

Edward W. Said on Erich Auerbach: the Critic in Exile

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Said's secular ideal, which Bruce Robbins describes as a "distinct version of internationalism" (26), emerges simultaneously as a global critical practice and a form of exilic displacement. In **The World the Text and the Critic**, in an introductory chapter entitled "Secular Criticism," Said heralds Erich Auerbach as a secular intellectual whose contributions in **Mimesis** are inextricable from the "circumstances of the book's actual writing," namely Auerbach's exile from Nazi Germany to Istanbul during World War II. After quoting from **Mimesis**' epilogue -- in which Auerbach describes his inadequate access to research materials while suggesting simultaneously that "it is quite possible that the book owes its existence to just this lack of a rich and specialized library" -- Said points to Auerbach's separation from European culture as precisely the condition that allows him to know it so well:

In other words, the book owed its existence to the very fact of Oriental, non-Occidental exile and homelessness. And if this is so, then **Mimesis** itself is not, as it has so frequently been taken to be, only a massive reaffirmation of the Western cultural tradition, but also a work built upon a critically important alienation from it, a work whose conditions and circumstances of existence are not immediately derived from the culture it describes with such extraordinary insight and brilliance but built rather on an agonizing distance from it. (*The World the Text and the Critic* 8)

Since **Mimesis**' proposed trajectory is the "representation of reality" in Western literature, Auerbach's displacement to Istanbul -- an "Oriental" area codified and "othered" by the Western canon -- allows him an ironic critical perspective of his book's subject from the periphery (5-6). And yet, in both **The World the Text and the Critic** and **Representations of the Intellectual**, Said emphasizes that the position of exile does not render the secular critic wholly independent, autonomous, hermetically-sealed, nor isolated from the workings of the nation-state. "There is a popular but wholly mistaken assumption," Said argues, "that being exiled is to be totally cut off, isolated, hopelessly separated from your place of origin" (*Representations* 48). By contrast, Said portrays the secular intellectual as a border-crosser who occupies a liminal space that mediates between nations, political organizations, and academic affiliations -- as well as between "culture" and "imperialism"; "text" and "world"; past and present.

- [Edward W. Said's "Politics of Secular Interpretation"--an introduction](#)
 - [Erich Auerbach: the Critic in Exile](#)
 - [Said's "Liminal Intellectual"](#)
 - [Bruce Robbins on Said's "Voyage In"](#)
 - [Problematizing Said's Exilic Category](#)
 - [Problematizing the Exilic: Temporality and Historical Specificity](#)
 - [Problematizing the Exilic: Eurocentrism and Elitism](#)
 - [The Ambiguity of Counter-Authority in the Liminal Intellectual's Struggle for Decolonization](#)
 - [Said on "Contrapuntalism" and Exile](#)
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