohen, M.H. “Typology and the Holocaust: Erich Auerbach and Judeo-Christian Europe” (*Religions* 3, 2012, 600–645) discusses Curtius’ distrust both of historicism and modernity (605). Thus while Auerbach and Curtius might have shared the turn back to the Latin Middle Ages, Auerbach’s intellectual commitment to historicism and his interest in narratives of modernity mark his reconfiguration of *Weltliteratur* out as a fascinating and distinctive project.
moment, that is, the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and the possibility for carrying forward the European literary tradition. Additionally, there is an overlap between the two projects in the shared critique of the idealization of Greek antiquity as the model for literature and interpretation. Auerbach’s prioritization of realism over classicism in *Mimesis*, as I have shown in Chapter One, depends on a de-prioritizing of ancient Greece as the aesthetic model for history of Western literature. Auerbach’s *Weltliteratur* takes on the baton from *Mimesis* in terms of mapping out hermeneutic possibilities that are not beholden to, and moreover, are deeply critical of, philhellenism as the ideal instance of classicism. There are two distinct drawbacks to philhellenic classicism for Auerbach: the first is that any programme of imitative aesthetics threatens to suffocate the particular, sensuous and historical reading of any given text. The second is specific to the context from which *Mimesis* itself emerged: the project of philhellenic classicism goes hand in hand with the political ideology of National Socialism. I am suggesting that *Weltliteratur*, taking up the Latin middle ages as its model, supplies a possible solution to the challenge that *Mimesis* poses: how to read without a philhellenism that calcifies aesthetic horizons and denatures the historical shape of the Western literary tradition.

To demonstrate how these concerns of *Weltliteratur* coincide with the programme of *Mimesis* around the strategic de-prioritization of philhellenism, I turn to the concluding moments of *The Brown Stocking*, the last body chapter of *Mimesis*. Here Auerbach expresses concern for the contemporary historical moment in a striking way, in the same terms in which he diagnoses the simplification of culture that provided him with the impetus to refashion *Weltliteratur* three years later. Auerbach pivots from an observation about Virginia Woolf’s process and philosophy of
representation in her 1929 novel *To the Lighthouse* to making an observation about the contemporary world:

The strata of societies and their different ways of life have become inextricably intermingled. There are no longer even exotic peoples. A century ago (in Mérimée for example), Corsicans and Spaniards were still exotic; today the term would be quite unsuitable for Pearl Buck’s Chinese peasants. Beneath the conflicts, and also through them, an economic and cultural leveling process is taking place. It is still a long way to a common life of mankind on earth, but the goal begins to be visible… 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 that it affords. But they are few in number, and probably they will not live to see much more than the first forewarnings of the approaching unification and simplification.

“The Brown Stocking” 552\(^{197}\)

\(^{197}\)“*Der Braune Strumpf*” 514: Die Bevölkerungsschichten und ihre verschiedenen Lebensformen sind durcheinandergeschüttelt, es gibt auch keine exotischen Völker mehr; vor einem Jahrhundert wirkten (etwa bei Mérimée) die Korsen oder die Spanier noch exotisch, heut wäre das Wort für die chinesischen Bauern von Pearl Buck ganz unangemessen. Unterhalb der Kämpfe und auch durch sie vollzieht sich ein wirtschaftlicher und kultureller Ausgleichprozess; es ist noch ein langer Weg bis zu einem gemeinsamen Leben der Menschen auf der Erde, doch das Ziel beginnt schon sichtbar zu werden… So scheint der komplizierte Auflösungsprozess, der zur Zerfaserung der äusseren Handlung, zu Bewusstseinspiegelung und Zeitenschichtung führte, nach einer sehr einfachen Lösung zu streben. Vielleicht wird sie allzu einfach sein für diejenigen, die unsere Epoche, trotz aller Gefahren und Katastrophen, wegen ihres Lebensreichtums und des unvergleichlichen geschichtlichen Standorts, den sie bietet, bewundern und lieben. Aber das sind nur wenige, und sie werden voraussichtlich von jener Vereinheitlichung und Vereinfachung, die sich ankündigt, kaum mehr als die ersten Anzeichen erleben.
Where Auerbach had admired Woolf for her ability to sample the core of the human condition by exploiting the sensuous, concrete particulars of everyday existence, such as a stocking, in her writing, he moves onto a more historically specific analysis of the trend of world culture. Where Auerbach’s celebration of Woolf’s method of seeking what we have in common as human is inflected with universalism, the process of unification causes alarm when he considers it historically. In discussing how “inextricably intermingled” (durcheinandergeschüttelt) the world has become, Auerbach insists that cultural difference is vanishing. Instead of commonality, the valence of Auerbach’s critical terms has shifted towards a more ominous register of totalization. Thus he perceives the ultimate goal of an “economic and cultural leveling process” (ein wirtschaftlicher und kultureller Ausgleichsprozess…). Moreover he is clearly dismayed at the idea that the telos of “dissolution” (Auflösungsprozess) might become its opposite, that is, “a very simple solution” (eine[ř] sehr einfache[n] Lösung). In the final sentence of Mimesis, Auerbach makes a diagnosis: the coming unification and simplification (Vereinheitlichung...Vereinfachung) are not conditions in which Auerbach’s hermeneutic programme can thrive since it values particularity, both in the sense of specificity of national literary contexts and in the sense of requiring attention to the sensual and concrete materiality of the world.

These are precisely the terms that Auerbach uses to describe the historical trajectory of the world in the analysis in the Weltliteratur essay (vereinheitlicht sich...Ausgleichprozess...Standardisierung...Konzentrationprozess...) and precisely the situation he is attempting to avoid in his refuinction of the concept of Weltliteratur. Where Auerbach insists that this situation is ungoethisch because it results in the homogenization of cultures into a monolithic world culture, his solution to this state of
affairs is also ‘ungoethisch’ in the sense of proposing an alternative to Goethe’s model of the Greeks for *Weltliteratur*. In proposing the (Latin) Middle Ages as his paradigm, Auerbach proposes instead that the European language and culture traditions with Rome rather than Greece at their root, are a more viable point for modeling *Weltliteratur* in their variety, harmonious diversity and awareness.

More broadly, the critical overlap between the last moment of *Mimesis* and the *Weltliteratur* essay is founded on a rejection of philhellenic classicism. At the root of Auerbach’s antipathy to any approach that valorizes classical antiquity is a resistance to measuring a text or the world itself against an ideal that it cannot reach. (In that sense, Woolf is an ideal author for the nascent programme of *Weltliteratur* in having Mrs Ramsay’s inner life subtended by the measuring of the stocking against her son’s leg rather than to a pattern, difficult as this task may be because of his fidgeting.) *Mimesis* turns its back explicitly on philhellenic classicism by taking up realism as a method of reading texts in sympathy with the cultural contexts and historical conditions. Auerbach’s reffunctioning of *Weltliteratur* shares *Mimesis*’ antipathy to philhellenic modes of reading, whilst also making explicit that cultural and historical specificity renders the task of the philologist meaningful.

The core of Auerbach’s *Weltliteratur* explicitly articulates what is only hinted at in the final sentences of *Mimesis*. I understand Auerbach’s powerful suggestion to return to the mindset of the (Latin) Middle Ages as a plea orientated towards the present as well as the past. With respect to the present, Auerbach enjoins us to adopt an epistemic pose that would provide a “vantage point” from which it would be possible to perceive the “abundance of life” and set up a critical attitude towards it. With
respect to the past, Auerbach’s demand is that we pay attention to the historical specificity of texts and the reality from which they emerge. Auerbach identifies the medieval period as the governing historical spirit of both these historically responsive attitudes because of its relation to Greek antiquity.

The interpretative virtue of Auerbach’s *Mittelalter* is its postclassicism: the flowering of the vernacular national literatures in Auerbach’s narrative of the history of European culture depends on coming after antiquity. Auerbach’s championing of Dante, as discussed extensively in the previous chapter, can also be seen as operating as part of the injunction to turn back to the Middle Ages. Dante’s poetry represents for Auerbach the culmination of the Middle Ages that is, the high point of national literary culture that could exceed classical antiquity in terms of literary imagination, style and mimetic capacity.\(^1\) Subtending Auerbach’s championing of realism in *Mimesis* is a plea to abandon philhellenism once and for all, as an impossible measure that does incalculable damage to the reality upon which it is imposed as well as limiting the possibilities of representation. The same plea, as I have argued in this chapter, undergirds Auerbach’s reprogramming of *Weltliteratur*. By orientating *Weltliteratur* away from German philhellenism and nationalism, Auerbach sought the conceptual resources by which European modernity could be re-imagined as the crucible for a rich diversity of national traditions.

\(^1\) Thus Auerbach’s closing sentiments in the chapter on Dante in *Mimesis* (“Farinata and Calvalcante” 174-202; “Farinata und Cavalcante” 167-194) turn precisely on how the Italian poet superseded his ancient forebearers. For example *Mimesis* 202, “Farinata and Cavalcante” 194: More accurately than antique literature was ever able to present it, we are given to see, in the realm of timeless being, the history of man’s inner life unfolding. (… wir erfahren, weit genauer als antike Dichtung er darzustellen vermochte, im zeitlosen Sein das innergeschichtliche Werden.)
Chapter Four: Not at Home Among the Greeks: the Critical Reception of Antiquity in *Minima Moralia*.

Where Chapter Two focused on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the present chapter attends to the critical reception of antiquity in another part of Theodor Adorno’s exilic thought. *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (*Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* 1951, hereafter *Minima Moralia*) was composed in a period that overlaps with *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. *Minima Moralia* is constituted by 153 critical aphorisms, divided into three parts. The first of these parts was written in 1944, the second in 1945 and the third and final part in 1946-47.

For the purposes of this chapter, I would like to draw attention to the epigraph of part one in which Adorno cites: “life does not live” (“das Leben lebt nicht”) from the 1855 novel *Der Amerika-Müde* by Viennese writer and political exile Ferdinand Künnerberger. In making this citational gesture, Adorno orients *Minima Moralia* in its immediate historical condition of his exile in America (1939-49). In addition, this epigraph announces an ethical problem: if life itself does not live, then how should any one particular person conduct their life? Weary of America, tired of life itself, *Minima Moralia* is nevertheless a fierce investigation of the contingent, squeezed and

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fractured possibilities of life after a historical trauma as profound as the Holocaust. Though Adorno’s critique of ethics, the philosophical position of the subject, and his experience of exile are presented with pungent pessimism, *Minima Moralia* does not express nihilism or existential despair. As this chapter will show, discomfort and unease with straightforward notions of historical or cultural belonging are the affective regimes inside of which Adorno seeks to re-ground the possibility of critical thought after World War Two.

*Minima Moralia*’s central philosophical move is the re-purposing of the Hegelian dialectic. Inverting Hegel’s dictum of totality, Adorno argues that “the whole is the false” (Aphorism 29 “Dwarf Fruit”, *Zwergobst*). In a rejection of systematic philosophical treatments, Adorno insists that his work will attend to the most insignificant details of modern life, the better to grasp the broken conditions in which it operates. Thus, earlier in the same aphorism, Adorno offers an excellent description of the method and form of *Minima Moralia*: “the splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass”. Adorno has smashed *Minima Moralia* into a multitude of glittering shards of different sizes that might allow for a complex reflection of reality that cannot be restored or recuperated from re-assembling its aphoristic pieces.

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200 *Minima Moralia* represents a turning point in Adorno’s thought, containing *in nuce* the themes and concerns that would be developed in later works. For example, Adorno’s resistance to synthetic thought is given full exposition in *Negative Dialectics* (1966) and is first found here in *Minima Moralia*. See the lucid preface of Buck-Morss, S. *The Origins of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School* (Macmillian, New York NY. 1977) ix- xiv.

201 Jephcott’s translation supplies Adorno’s missing citation in identifying this part of the aphorism as an inversion of “Das Wahre ist das Ganze” in Hegel, G.F.W. *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Bamberg und Würzburg (1807) 24.

202 Hereafter the citation of the page number in English translation will be given as *Minima Moralia*, followed by the page number in German as MM. *Minima Moralia* 50, MM 54-5: Der Splitter in deinem Auge ist das beste Vergrösserungsglas.
In addition to the dialectical form of *Minima Moralia*, Adorno also approaches history as a dialectical proposition. Thus in Aphorism 152 (“Warning not to be misused”, *Vor Missbrauch wird gewarnt*):

> Its truth or untruth, therefore, is not inherent in the method itself, but in its intention in the historical process.²⁰³

At stake in this project is a resistance to the traditional dialectical denouement in the movement towards synthesis. For Adorno this is a universalizing tendency that allows the fruits of dialectical philosophy to be incorporated in the Enlightenment systems of domination. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer had argued for the strong linking of the Enlightenment and its totalizing philosophical systems and the contemporary disaster of National Socialism as its late-flowering and bitter fruit²⁰⁴ (for further discussion of how *Dialectic of Enlightenment* articulates this project, see the introduction of Chapter Two). *Minima Moralia* can then be understood as Adorno’s first steps towards disentangling the dialectic from its original intellectual formation in the modern philosophical tradition. In both exile works, Adorno is concerned with the critique of the whole tradition of philosophy. Moreover, *Minima Moralia* gains its radical edge by pushing back on the very notion of a hypostatized original point of Western culture. I argue therefore that the critique of Greco-Roman antiquity as an idealized foundational moment of Western philosophy is central to *Minima Moralia*.

²⁰³ *Minima Moralia* 244, MM 278: Ihre Wahrheit oder Unwahrheit steht daher nicht bei der Methode als solcher, sondern bei ihrer Intention im historischen Prozess.

²⁰⁴ *Zwergobst* is a type of pear that appears late in the harvest season. The referent is extremely opaque, gesturing either towards totalitarianism as the late ripening fruit of Hegelian thought OR self-reflexively as the intervention of *Minima Moralia* itself.
In the Dedication (Zueignung) Adorno announces the kind of inverted Hegelian project that *Minima Moralia* will pursue. Thus *Minima Moralia* formally and thematically takes up the dialectic at the very moment where Adorno understands Hegel’s commitment to totality as stymieing the potential of dialectical thought:

Thus Hegel, whose method schooled Minima Moralia, argued against the mere being-in-itself of subjectivity on all its levels. Dialectical theory, abhorring anything isolated, cannot admit aphorisms as such… In his relation to the subject, Hegel does not respect the demand he otherwise passionately upholds: to be in the matter and not ‘always beyond it’, ‘to penetrate into the immanent content and matter’. 205 If today the subject is vanishing, aphorisms take upon themselves the duty to ‘consider the evanescent itself as essential’. They insist, in opposition to Hegel’s practice and yet in accordance with his thought, on negativity: ‘the life of the mind only attains truth when discovering itself in absolute desolation. The mind is not this power as a positive that turns away from the negative…it is this power only when looking the negative in the face, dwelling upon it. 206

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205 Jephcott’s translation gives the supplemental information for both of Adorno’s citations of Hegel (*Phaenomenologie des Geistes, Werke* 3, Frankfurt 1970, 52 and 53 respectively; *Phenomenology of Mind*, London 1966, 112 and 93).

206 *Minima Moralia* 16: MM 14-15 So hat Hegel, an dessen Methode die der Minima Moralia sich schulte, gegen das bloss Fürsichsein der Subjektivität auf all ihren Stufen argumentiert. Die diallektische Theorie, abhold jeglichem Vereinzelten, kann denn auch Aphorismen als solche nicht gelten lassen…Hegel hält sich dem Subjekt gegenüber nicht an die Forderung, die er sonst leidenschaftlich vorträgt: die, in der Sache zu sein und nicht »immer darüber hinaus«, anstatt »in den immanenten Inhalt der Sache einzugehen«. Verschwindet heute das Subjekt, so nehmen die Aphorismen es schwer, dass »das Verschwindende selbst als wesentlich zu betrachten« sei. Sie insistieren in Opposition zu Hegels Verfahren und gleichwohl in Konsequenz seines Gedankens auf der Negativität. »Das Leben des Geistes gewinnt seine Wahrheit nur, indem er in der absoluten Zerrissenheit sich selbst findet. …«
Clearly indebted to Hegel’s philosophy, *Minima Moralia* goes beyond and even *contrary* to it. Adorno’s anti-Hegelian Hegelianism works out in several ways which are at root connected by negativity (*Negativität*). *Minima Moralia*’s form (the aphorism) and content (immanent critique of the subject) bear out this deep commitment to negativity. Adorno’s complaint is that though Hegel demanded that all criticism must be immanent, he did not follow through when approaching the idea of the subject. Moreover, Adorno gestures towards how Hegel’s stopping short in the practice of immanent critique of subjectivity is consequential for the form of philosophy: Hegel held out the promise of negativity as the dialectical route to the truth, though his long form treatises denied the possibility of admitting negativity as a structural possibility. *Minima Moralia* therefore seeks to make good on these disjunctions between Hegelian theory and practice by carrying out an immanent critique of the subject, using the aphorism as a form of philosophy to accommodate, or even promote, the disruption of totalizing thought.

In observing this commitment, we should note that Adorno makes a significant move away from Marx’s philosophy of history, which provides for the proletariat to become a subject, rather than an object of history. If the traditional Marxist critique of history therefore casts the examination of the conditions of the individual subject as a bourgeois concern, Adorno’s powerful inversion of Hegel’s dialectical priorities rests on the historical contextual force of the time of writing. He provocatively identifies continuity between the totalizing tendencies in Hegel’s thought and the disaster of National Socialism. For example, in Aphorism 54 “The Robbers” (*Die Räuber*),\(^{207}\) he makes the connection explicit:

\(^{207}\) Referring to Schiller’s play “The Robbers”, Adorno indicts the one-dimensionality of Schiller and Goethe’s female characters as indicative of a particular identitarian cast of thought in German
… this inability to make distinctions, animates the great speculative systems of Idealism, defying all imperatives and yoking German mind to German barbarism.\footnote{Minima Moralia 89, MM 98: … der Unfähigkeit zu unterscheiden, lebt aber in den grossen spekulativen Systemen des Idealismus, allen Imperativen zum Trotz, und kettet deutschen Geist und deutsche Barbarei aneinander.}

Arguably the governing principle of \textit{Minima Moralia} is to reassert the importance of drawing and maintaining difference. Thus its focus on the individual subject is a corrective to the politics and philosophical pursuit of totality, spelled out in the National Socialist intolerance of difference. This shift of focus towards the subject goes hand in hand with the rejection of the positive ends of Idealist philosophy: \textit{Minima Moralia} inaugurates “negativity” (\textit{der Negativität}) as its formal scheme and operational logic. Thus \textit{Minima Moralia} attempts nothing less than the radical redrafting of the very basis of philosophy so that it does not merely function as “justification of what exists” (MM 17 \textit{Rechtfertigung des Bestehenden}) but is capable of critical thought, that is, thought that neither seeks identity as its ultimate goal nor understands itself as identical with its object.

Critique of post-war American culture, as Adorno encountered it in various forms, also constitutes a fundamental part of the project of \textit{Minima Moralia}. Moreover, he takes seriously the condition of exile, that is, not being at home as a physical, spiritual, and philosophical predicament. A brief examination of Aphorism 66

\footnote{Critical Theory: Current State and Future Prospects (Berghahn Books, New York, London 2001) 49-68.}
(“Mélange”, *Melange*) can stand as an example of Adorno’s approach of pairing his large-scale philosophical critique of totality and his specific attacks on National Socialism with a devastating account of American culture:

The familiar argument of tolerance, that all races and people are equal, is a boomerang. It lays itself open to the simple refutation of the senses, and the most compelling anthropological proofs that the Jews are not a race will, in the event of a pogrom, scarcely alter the fact that the totalitarians know full well whom they do and whom they do not intend to murder… Abstract utopia is all too compatible with the most insidious tendencies of society… [Society] considers actual or imagined differences as stigmas indicating that something has still been left outside of its machinery, not quite determined by its totality. The technique of the concentration camps is to make the prisoners like their guards, the murdered, murderers. The racial difference is raised to an absolute so that it can be abolished absolutely, if only in the sense that nothing that is different survives. The spokesmen of unitary tolerance … are always ready to turn intolerantly on any group that does not conform … The melting-pot was introduced by unbridled industrial capitalism. The thought of being cast into it conjures up martyrdom, not democracy.209 (Translation modified)

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209 *Minima Moralia* 102-3: MM 113-4 Das geläufige Argument der Toleranz, alle Menschen, alle Rassen seien gleich, ist ein Bumerang. Es setzt sich der bequemen Widerlegung durch die Sinne aus, und noch die zwingendsten anthropologischen Beweise dafür, dass die Juden keine Rasse seien, werden im Falle des Pogroms kaum etwas daran ändern, dass die Totalitäten ganz gut wissen, wen sie umbringen wollen und wen nicht… Die abstrakte Utopie wäre allzu leicht mit den abgefeimtesten Tendenzen der Gesellschaft vereinbar…Sie betrachtet die tatsächlichen oder eingebildeten Differenzen als Schandmale, die bezeugen, dass man es noch nicht weit genug gebracht hat; dass irgend etwas von der Maschinerie freigelassen, nicht ganz durch die Totalität bestimmt ist… Die Fürsprecher der unitarischen Toleranz sind denn auch stets geneigt, intolerant gegen jede Gruppe sich zu kehren, die sich nicht anpasst… Der melting pot war eine Einrichtung des losgelassenen Industriekapitalismus. Der Gedanke, in ihn hineinzuqueren, beschwört den Martertod, nicht die Demokratie.
Adorno connects the most recent contemporary horror on European soil in the form of concentration camps (a politics of genocidal intolerance) and the utopian impulse behind the American ideology of immigration (a politics of open-minded tolerance). He forges a connection between these seemingly polar opposite political systems in the underlying intolerance of difference, that is, anything, that lies “outside of the (social) machinery” and cannot be brought under its control. The “melting-pot” as the ideal of the American immigrant dream insists uncompromisingly on assimilation. In this sense, the notion of the melting pot is an instrument of the logic of capital, in which the exchange and circulation of commodities depends on their infinite fungibility and uniformity. Thus Adorno argues that American capitalist democracy shares with National Socialism the structural allergy to who or whatever refuses to submit to its total grasp. The inability to recognize the intolerance operating at the heart of the American dream of immigration leads to egregiously inconsistent attitudes to difference within American culture: Adorno points to the hypocrisy hardwired into the American commitment to tolerance in its attitude to race. He argues that African-Americans who cannot shed racial difference are an analogous position with respect to the American social totality as the Jews were in Germany in the 1930s and 40s (perhaps, indeed, that America is worse because its systemic racism is cloaked in a politics of equality). Though the connection between the two systems remains shocking, it illustrates of how much a piece Adorno saw the horror that he had fled and his critique of the American culture in which he sought refuge.

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Across these two moves (the refunctioning of the dialectic and the critique of totalitarian thought as it was manifested in National Socialist Germany or America), modernity emerges as Adorno’s main quarry. Minima Moralia demonstrates an unflinching and abiding commitment to probing modernity as a dialectical proposition in history. Jettisoning synthesis as a philosophical desideratum provides the basic grounds for the dialectical approach to modernity: the refunctioning of the dialectic goes together with his rejection, or ironic inversions, of teleological narratives of history. By looking carefully at how Adorno formulates a concept of modernity within a dialectical schema of history, it will be possible to see how the past (with Greek antiquity as a particularly privileged and contested historical moment) is organized within this scheme.

Violence as a historical problem: models of difference and similarity

Adorno takes aim at concepts of history that install too much difference between modernity and what has gone before, as twentieth century political ideologies and artistic movements (such as Futurism or the more technologically fetishistic parts of capitalism) sought to do. He recognized that failing to account for structures of historical similarity sets up a recoil mechanism when history intrudes and reimposes itself. However, he was convinced that it was just as mistaken to consider history merely the continuous reproduction of the same, riding roughshod over the specificity of each historical moment. As we have just seen, Adorno has a deep antipathy towards mechanisms of assimilation, whether they are socio-cultural or philosophical. In Adorno’s view, violence emerges as a consistent and endlessly reformatted feature of
history – the connections between historical moments can be traced through violence. Thus Adorno articulates the subject’s experience of modernity as a violent assault, in the image of someone being punched in the head. Having demonstrated how Adorno rejects separation and continuity as historical models, I will be able to show how Adorno’s dialectical modernity copes with a historical problem of the highest stakes, that is, how to make the Holocaust legible within a schema of history.

Adorno signals that the third and final part of *Minima Moralia* will be particularly attuned to modernity in its epigraph taken from Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du Mal*.\(^\text{211}\) Indicating that he is concerned as much with cultural positions that embrace the condition of being modern as well as the philosophical proposition of modernity, Adorno returns to Baudelaire in Aphorism 150 (“Late Extra”, *Extrablatt*). Here he provides us with a programmatic statement about his view of the cultural and historical texture of modernity, paying particular attention to the concept of novelty (*der Begriff des Neuen*). Novelty, as a cultural attitude that modernity formulates, does not indicate that the past has been successfully left behind. Instead Adorno claims that novelty, despite itself, registers two fundamental features of history, that is, violence and repetition:

\(^{211}\) *Minima Moralia* 159, MM 180: “Avalanche, veux-tu m’emporter dans ta chute?” Adorno gives no citation beyond the name of Baudelaire. It is then up to the reader to locate and parse the meaning of such a gesture. Amongst others Claussen, D. *Theodor W. Adorno: One Last Genius* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA. 2012) 398 n. 122 identifies this as the last line of Baudelaire’s poem ‘Le Gout du Néant’. Richter, G. *Thought Images: Frankfurt School Writers’ Reflections from Damaged Life* (Stanford University Press, Stanford CA. 2000) 197 understands this as a continuation of Adorno’s “ghostly conversation with Benjamin”, for whom the French poet was the “modern emblem of cultural production and decay in the Parisian arcades of nineteenth century capitalism”. Richter also sees in Adorno’s apostrophe of the avalanche “the slippery edge between the suicidal temptation of giving oneself over to the disaster and the wish to continue life in order, perhaps to write, even if only to write the writing of the disaster”. \(\)
In central passages of Poe and Baudelaire the concept of newness emerges…in the latter, in the last line of the cycle La Mort, which chooses the plunge into the abyss, no matter whether hell or heaven, ‘au fond de l’inconnu pour trouver du nouveau’…it is an unknown threat that the subject embraces and which, in dizzy reversal, promises joy. The new, a blank place in consciousness, awaited as if with shut eyes, seems [to be] the formula by means of which a stimulus is extracted from despair and dread. It makes evil flower. But its bare contour is a cryptogram for the most unequivocal reaction… The cult of the new, and thus the idea of modernity, is a rebellion against the fact that there is no longer anything new. 212

Baudelaire’s exhortation is to plunge into the abyss, hoping that it will somehow be better than the present or past, for the sake of ‘le noveau’. Adorno understands novelty as a “blank place in consciousness” (eine Leerstelle des Bewusstseins) because it constitutes a bad faith response to history: fleeing into the arms of the new, without knowing what it is but merely different from the pain and suffering of history. He gives us an image of a modern subject whose eyes are squeezed shut, as if to block out the painful reality of historical existence and has made her mind go blank to avoid contemplating this situation. Taking us inside the mind of this hypothetical modern subject, Adorno elaborates on how novelty is connected to violence:

Baudelaire’s poetry is full of the lightning flashes seen by a closed eye that has received a blow. As phantasmagoric as these lights is the idea of newness itself. What flashes thus, while serene contemplation now attains merely the socially pre-formed plaster casts of things, is itself repetition. The new, sought for its own sake, a kind of laboratory product, petrified into a conceptual scheme, becomes in its sudden apparition a compulsive return of the old not unlike that in traumatic neuroses. To the dazzled vision the veil of temporal succession is rent to reveal the archetypes of perpetual sameness: this is why the discovery of the new is satanic, an eternal recurrence of damnation.\footnote{Minima Moralia 236, MM 268: Baudelaires Dichtung aber ist erfüllt von jenem Blitzlicht, welches das geschlossene Auge sieht, das ein Schlag trifft. So phantasmagorisch dies Licht, so phantasmagorisch auch die Idee des Neuen selber. Was aufblitzt, während gelassene Wahrnehmung blass noch den gesellschaftlich präformierten Abguss der Dinge erreicht, ist selber Wiederholung. Das Neue, um seiner selbst willen gesucht, gewissermassen im Laboratorium hergestellt, zum begrifflichen Schema verhärtet, wird im jähnen Erscheinen zur zwangshafien Rückkehr des Alten, nicht unähnlich den traumatischen Neurosen. Dem Geblendeten zerreist der Schleier der zeitlichen Sukzession vor den Archetypen der Immergleichheit: darum ist die Entdeckung des Neuen satanisch, ewige Wiederkehr als Verdammnis.}

Adorno compares the cultural consciousness that privileges novelty to the shocked mind of a person who has just been squarely punched in the head and attempts desperately to understand the experience even though their sensory apparatus has also been jammed by the blow. The comparison of a culture that values novelty to a traumatized mind is not incidental: just as a traumatized mind never represses a memory with total success, novelty is the cultural expression of modernity’s failed attempt to separate itself from the past. Adorno therefore points to how novelty is therefore an empty placeholder: the propositional content of the ‘new’ is doomed to repetition, what Adorno calls “the eternal recurrence of damnation”.

\footnote{Minima Moralia 236, MM 268: Baudelaires Dichtung aber ist erfüllt von jenem Blitzlicht, welches das geschlossene Auge sieht, das ein Schlag trifft. So phantasmagorisch dies Licht, so phantasmagorisch auch die Idee des Neuen selber. Was aufblitzt, während gelassene Wahrnehmung blass noch den gesellschaftlich präformierten Abguss der Dinge erreicht, ist selber Wiederholung. Das Neue, um seiner selbst willen gesucht, gewissermassen im Laboratorium hergestellt, zum begrifflichen Schema verhärtet, wird im jähnen Erscheinen zur zwangshafien Rückkehr des Alten, nicht unähnlich den traumatischen Neurosen. Dem Geblendeten zerreist der Schleier der zeitlichen Sukzession vor den Archetypen der Immergleichheit: darum ist die Entdeckung des Neuen satanisch, ewige Wiederkehr als Verdammnis.}
If Adorno claims that there is “no longer anything new” \((es \, nichts \, Neues \, mehr \, gebe)\), he means that we have to take seriously how deep the effects of the past are on the present. However, in the previous aphorism, (Aphorism 149 “Don’t exaggerate”) Adorno attacks the opposite tendency, that is, the idea that history is an undifferentiated stream of events that are more or less of the same importance.

Criticism of tendencies in modern society is automatically countered, before it is fully uttered, by the argument that things have always been like this… But even if things have always been so neither Timur nor Genghis Khan nor the English colonial administration in India systematically burst the lungs of millions of people with gas, the eternity of horror nevertheless manifests itself in the fact that each of its new forms outdoes the old…What is constant is not an invariable quantity of suffering but its progress towards hell… Horror consists in its always remaining the same – the persistence of ‘pre-history’ - but is realized as constantly different, unforeseen, exceeding all expectation, the faithful shadow of developing productive forces.\(^\text{214}\)

While insisting that the crimes of National Socialism are horrific beyond the scope of any previous violent tyranny or system of oppression, Adorno does not thereby position the recent terror of the concentration camps as a historical exception. The difference of the Holocaust in historical terms from previous events, Adorno asserts,

\(^\text{214}\) *Minima Moralia* 233, MM 264-6: Der Kritik an Tendenzen der gegenwärtigen Gesellschaft wird automatisch, ehe sie nur ganz ausgesprochen ist, entgegengehalten, so sei es immer schon gewesen… Aber mag es selbst schon immer so gewesen sein, obwohl doch weder Timur und Dschingis Khan noch die indische Kolonialverwaltung plangemäss Millionen von Menschen mit Gas die Lungen zerreißen liessen, dann offenbar doch die Ewigkeit des Entsetzens sich daran, dass jede seiner neuen Formen die ältere überbietet... Was überdauert, ist kein invariables Quantum von Leid, sondern dessen Fortschritt zur Hölle… Das Entsetzen besteht darin, dass es immer dasselbe bleibt - die Fortdauer der »Vorgeschichtex «, aber unablässig als ein anderes, Ungeahntes, alle Bereitschaft Übersteigendes sich verwirklicht, getreuer Schatten der sich entfaltenden Produktivkräfte.
is the increase in the scale and degree of violence. Indicating previous wide-scale massacres, Adorno argues that history has demonstrated that it has retained pre-civilizational horror as its spectral *Doppelgänger*, emerging in unpredictable ways but never banished. He draws the connection between the cult of novelty and the nightmarish telos of history:

On the one hand they rave about the *dernière nouveauté*, on the other hand they deny the infernal machine that is history. Auschwitz cannot be brought into analogy with the destruction of the Greek city-states as a mere gradual increase in horror before which one can preserve tranquility of mind. Certainly, the unprecedented torture and humiliation of those abducted in cattle trucks does shed a deathly livid light on the most distant past…He who relinquishes awareness of the growth of horror not merely succumbs to cold hearted contemplation, but fails to perceive, together with the specific difference between the newest and that preceding it, the true identity of the whole, of terror without end.\(^{215}\)

In identifying the growth of horror (*das Anwachsen des Entsetzens*) as the fundamental connection between Auschwitz and the history of imperial conquest, Adorno insists that violence is the defining condition of history. Thus Adorno’s

chilling claim is that the “infernal machine” of history is one of perpetual motion, inflicting “terror without end”. Contemporary violence is therefore also historical. Adorno rejects concepts of modernity, like novelty, that are separated from the past because they overlook the profound connection between history and violence.

**Adorno’s dialectical concept of modernity**

Adorno’s dialectical philosophy of history situates modernity in dynamic relationships of tangled and partial identity with what has gone before. In his eschewal of teleological narratives of history, Adorno also sets up a structure that both allows for historical movement and accommodates historical difference. In the following, I shall turn to examine how Adorno articulates his concept of modernity within this dialectical schema of history. It is precisely because Adorno insists on tracing historical relationships that are structured dynamically and by difference that his concept of ‘modernity’ also has to deal with ‘antiquity’.

Adorno makes his most explicit dialectical statement about modernity in Aphorism 140 (“Consecutio temporum”, *Consecutio temporum*). It is here that Greco-Roman antiquity becomes visible as philosophical concern:

> The modern has really become unmodern. Modernity is a qualitative, not a chronological category. Just as it cannot be reduced to abstract form, with equal necessity it must turn its back on conventional surface coherence, the appearance of harmony, the order corroborated merely by replication…
Matching the psychological regression of individuals who exist without a self, is a regression of the objective spirit, in which obtuseness, primitivism and the bargain sale set up what historically has long since decayed as the newest historical power, and consign to the day before yesterday everything that does not zealously join in the march of regression. This *quid pro quo* of progress and reaction makes orientation in contemporary art almost as difficult as in politics … where anyone who clings to extreme intentions is made to feel like a backwoodsman, while the conformist no longer lingers bashfully in arbors, literary or horticultural, but hurtles forward, rocket-powered, into the pluperfect.216

Dominate iterations of modernity are invested in chronological principles of history and the idea that culture is always improving on what came before. Adorno inverts the notion of progress, this time hitching his critique to the sequence of tenses that govern subordination in Latin grammar. This strategy draws attention to how the concept of “progress” has been formulated as the governing mode of history since antiquity. Adorno’s polemical claim is that modernity is self-defeating because it is unaware that its cultural trajectory is regressive. Regressive modernity suppresses difference in the name of progress in various ways: either through violence or, as Adorno identifies here, through a cultural antipathy to out-datedness. The “extreme intentions”

216 *Minima Moralia* 218-9, MM 247-8: Das Moderne ist wirklich unmodern geworden. Modernität ist eine qualitative Kategorie, keine chronologische. So wenig sie auf die abstrakte Form sich bringen lässt, so notwendig ist ihr die Absage an den konventionellen Oberflächenzusammenhang, an den Schein von Harmonie, an die vom blossen Abbild bekräftigte Ordnung… Der psychologischen Regression der Individuen, die ohne Ich existieren, ist angemessen eine Regression des objektiven Geistes, in der Stumpfsinn, Primitivität und Ausverkauf das längst historisch Verfallene als jüngste geschichtliche Macht durchsetzen und dafür alles dem Verdikt des Vorgestrigen überantworten, was dem Zug der Regression nicht eifrig sich anvertraut. Solches quid pro quo von Fortschritt und Reaktion macht die Orientierung in der zeitgenössischen Kunst fast so schwierig wie die politische… in der, wer an extremen Intentionen festhält, wie ein Hinterwäldler sich fühlen muss, während der Konformist nicht länger verschämt in der Gartenlaube sitzt, sondern mit dem Raketenflugzeug vorstösst ins Plusquamperfekt.
(extremen Intentionen) are the attempts to think of history beyond an inevitable sequence of improvement over time. Adorno’s dialectical concept of modernity demands that one thinks non-identically with this dominant mode of history and cultural modernity.

The claim then that “modernity is a qualitative… category” privileges the cultural texture of a historical moment over its sequential position. Adorno’s dialectical proposition for history demands that antiquity, just as modernity, must be decoupled from any chronological schema: antiquity must also become a qualitative category. If the ancient Greco-Roman past can be constituted as a site at which critical perspectives onto contemporary culture can be formulated, rather than a site at which justifications for “the order corroborated by mere replication are found”, antiquity could also fulfill the same criteria for the radical potential for critique as those which Adorno sets out for modernity. It is the aim of this chapter then to illuminate how Adorno reckons with a cultural and philosophical notion of antiquity as a critical part of the project of *Minima Moralia*.

**Antiquity in Minima Moralia**

Others have recognized that ‘antiquity’ is an operative concept for Adorno. For example, Rolf Tiedemann asserts in his editor’s afterword to *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*:
That the discussion of Aristotle’s metaphysics has no counterpart in the book version of the Negative Dialectics does not mean that antiquity is not present in it – or for that matter, in Adorno’s philosophy as a whole. It is present, and to a far higher degree than the relatively rare mentions of Greek philosophers in Adorno’s writings might suggest. Even if there is no work which is explicitly devoted to ancient philosophy, Adorno’s thought presupposed Plato and Aristotle just as much as any other great philosophy has done… However suspect the proximity of ἀρχή, the mythical concept of origin, may have been to that of fatherland for Adorno, he would nevertheless have agreed with Hegel, who ‘always felt at home when (he) heard the word Greece’. 217

It is worth quoting Tiedemann’s argument at length because it seems to abandon criticality in the service of fitting Adorno into the canon of Western philosophy. So whilst Tiedemann observes that antiquity “is present and to a far higher degree” than the absence of a monograph length engagement with an ancient philosopher would suggest, the complexity of Adorno’s conceptual engagement with antiquity is drastically reduced in claiming the nature of that engagement is “the presupposition of Plato and Aristotle”. Moreover, this reading makes Adorno a far less compelling reader of antiquity if his thought shares the basic working assumptions of “other great philosophy”. Adorno himself might have recoiled at the characterization of any aspect of his work as ‘great’. With particular respect to Minima Moralia, “greatness” is exactly the quality that Adorno is concerned with subverting.

In piecing together the critical reception of antiquity that the title of _Minima Moralia_, cues, we might well turn back to Adorno’s pithy summary about the deeply rooted ambivalence he holds towards the concept of tradition: “One must have tradition in oneself to hate it properly”.\(^{218}\) Where Tiedemann reads Adorno’s intimacy with antiquity as itself an implicit endorsement of its cultural status, in fact the critical force of _Minima Moralia_ re-evaluates that intellectual and philosophical intimacy. The problematic aspects of the recuperative reading of Adorno’s antiquity are borne out in Tiedemann’s final cluster of thoughts around Adorno’s ‘homeland’. Tiedemann’s speculation that Adorno would have felt that antiquity was a homeland in the manner of Hegel disregards Adorno’s radical critique of both the concepts of antiquity and homeland as well as the potent conjunction of the two in the German cultural imaginary. Adorno’s relationship to a philhellenic cluster of concepts that root German belonging are informed by a precisely opposite desire to that which Hegel articulates and that Tiedemann attributes to Adorno: the desire not to be at home, among the Greeks or otherwise. Adorno’s fierce claim then that “one must have tradition in oneself to hate it properly” is a kind of intellectual innoculation. It discloses a relationship of complex intimacy to the notions of home and to the past that cannot be squared straightforwardly with the easy familiarity of ‘being at home’ in antiquity.

\(^{218}\) Aphorism 32 ("Savages are not noble", _Die Wilden sind nicht bessere Menschen_) _Minima Moralia_ 52, MM 58: …sobald sie einmal der Kraft der Tradition gewahr wurden. _Man muss diese in sich selber haben, um sie recht zu hassen_. I understand that the referent of ‘diese’ is ‘tradition’.
Magna Moralia as critical choice

While not as explicit as Dialectic of Enlightenment’s reading of the Odyssey, this chapter contends that Minima Moralia offers an oblique but no less radical engagement with the ancient Greek past through its choice of ancient intertext: (ps.) Aristotle’s Magna Moralia. I take my cue to scrutinize the title from Adorno himself, who is particularly sensitive to the problem of naming and titling a piece of writing. In disrupting the assumption that Magna Moralia is an obvious starting point for Adorno, I argue that Adorno’s critical reception of antiquity is fundamental for his broader arguments about the ethical status of the subject in post-Holocaust culture and the philosophical texture of modernity.

Scholarship on Minima Moralia has not pushed much further than reading the invocation of Magna Moralia as a rhetorical strategy. Adorno is characteristically deft and playful in his treatment of the philosophical tradition: see for example the inversion of Hegel discussed on page one of this chapter, or the title of Aphorism 147 (MM 228-232 “Novissimum Organum”, Novissimum Organum) whose searing critique of subjectivity is cued up by the ironic intensification of the title Francis Bacon’s major treatise on logic. Wilson sums up the rhetorical reading that most scholars have understood in the titular inversion of Magna Moralia: “the shift from

219 In his 1962 essay “Titles: Paraphrases on Lessing” (“Titel. Paraphrasen zu Lessing” Akzente, no. 3 1962; trans. Nicholsen, S.W. in Notes to Literature Volume Two (Columbia University Press, New York NY. 1992) 3-11 Adorno worries about the essentializing and conceptually harmful function of a title. By way of Lessing reading Voltaire and Plautus, as well as Kafka reading Kierkegaard, Adorno takes up the title as part of his wider problem of the ‘name’. Adorno insists that the title must not directly address or distil a work, but exist in an oblique relationship to its inner or conceptual heart. Setting this essay in the context of Adorno’s admiration for Beckett and into the context of Adorno’s secular Jewish mysticism illuminates why the title is such a problem for him. Ultimately, Adorno acknowledges that titles, though an imperfect mechanism, are important for posterity’s sake.
220 Bernstein, J. Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001) 41 pushes a little further than the rhetorical gesture in his observation that both Adorno and Aristotle’s ethics start from the premise that possibilities of ethical action are determined for the subject by external circumstances.
magna to minima is meant to register both the disintegration of the philosophical
vocation to teach the good life and the decreased possibility for any straightforwardly
good life at all under contemporary conditions”. Gillian Rose provides the most
attentive parsing of the complexity of Adorno’s ironic procedures and wordplays,
drawing particular attention to ‘chiasmus’ as a characteristic rhetorical and conceptual
procedure. Whilst these readings undoubtedly have some purchase in interpreting
how the title of this collection of aphorisms operates, Adorno’s choice of the Magna
Moralia in the first instance has not been interrogated. Readings that focus on irony
start from the assumption that both ancient author and text are recognizable and
therefore amenable starting places from which Adorno can launch critique. To go
straight for the ‘ironic inversion’ interpretation of Adorno’s titular gesture skips over
an important moment of aporetic critique. I hope to draw attention to the
consequences of Adorno’s choice of ancient intertext as a critical reception of
antiquity in his argument about the cultural formation of modernity.

Adorno’s mobilization of Magna Moralía raises profound doubts about the
authoritative function of antiquity. In the first instance, Magna Moralía is a marginal
text because it is not one of the two securely attributed Aristotelian ethical texts, that
is, the Nicomachean and Eudemian Ethics. Nor is Adorno unacquainted with the
relative status that these texts have in the Aristotelian corpus. In the lecture series on
the history of philosophy Adorno gave upon his return to Germany (gathered in
Metaphysics, Concepts and Problems) the omission of Magna Moralía is reflective of

221 Wilson, R. Theodor Adorno (Routledge, Abingdon/New York 2007) 81.
222 On some of the implications of Adorno’s chiasmus as a figure of thought, see Nealon, J.T. “Maxima
Immoralia? Speed and Slowness in Adorno” in Rethinking the Frankfurt School: Alternative Legacies
2012) 131-144.
a general consensus in mid 20th century classical scholarship that this text cannot be attributed to Aristotle.

Secondly, we can think of Magna Moralia as marginal in terms of its position in the canon of classical texts. An animating principle in the selection and valuing of ancient texts is the secure attribution to a canonical ancient author. This evaluation is based on the (entirely refutable) assumption that ancient authors self evidently produced ‘good’ texts. Circularity emerges in this logic when ancient authorial figures are privileged because of the quality of their textual output. In the case of the Magna Moralia, I will show the debate around its attribution to Aristotle was a live issue for German Altertumswissenschafter. In leveraging the doubt that is produced by this debate, Adorno strikes a blow at the heart of philosophical arguments that make recourse to antiquity. Magna Moralia exposes the fallacy that antiquity is stable ground for making knowledge since it is not a credible object that the modern can know. The ways of knowing the ancient past through the vicissitudes of textual transmission are exposed as vulnerable. Ultimately Adorno’s titular inversion of Magna Moralia demonstrates how inadequate antiquity is for grounding and authorizing ethics in the post-Holocaust historical moment.

Though the attribution of the NE to Aristotle has never seriously been called into contention in either German or Anglophone scholarship, question marks have long been placed over the authenticity of the EE and, to a greater extent, Magna Moralia. Leo Spengel’s 1841 thesis that only NE could truly be considered authentic was generally accepted as the orthodox position for the second half of the nineteenth century. Where other scholars had made arguments for the authenticity of EE, Werner
Jaeger emphatically overturned the Spengel orthodoxy in his career-making *Aristoteles Grundlegung einer Geschichte seiner Entwicklung* (1923).³²³ Jaeger built on his own work from the previous two decades on Aristotle in order to secure a dating for the writing of EE, that is, as contemporaneous with the first book of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. This argument to accept the EE as authentically Aristotelian consequently made a bigger argument about the corpus of Aristotle’s ethics. Jaeger insisted that Aristotle must not be read as the purveyor of a uniform philosophy and instead his ethical thought must be read as having developed over time. As emphatically as Jaeger made the argument for the authenticity of EE, he excluded *Magna Moralia* from the Aristotelian corpus. The exclusion of the *Magna Moralia* ignited a fierce dispute with Jaeger’s classical philologist colleague, Hans von Arnim. In the next year, von Arnim published the pointedly titled response: *Die drei aristotelischen Ethiken* (1924) in which he pushed the developmental thesis that Jaeger had argued for one step further in order to be able to fit *Magna Moralia* into a chronology of Aristotle’s life. Von Arnim argued that *Magna Moralia*, though displaying the hallmarks of juvenilia, was written prior to NE and EE and that all three were securely attributable to Aristotle. He and Jaeger continued their confrontation over the authenticity of *Magna Moralia* for the rest of the decade in article and book length instalments and in increasingly poisonous terms.³²⁴ Jaeger took exception to what he deemed as a misapplication of his developmental theory.

This debate set the terms for Aristotle scholarship and sometimes yielded strange fruit.

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in attempts to find resolution. The controversy also pulled in other contemporary heavyweights. However into the 1930s the scholarly consensus generally sided with Jaeger in accepting that *Magna Moralia* could not be securely attributed to Aristotle.

I have lingered on this moment in the history of classical scholarship not (only) out of a gossipy interest but in order to demonstrate the sheer *oddness* of the choice of *Magna Moralia* as Adorno’s ancient intertext. It is my contention therefore that by the time of the composition of *Minima Moralia* there can be no way that a philosopher as well versed in the history of philosophy as Adorno could have been ignorant of the debate that has just been outlined about the ancient text’s (in)authenticity. Moreover even if Adorno himself did not make an intervention into this debate and come down on either side of the argument about the authenticity of the *Magna Moralia*, I suggest that Adorno leverages precisely the doubt that is fostered by this debate. The marginality of the *Magna Moralia* in and of itself undermines any mobilization of antiquity in the promulgation of contemporary ethics. Thus, Adorno installs a significant doubt in projects of normative ethics even before the reduction of ‘magna’ to ‘minima’.

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225 Chroust, A.H. “Some Comments on Aristotle’s Major Works on Ethics” in *Laval théologique et philosophique*, Vol. 21 No.1 (1965) 63-79. Chroust lays out how the Jaeger-von Arnim debate was taken up by the subsequent generation of German classical scholars, 71-76.


227 In his post war lectures on Aristotle, Adorno does not treat or mention *Magna Moralia*.
Hellenism and Heimat: Heidegger’s Greek belonging

In order to understand the connection between Adorno’s alienation of modern subject on the one hand and his critical interrogation of antiquity on the other hand, it is necessary to examine how German notions of belonging and home in his immediate context were organized as philhellenic ideas. Heimat was a core part of the National Socialist ideological programme. The inescapably nationalist concept of Heimat made a unique claim of belonging on behalf of the Volk. For my concerns, it is important to illustrate how Greek antiquity was mobilized to authorize Heimat and the völkish politics of autochthony. Whilst Greece had long held a privileged place in the German cultural imaginary around belonging, National Socialism organized this dynamic into a (hyper) nationalist politics. In this particular context for Adorno, the intellectual figure that most prominently interpolated Heimat into a discourse of philhellenism was Martin Heidegger. While both Adorno and Heidegger conduct arguments about the nature of modernity and the task of philosophy through recourse to history of the philosophical tradition, the critical impetus could not be more different for each man. Adorno derives his antipathy to a German sense of belonging inflected by philhellenism in part from the way Heidegger had formulated a return to Greek antiquity so strongly as the answer to the problem of Heimat (and belonging more generally) in a technologically organized modernity. Minima Moralia responds therefore to the powerful conjunction of philhellenism and nationalism in Heidegger’s thought: Adorno’s politics of antiquity operate in the context of Heidegger’s insistence on the philhellenic derivation of Heimat.
Though Heidegger conspicuously attempted to distance himself from the politics of National Socialism, it is clear that even after the end of the war he set store by many of the philosophical positions he had taken up in the 1930s and 1940s. We can see this consistency with respect to the special relationship between Germany and ancient Greece in operation in the *Letter on Humanism* (1947).\textsuperscript{228} French philosopher Jean Beaufret had heard a lecture given by Jean-Paul Sartre in Paris in 1945 (published as *Existentialism is a Humanism* 1946)\textsuperscript{229} and posed questions to Heidegger. Beaufret prompted a series of responses by Heidegger that were then later collected and edited into an extended essay and published in 1947. The density of the essay owes in part to an attempt (by no means an isolated attempt in Heidegger’s post war oeuvre) to give an exculpatory account of his complicity with the National Socialist regime. As a significant recapitulation of Heidegger’s thought under straitened political circumstances, *Letter on Humanism* (hereafter *LH*) provides an excellent illustration of how he compounded the notion of German belonging with Greek antiquity. In the first instance, *LH* seeks to provide an account of objective Being, or rather, to recuperate a primordial account of Being that has suffered from the intercession of metaphysics. For Heidegger, humanism makes a fundamental misstep in subordinating Being, a deep and trans-historical notion existence, to Man, a time-bound subject. Thus Heidegger attempts to de-centre Man as a master subject by investigating a more fundamental account of existence. By tracing how *LH* positions Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin as an exceptional figure in his ability to recognize and to access the original ground of being, it will be possible to observe how, before


and after the downfall of National Socialism, Heidegger consistently organizes a philhellenic concept of Heimat.

Heidegger sketches the history of humanism as an essentially Roman concept, tracing its trajectory through the Renaissance and the German thinkers of the eighteenth century. Thus Heidegger identifies the common conceptual strand to humanism as: ‘a studium humanitatis which in a certain way reaches back to the ancients and thus also becomes a revival of Greek civilization, always adheres to historically understood humanism’ (LH 225).230 Into this history of humanisms, Heidegger also adds Christianity and Marxism: “However different these forms of humanism may be in purpose and in principle, in the mode and means of their respective realizations, and in the form of their teaching, they nonetheless all agree in this, that the humanitas of homo humanus is determined with regard to an already established interpretation of nature, history, world, and the ground of the world, that is, of beings as a whole.”231 (LH 225) Heidegger’s aim is to disrupt what he sees as the core assumption that all humanisms make about the nature of being. Heidegger believes that the task of philosophy is to go beyond the human existence as its starting point: the trap of metaphysics, as set by Plato, put the course of Western thought down a blind alley. Every iteration of humanism, Heidegger insists, has turned back to the wrong moment of the ancient past and is therefore cut adrift from the most profound and original articulation of being.

230 Brief über den Humanismus 152: Zum historisch verstandenen Humanismus gehört deshalb stets ein studium humanitatis, das in einer bestimmten Weise auf das Altertum zurückgreift und so jeweils auch zu einer Wiederbelebung des Griechentums wird.
Heidegger identifies German Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin as an exception to this history of humanism because the poet “thought the destiny of the essence of the human being in a more original way than ‘humanism’ could” (LH 225). The significance of Hölderlin’s substantially different conception of human existence becomes clear later in the essay. Discussing Hölderlin’s 1802 poem Heimkehr in which the poet describes a journey from Switzerland back to his native Swabia, Heidegger argues that the poet has grasped the importance of being in a fundamental way (LH 241-2):

The essence of the homeland, however, is also mentioned with the intention of thinking the homelessness of contemporary human beings from the essence of being's history. Nietzsche was the last to experience this homelessness. From within metaphysics he was unable to find any other way out than a reversal of metaphysics. But that is the height of futility. On the other hand, when Hölderlin composes "Homecoming" he is concerned that his "countrymen" find their essence. He does not at all seek that essence in an egoism of his people. He sees it rather in the context of a belongingness to the destiny of the West. But even the West is not thought regionally as the Occident in contrast to the Orient, nor merely as Europe, but rather world-historically out of nearness to the source. We have still scarcely begun to think of the mysterious relations to the East that have found expression in Holderlin's poetry (cf. "The Ister"; also "The Journey," third strophe ff.). "German" is not spoken to the world so that the world might be reformed through the German essence; rather, it is spoken to the Germans so that from a

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fateful belongingness to other nations they might become world-historical along with them …

Heidegger observes that Nietzsche was the last figure from inside the philosophical tradition that tried to think beyond metaphysics. At the very least, Heidegger argues, Nietzsche was aware of the predicament of being as having become separated from its originary sense and therefore he mounted an attempt to circumvent metaphysics and get back to the home of being. Here we must understand that Heidegger names the original ground of being as that of the pre-Socratics (LH gives its final proof for being in a radical translation of Heracleitus’ maxim ἡθος ἀνθρώπῳ δαιμόνιον) and that Heidegger is gesturing here towards Nietzsche’s own Auseinandersetzung with Plato. In Hölderlin’s poem Heimkehr, Heidegger observes a mind attempting to grapple with the “belongingness to the destiny of the West” (das Geschick des Abendlandes). Even as Heidegger ostensibly attempts to extricate German homecoming from any nationalist project (this is not about any one people’s “egoism”, he tells us) a philhellenic notion of the origin of being starts to emerge. Pointing to another of Hölderlin’s poems, Heidegger recapitulates the reading of The Ister (Der Ister 1803/5; the Greek name for a part of the Danube river) that he gave in a lecture series in 1942 when he was much less concerned to distance himself from nationalist politics and much more able to articulate the status of the German people as exceptional by virtue

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of their privileged relationship to the ancient Greeks. Glimpses of that exceptionalism are evident here in LH as Heidegger attempts to distil a destiny for the German people, given to them by the world. The homecoming that Heidegger identifies for the West is its proximity “to source” (zum Ursprung), that is, the primordial being present in the thought of the pre-Socratics. Unlike the 1942 lectures on The Ister, the exception of the ancient Greek - German relationship remains relatively submerged until Heidegger confronts Heimatlosigkeit head on (LH 242):

Homelessness so understood consists in the abandonment of Being by beings. Homelessness is the symptom of oblivion of Being… The world-historical thinking of Hölderlin that speaks out in the poem "Remembrance" is therefore essentially more primordial and thus more significant for the future than the mere cosmopolitanism of Goethe. For the same reason Hölderlin's relation to Greek civilization is something essentially other than humanism. When confronted with death, therefore, those young Germans who knew about Hölderlin lived and thought something other than what the public held to be the typical German attitude.

Homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world.²³⁴

Citing yet another poem by Hölderlin on which he had previously lectured, Heidegger indicates explicitly that the German poet is and will continue to be important because

²³⁴ Brief über den Humanismus 169-70: Die so zu denkende Heimatlosigkeit beruht in der Seinsverlassenheit des Seienden. Sie ist das Zeichen der Seinsvergessenheit… Das weltgeschichtliche Denken Hölderlins, das im Gedicht >>Andenken<< zum Wort kommt, ist darum wesentlich anfänglicher und deshalb zukünftiger als das bloße Weltbürgertum Goethes. Aus demselben Grunde ist der Bezug Hölderlins zum Griechentum etwas wesentlich anderes als Humanismus. Darum haben die jungen Deutschen, die von Hölderlin wussten, angesichts des Todes Anderes gedacht und gelebt als das, was die Öffentlichkeit als deutsche Meinung ausgab. Die Heimatlosigkeit wird ein Weltschicksal.
of his more ‘primordial’ grasp on being, that is, because he recognizes the relationship of his moment to ‘Greek civilization’ uniquely. Two elements secure this as Heidegger’s way of articulating a German sense of belonging, rather than a relationship of any given modern subject. In the first place, the favorable comparison of Hölderlin to Goethe announces that Heidegger’s evaluations are primarily concerned with German belonging. (As we have seen in Chapter 3, it is precisely the philhellenic and nationalist grounding of Goethe’s cosmopolitanism with which Auerbach takes issue). Secondly, while the comment on ‘those young Germans’ is oblique, Heidegger implies that an acquaintance with Hölderlin’s poetry and the philhellenic grounding of the concept of belonging, allows certain Germans to evaluate life and death in a profoundly meaningful way. In this nested sequence of thought, we can explicitly see how Heidegger pits Hölderlin as the unique guarantor of *Heimat* because of his primordial relationship to Greek antiquity against the homelessness to which the rest of the world is consigned. Poetry as much as philosophy, for Heidegger, was able to gain a sense of Being: thus Hölderlin, just like the pre-Socratics, had access to Being and could transmit it to (some) other Germans and thereby anchor them in the world.

The foregoing discussion has provided the essential philosophical context for the argument that *Minima Moralia* makes about the impossibility for the modern subject of being at home. In illuminating how Heidegger diagnoses *Heimatlosigkeit* as a condition for the world that can only be answered by a particular kind of German philhellenic belonging, I turn now to demonstrate how Adorno counters this argument by rendering *Heimatlosigkeit* as the exilic condition of modernity. In rejecting the

235 It is not clear who exactly these young Germans are: Heidegger could be referring to the radical Junges Deutschland poetic movement, active in the early part of the nineteenth century and the contemporaries of Hölderlin, or to those who had recently fought and died in the Second World War.
notion that one can secure belonging in antiquity, I will show how Adorno demonstrates that exile is the critical condition that the modern subject must embrace.

Ethics in exile, ethic of exile

Adorno articulates his philosophical rejection of belonging in remarkably Heideggerian terms. Thus Aphorism 18 (“Refuge for the Homeless”, *Asyl für Obdachlose* MM 42-3) opens with the astonishing claim: “Dwelling, in the proper sense, is now impossible.”

Furthermore, as I have shown, Heidegger’s concept of belonging to anchored to particular place (Germany) as well as in a privileged historical moment (pre Socratic antiquity). By couching the impossibility of living as wohnen, Adorno cues us to read this aphorism as a repudiation of Heidegger’s philhellenic index of belonging. Where Heidegger had insisted that German belonging could be rooted in place and time, Adorno observes that physical dislocation is a defining phenomenon of modernity:

Those who have no choice… live in… if not in slums then in bungalows that by tomorrow may be leaf-huts, trailers, cars, camps or the open air. The house is past.

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236 *Minima Moralia* 38, MM 42: Eigentlich kann man überhaupt nicht mehr wohnen.
Adorno’s claim that more precarious forms of housing have superseded the house constitutes an identification of a deep rupture in the ties of historical belonging. The passing of the moment of the ‘house’ represents a profound historical unmooring of subjects. He goes on to argue that the bombing of European cities and the concentration camps accelerated the mass movement and displacement of people. Belonging is no longer the point from which the modern subject starts – the baseline of an individual’s life is temporary or insecure accommodation:

The attempt to evade responsibility for one’s residence by moving into a hotel or furnished rooms makes the enforced conditions of emigration a wisely chosen norm. 239

Adorno’s sarcasm is hard to miss: the experience of “forced emigration” (den aufgezwungenen Bedingungen der Emigration) or exile, by no means a choice, captures the defining relationship of subject to place in modernity by taking displacement to its logical extreme. In working out the implications of the impossibility of living as a historically grounded activity, this aphorism articulates an ‘ethic of exile’. Adorno does this with a characteristically virtuoso gesture, via a play on an aphorism taken from Nietzsche’s Gay Science:

The best mode of conduct, in face of all this, still seems an uncommitted, suspended one: to lead a private life… but not to attach weight to it as something still socially substantial and individually appropriate. ‘It is even part of my fortune not to be a house-owner’, Nietzsche already wrote in the

239 Minima Moralia 38-9, MM 42: Will man der Verantwortung fürs Wohnen ausweichen, indem man ins Hotel oder ins möblierte Appartement zieht, so macht man gleichsam aus den aufgezwungenen Bedingungen der Emigration die lebenskluge Norm.
Gay Science. Today we should have to add: it is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home… The trick is to keep in view… the fact that private property no longer belongs to one… but that one must nevertheless have possessions, if one is not to sink into that dependence and need which serve the blind perpetuation of property relations. But the thesis of this paradox leads to destruction, a loveless disregard for things which necessarily turns against people too; and the antithesis, no sooner uttered, is an ideology for those wishing with a bad conscience to keep what they have. Wrong life cannot be lived rightly.\textsuperscript{240}

In extricating an ethic from this historical situation, Adorno conceives of private life not as the alternative to or retreat from a shattered public sphere of activity but rather as a provisional (\textit{unverbindliches, suspendiertes}) place for doing life. Therefore, in the inversion of \textit{Gay Science’s} Aphorism 240, Adorno recognizes that a notion of ‘home’ fails as a historical anchoring point for the individual subject.\textsuperscript{241} Where Nietzsche in

\textsuperscript{240} \textit{Minima Moralia} 39, MM 43: Das beste Verhalten all dem gegenüber scheint noch ein unverbindliches, suspendiertes: das Privatleben führen, solange die Gesellschaftsordnung und die eigenen Bedürfnisse es nicht anders dulden, aber es nicht so belasten, als wäre es noch gesellschaftlich substantiell und individuell angemessen. »Es gehört selbst zu meinem Glücke, kein Hausbesitzer zu sein«, schrieb Nietzsche bereits in der Fröhlichen Wissenschaft. Dem müsste man heute hinzufügen: es gehört zur Moral, nicht bei sich selber zu Hause zu sein. Darin zeigt sich etwas an von dem schwierigen Verhältnis, in dem der Einzelne zu seinem Eigentum sich befindet, solange er überhaupt noch etwas besitzt. Die Kunst bestünde darin, in Evidenz zu halten und auszudrücken, dass das Privateigentum einem nicht mehr gehört, in dem Sinn, dass die Fülle der Konsumgüter potentiell so gross geworden ist, dass kein Individuum mehr das Recht hat, an das Prinzip ihrer Beschränkung sich zu klammern; dass man aber dennoch Eigentum haben muss, wenn man nicht in jene Abhängigkeit und Not geraten will, die dem blinden Fortbestand des Besitzverhältnisses zugute kommt. Aber die Thesis dieser Paradoxie führt zur Destruktion, einer lieblosen Nichtachtung für die Dinge, die notwendig auch gegen die Menschen sich kehrt, und die Antithese ist schon in dem Augenblick, in dem man sie ausspricht, eine Ideologie für die, welche mit schlechtem Gewissen das Ihre behalten wollen. Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen.


Ich würde mir kein Haus bauen (und es gehört selbst zu meinem Glücke, kein Hausbesitzer zu sein!). Müsste ich aber, so würde ich, gleich manchem Römer, es bis ins Meer hineinbauen - ich möchte schon mit diesem schönen Ungeheuer einige Heimlichkeiten gemeinsam haben.

\textit{Gay Science 214 At the Sea}:
Adorno’s emphasis is on the ethical implications of displacement. Transforming Nietzschean Glück into an ethic (Moral), Adorno delineates the predicament the contemporary dislocated subject finds herself in: she needs material security but cannot find it by means other than self-serving and capitalist ones. If Nietzsche’s subject in *The Gay Science* is able to move through the world at will and celebrate what she finds, Adorno insists that the collapse of private property promotes a very different relationship between the subject and environment: the historical moment breeds contempt (*lieblosen Nichtachtung*) that eventually tips over into social relations. Adorno rejects this way of relating to the world. Instead he offers the ethic of exile, as provisional and shabby as that ethic might be in a scenario in which there are no satisfying ways to hold oneself to account ethically nor any way of determining what constitutes ‘life lived rightly’ (*richtiges Leben*).

Adorno underscores *Heimatlosigkeit* as a physical and spiritual expression of the displacement of modernity in Aphorism 51 (“Memento”, *Hinter den Spiegel* MM 93-7). The lions’ share of the aphorism is not concerned with homelessness, but rather with the intellectual habits and spiritual resources required to write. *Heimatlosigkeit* would therefore seem to be an afterthought, if Adorno did not remind us how carefully *Minima Moralia* has been constructed and that the connections between aphoristic parts have been intentionally submerged:

> I would not build a house for myself and I count it part of my good fortune that I do not own a house. But if I had to, then I should build it as some of the Romans did, right into the sea. I should not mind sharing a few secrets with this beautiful monster.
If the dialectician, for example, marked the turning-point of his advancing ideas by starting with a ‘But’ at each caesura, the literary scheme would give the lie to the unschematic intention of his thought.\(^{242}\)

Taking Adorno at his word, then, there is an important connection between his advice (\textit{Vorsichtsmassregel}) to writers and the final part of the aphorism in which \textit{Heimatlosigkeit} is explicitly thematized. The injunction “to not be at home even in one’s home” takes on a particular meaning for Adorno as a particular subject who has been dislocated from home. For the intellectual subject in exile, I’ll show Adorno understands this as a constant self-estrangement from the world, even and perhaps particularly, from what was once comfortable and familiar.

Adorno enjoins aspiring writers: to avoid clichéd thought as well as language, to edit assiduously,\(^{243}\) to be bold in discarding ideas even if they are interesting, should the ‘construction’ of the text ‘demand’ it,\(^{244}\) to avoid both too fussy and too plain style as compensations for fuzzy thinking,\(^{245}\) and to develop a style of language appropriate to its subject matter.\(^{246}\) Understood together, these pieces of advice insist that the writer is uncompromising in her relationship to her subject matter, unsparing in self-critique

\(^{242}\) Minima Moralia 85, MM 94: Wollte etwa ein Dialektiker den Umschlag des sich fortbewegenden Gedankens dadurch markieren, dass er jeweils bei der Zäsur mit einem Aber beginnt, so strafte das literarische Schema die unschematische Absicht der Überlegung Lügen.

\(^{243}\) Minima Moralia 85, MM 93: No improvement is too small or trivial to be worthwhile. (Keine Verbesserung ist zu klein oder geringfügig, als dass man sie nicht durchführen sollte.)

\(^{244}\) Minima Moralia 85, MM 93: It is part of the technique of writing to be able to discard ideas, even fertile ones, if the construction demands it. (Es gehört zur schriftstellerischen Technik, selbst auf fruchtbare Gedanken verzichten zu können, wenn die Konstruktion es verlangt.)

\(^{245}\) Minima Moralia 86, MM 94: Precisely the writer most unwilling to make concessions to drab common sense must guard against draping ideas, in themselves banal, in the appurtenances of style. (Gerade wer der Dummheit des gesunden Menschenverstandes keine Konzession machen will, muss sich hüten, Gedanken, die selber der Banalität zu überführen wären, stilistisch zu drapieren.)

\(^{246}\) Minima Moralia 86, MM 95: The writer ought not acknowledge any distinction between beautiful and adequate expression… If he succeeds entirely in saying what he means, it is beautiful. (Der Schriftsteller darf auf die Unterscheidung von schönem und sachlichem Ausdruck sich nicht einlassen. …Gelingt es ihm, ganz das zu sagen, was er meint, so ist es schön.)
to whittle and hone a text, unstinting in her efforts. Writing, for Adorno, is a matter of utmost self discipline: only then can one produce “properly written texts’ that are ‘like spiders’ webs: tight concentric transparent, well-spun, and firm.” Moreover, this is an intellectual ethos that Adorno himself lived out in his own exile: as Martin Jay notes, “Adorno’s California years were enormously productive.”

The final part of the aphorism makes the connection between writing and the idea of home, by exploring the affective relationships a writer might have to her work:

In his text the writer sets up house. Just as he trundles papers, books, pencils, documents untidily from room to room, he creates the same disorder in his thoughts. They become pieces of furniture that he sinks into, content or irritable. He strokes them affectionately, wears them out, mixes them up, rearranges, ruins them. For a man who no longer has a homeland writing becomes a place to live.

Just as in Aphorism 18, Adorno makes his claim in conspicuously Heideggeran terms: one of the core claims in Letter on Humanism is that “language is the house of being: in its home human beings dwell.” Adorno’s affective index (contentment, irritation, affection; wohlfühlen, Ärger, Zartheit) appears to suggest that he agrees with

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247 Minima Moralia 86, MM 95: Anständig gearbeitete Texte sind wie Spinnweben: dicht, konzentrisch, transparent, wohlgefügt und befestigt. Sie ziehen alles in sich hinein, was da kreucht und fleucht.


249 Minima Moralia 87, MM 95-6: In seinem Text richtet der Schriftsteller häuslich sich ein. Wie er mit Papieren, Büchern, Bleistiften, Unterlagen, die er von einem Zimmer ins andere schleppt, Unordnung anrichtet, so benimmt er sich in seinen Gedanken. Sie werden ihm zu Möbelstücken, auf denen er sich niederlässt, wohlfühlt, ärgerlich wird. Er streichelt sie zärtlich, nutzt sie ab, bringt sie durcheinander, stellt sie um, verwüstet sie. Wer keine Heimat mehr hat, dem wird wohl gar das Schreiben zum Wohnen.

Heidegger’s claim about dwelling in language when he asserts that writing, for the exile writer, can even be a substitute for a home. However, Adorno immediately parts company with Heidegger by extending the critical metaphor of ‘language as home’:

In it he inevitable produces as his family once did, refuse and lumber. But now he lacks a storeroom and it is hard in any case to part from left-overs. So he pushes them along in front of him, in danger finally of filling his pages with them. The demand that one harden oneself against self-pity implies the technical necessity to counter any slackening of intellectual tension with the utmost alertness, and to eliminate anything that has begun to encrust the work or to drift idly along, which may at an earlier stage serve, as gossip, to generate the warm atmosphere conducive to growth, but is now left behind, flat and stale.²⁵¹

Whilst Adorno acknowledges that writing is an emotionally invested process (“it is hard…to part from the leftovers”), he refuses to rest easy in the idea of “living in one’s writing”. Just as being at home with a storeroom or cellar allows one to hang on to things that really should be discarded (Abfall und Bodenramsch), Adorno implies that the person in exile is tempted to keep a tight hold on what they have salvaged intellectually. An émigré writer must actively work against the desire to hold on to what precious little they have with them, and should instead give themselves over to

²⁵¹ *Minima Moralia* 87, MM 96: Und dabei produziert er, wie einst die Familie, unvermeidlicherweise auch Abfall und Bodenramsch. Aber er hat keinen Speicher mehr, und es ist überhaupt nicht leicht, vom Abhub sich zu trennen. So schiebt er ihn denn vor sich her und ist in Gefahr, am Ende seine Seiten damit auszufüllen. Die Forderung, sich hart zu machen gegen Mitleid mit sich selber, schliesst die technische ein, mit äusserster Wachsamkeit dem Nachlassen der gedanklichen Spannkraft zu begegnen und alles zu eliminieren, was als Kruste der Arbeit sich ansetzt, was leer weiterläuft, was vielleicht in einem früheren Stadium als Geschwätz die warme Atmosphäre bewirkte, in der es wächst, jetzt aber muffig, schal zurückbleibt. Am Ende ist es dem Schriftsteller nicht einmal im Schreiben zu wohnen gestattet.
the difficult work of marshalling of thought and language with precision. Throughout *Minima Moralia*, Adorno is keen to keep up the intellectual pressure on himself to produce work of the highest standard. Here, Adorno continues this endorsement of ‘intellectual tension’ (*gedankliche Spannkraft*). Writing under this kind of pressure starts to look less and less desirable: Adorno’s advice does not look like it is suggesting a particularly comfortable life. He concludes:

> In the end, the writer is not even allowed to live in his writing.

The pathos of the exilic situation is painfully manifest here: even writing, that once could have offered solace and comfort, can no longer be a place of refuge. And yet, Adorno actively seeks to avoid “self pity” (*Mitleid mit sich*) if it allows the writer to slacken the intellectual tension on herself. Thus if we follow Adorno’s argument of self-discipline, this prohibition on being at home intellectually is as much chosen as is imposed: do not get comfortable in thoughts and familiar co-ordinates.

This prohibition acts on readers of *Minima Moralia* as much as it has done for its writer. We are not allowed to think of *Minima Moralia* as a recuperative project of home. The external condition of exile serves, in a productively grim way, as an accurate reflection of the homelessness of the writer.²⁵² Where in Aphorism 18, homelessness as an ethic of exile relates to the abstract category of the individual, Aphorism 51 demonstrates how Adorno internalizes this ethic for as a guiding principle for his response to the material and historical conditions of his intellectual work. Adorno considers his own position as a writer in exile, then, as a double

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displacement. He has been forcibly dislocated in physical terms but taken upon
himself an intellectual estrangement from home. Exile, in other words, takes on
meaning only as a way of describing a critical disposition towards the world.
Following through intellectually on that critical disposition requires self-discipline of
the highest order.

Minima Moralia bears out Heimatlosigkeit as the particular rubric for the writer in
exile253 and the general condition of modern subjectivity. Establishing homelessness
as a spiritual condition and ethic means that Adorno does not seek to recoup ‘home’ in
any moment of the historical past. Therefore he does not seek to return to an idealized
notion of Germany before the advent of National Socialism (Aphorism 35 Back to
culture “Anyone who did not play the game was forced into inner emigration years
before the Third Reich broke out”)254 nor in a nostalgic reverie of his Frankfurt
childhood. In fact, it is precisely in childhood memory that Adorno completes his
deconstruction of the notion of home. In Aphorism 128 “Regressions” (Regressionen

253 See additionally Aphorism 13 “Protection, help and counsel” (Schutz, Hilfe und Rat [Minima
Moralia 33-4 MM 35-6]). Adorno observes how wretched the situation is of the exiled intellectual and
reiterates the demand for intellectual self discipline, couched here as “austerity”:

Every intellectual in emigration is, without exception, mutilated, and does well to acknowledge it to
himself... He lives in an environment that must remain incomprehensible to him, however flawless his
knowledge of trade unions or the automobile industry maybe, he is always astray... His language has
been expropriated, and the historical dimension that nourished his knowledge, sapped. There is no
remedy but steadfast diagnosis of oneself and others, the attempt, through awareness, if not to escape
doom, at least to rob it of dreadful violence... the concept of austerity, though hardly ship shape or
watertight, still seems, in emigration, the most acceptable lifeboat.

Jeder Intellektuelle in der Emigration, ohne alle Ausnahme, ist beschädigt und tut gut daran, es selber
ezuerkennen, wenn er nicht hinter den dicht geschlossenen Türen seiner Selbstachtung grausam darüber
beleht werden will. Er lebt in einer Umwelt, die ihm unverständlich bleiben muss, auch wenn er sich in
den Gewerkschaftsorganisationen oder dem Autoverkehr noch so gut auskannt; immerzu ist er in der
Irre... Enteignet ist seine Sprache und abgegraben die geschichtliche Dimension, aus der seine
Erkenntnis die Kräfte zog... Nichts hilft als die standhaltende Diagnose seiner selbst und der anderen,
der Versuch, durch Bewusstsein wenn schon nicht dem Unheil zu entweichen, so ihm doch seine
verhängnisvolle Gewalt, die der Blindheit, zu entziehen... so scheint der abgetakelte und wenig
wasserdichte Begriff der austerité in der Emigration noch das annehmbarste Rettungsboot.

254 Minima Moralia 57-8, MM 62-3: Wer nicht mittat, musste schon Jahre vorn Ausbruch des Dritten
Reichs in die innere Emigration...
MM 224-6) he discusses three lullabies that form some of his earliest memories. This is the second song:

‘Sleep in gentle ease / little eyes shut please, / hear the raindrops in the dark, / hear the neighbours’ doggy bark / Doggy bit the beggar man, / tore his coat, away he ran / to the gate the beggar flees, / sleep in gentle ease.’

… So long as there is a single beggar, Benjamin writes in a fragment, there is still myth; only with the last beggar’s disappearance would myth be appeased… Would not, in the end, the disappearance of the beggar make good everything that was ever done to him and can never be made good? ...Would not the beggar, driven out of the gates of civilization, find refuge in his homeland, freed from exile on earth? ‘Have now peaceful mind, beggar home shall find.’

By marshalling his own childhood memories, Adorno conducts a very personal act of defamiliarization. Perhaps it was the soothing voice of a parent that reassures (Adorno himself as) the young child that he can rest easy because the beggar has been chased
off. The coziness of this scene is interrupted as Adorno poses the question for whom peace exists. He suggests that sleeping child’s fantasy of security is actually one of splendid isolation, in which there is no chance of being troubled by the sight of others or their material suffering. Shifting tack, via Benjamin’s comment in the *Arcades Project*, Adorno speculates to where the figure of the beggar (*Bettler*) is chased off. Home cannot be found within the “gates of civilization” (*die Pforte der Zivilisation*), nor is there release from the conditions of material suffering whilst on earth. The experience of exile is so profound that the beggar has been alienated whole world. Adorno’s notion of home, then, is a faint glimmering hope that cannot be realized within history.

**Conclusion**

By formulating his title via *Magna Moralia*, a text over whose attribution to Aristotle significant doubts hovered, Adorno insists that antiquity is faulty ground on which to build stable notions of historical belonging or to derive ethical schema. To that end, Adorno is deeply and self-reflexively critical of philhellenic German tradition in

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257 In the conclusion of his 1956 essay “Die Wunde Heine” (originally a talk on Westdeutscher Rundfunk for the centennial of Heine’s death February 1956, published in *Texte und Zeichen*, 1956, 3; trans. Nicholsen, S.W., ‘Heine the Wound’ in *Notes to Literature Volume One* 80-85), Adorno discusses Heine’s 1823 poem ‘Der Heimkehr’: “Heine’s stereotypical theme, unrequited love, is an image of homelessness, and the poetry devoted to it is an attempt to draw estrangement itself into the sphere of intimate experience. Now that the destiny that Heine sensed has been fulfilled literally, however, the homelessness has also become everybody’s homelessness; all human beings have been as badly injured in their beings and language as Heine the outcast was. His words stand in for their words: there is no longer any homeland other than a world in which no one would be cast out any more, the world of a genuinely emancipated humanity. The wound that is Heine will heal only in a society that has achieved reconciliation” (85). Again, Adorno’s concept of homelessness is formulated as the ethical response to the claim that the historical moment is one of deep suffering and alienation.
culture and thought from which he cannot disentangle himself. In the final aphorism of *Minima Moralia* (Aphorism 153 “Finale”, *Zum Ende*) Adorno insists that:

> Perspectives must be found that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, as indigent and distorted as it appears one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects – this alone is the task of thought. It is the simplest thing…But it is also an impossible thing… [W]e well know that any possible knowledge must not only be wrested from what is, if it shall hold good, but it is also marked, for this very reason, by this same distortion and indigence from which it seeks to escape.

Adorno’s choice to invert a marginal ancient text pulls off what he claims in the closing moments of *Minima Moralia* as necessary, simple and impossible for philosophy to achieve in the post-Holocaust moment. Adorno’s choice deconstructs Greek antiquity as the original home of Western thought, that is, the unconditional site for grounding subjective or objective historical existence without “velleity or violence” (*Willkür und Gewalt*).

I have argued that Adorno’s promotion of an ethic of exile operates in the cultural context in which *Heimat*, a German cultural sense of belonging, was rooted in cultural affiliation with ancient Greece. Whilst many historical formations of this relationship

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258 *Minima Moralia* 247, MM 281: Perspektiven müssten hergestellt werden, in denen die Welt ähnlich sich versetzt, verfremdet, ihre Risse und Schründe offenbart, wie sie einmal als bedürftig und entstellt im Messianischen Lichte daliegen wird. Ohne Willkür und Gewalt, ganz aus der Fühlung mit den Gegenständen heraus solche Perspektiven zu gewinnen, darauf allein kommt es dem Denken an. Es ist das Allereinfachste…Aber es ist auch das ganz Unmögliche…jede mögliche Erkenntnis nicht bloss dem was ist erst abgetrotzt werden muss, um verbindlich zu geraten, sondern eben darum selber auch mit der gleichen Entstelltheit und Bedürftigkeit geschlagen ist, der sie zu entrinnen vorhat.
have been recognized, the one I have chosen to focus on is Heidegger’s construal of the particular anchoring of German belonging in an ancient Greek past. Whilst Adorno and Heidegger arrive at a diagnosis of modernity’s *Heimatlosigkeit*, their philosophical responses substantially diverge. For Heidegger, even after 1945, it is possible to anchor German national belonging through a cultural tradition of philhellenism. For Adorno, the rupture of the Holocaust prevents any recuperative move back into the past.

Finally, I would like to turn to how Adorno carries over this critique of antiquity with respect to objective historical conditions. *Minima Moralia* focuses for the most part on the predicament of the modern subject, making a deliberate and critical turn inwards. However it is possible also to observe how Adorno’s engagement with the tradition of philosophical thought in which he operates, and its philhellenism, extends to an objective critique. This chapter started by indicating how *Minima Moralia*’s mode of operation could be construed as an anti-Hegelian Hegelianism. In Aphorism 33 (“Out of the firing line”, *Weit vom Schuss*) Adorno mobilizes antiquity to recalibrate Hegel’s dialectical philosophy of history:

> Had Hegel’s philosophy of history embraced this age, Hitler’s robot bombs would have found their place beside the early death of Alexander and similar images, as one of the selected empirical facts by which the state of the world-spirit manifests itself directly in symbols. Like Fascism itself, the robots career without a subject. Like it they combine utmost technical perfection with total blindness. And like it, they arouse mortal terror and are wholly futile. ‘I have seen the world spirit’, not on horseback, but on wings and without a head, and
that refutes, at the same stroke, Hegel’s philosophy of history.\textsuperscript{259}

This aphorism makes clear Adorno’s strategy of inverting the dialectic as a Hegelian structure of thought. Adorno’s briefly speculates that if he had been alive to witness National Socialism, Hegel would have added the techno-fascist killing machinery to his list of Alexander, Caesar and Napoleon who were discarded as soon as they fulfilled the need to embody the Weltgeist. As Gerhard Richter points out, “Adorno ironically calls into question the very notion of a world spirit that is facilitated by great military individuals… Hitler’s robot bombs problematize Hegel’s model … as the ultimate subjectless subject”.\textsuperscript{260} Adorno then clearly signals that he will continue his ironic operations in and on the philosophy of history by taking up antiquity as the field of engagement. Deconstructing Hegel’s reported remark upon seeing Napoleon “I have seen the world spirit on horseback”, Adorno disfigures the embodiment of Weltgeist. Moreover it implies a deeply partial weathering of a great storm (perhaps, at this point, we might say, the storm of historical progress)\textsuperscript{261} – this is no triumphalist


\textsuperscript{261} Others have noted that Adorno’s image here bears a close resemblance to Benjamin’s Denkbild of the Angel of History (\textit{der Engel der Geschichte}) in \textit{Theses on the Philosophy of History}. Both Adorno and Benjamin’s images have an artwork as its referent (Paul Klee’s \textit{Angelus Novus}). Furthermore, the resemblance between Adorno and Benjamin’s personified symbols of the philosophy of history rests primarily on the stormy dynamism of these images. Thus Adorno’s plastic referent features sensuous folds of Victory’s dress as she faces the winds. Benjamin’s image is more portentous:

But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels hum into future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. The storm is what we call progress.
image of victory but rather survival that has come at great cost to the integrity of the
subject.

It is my original suggestion that Adorno’s specific referent here in the image of
Weltgeist is the Winged Victory of Samothrace (see Fig. 1). The incompleteness of
the human figure, lacking a head and an arm that could have carried a symbol or sign
of victory, becomes a ghastly fragment of Weltgeist. The once beautiful image of
victory now embodies historical suffering: decapitation is the price of her survival.
Adorno’s invocation of this broken statue tells us as much about the critical reception
of antiquity in operation in Minima Moralia as the kind of anti-Hegelian framing of
history he is in pursuit of. His choice of icon profoundly undermines the notion of
Greek antiquity as the ground for rooting modernity. The Winged Victory of

We say that the world’s magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of
speed. A racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes, like serpents of explosive
breath – a roaring car that seems to ride on grapeshot – is more beautiful than the
Victory of Samothrace.
Samothrace as symbol of *Weltgeist* deconstructs the philhellenism upon which German thought from Idealism to National Socialism formed an authoritative relationship to historical belonging.\(^{265}\) The mutilated state of the statue in particular undermines the aesthetic valorization of antiquity, so prevalent in German thought. If a broken and decidedly not classical figure really is Adorno’s intended figure for the notion of *Weltgeist*, it operates as the counterpart to his critical intervention mobilization of *Magna Moralia* for articulating the estranged and fraught position of the subject in modernity.

**IMAGE REMOVED OWING TO COPYRIGHT CONCERNS**

Fig. 1 Winged Victory of Samothrace, Musée de Louvre, Paris.\(^{266}\)


\(^{266}\) [http://library.artstor.org/#/asset/SS35100_35100_15704770](http://library.artstor.org/#/asset/SS35100_35100_15704770) [Accessed: 12/11/17]. The statue now occupies a commanding position in the museum at the top of the Daru staircase.
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