Impossible Speech Acts: Jacques Rancière’s Erich Auerbach

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It seems unlikely today that an Anglo-American reader will encounter Erich Auerbach’s magnum opus *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* except through the mediation of Edward W. Said. Indeed, the fiftieth-anniversary edition of the book’s English translation is framed by the introduction Said wrote for the occasion, one of the last essays he completed before his death in 2003. Said’s interest in *Mimesis* spanned the length of his career, with discussions of varying length appearing in nearly all his critical works, from *Beginnings* (1975), *Orientalism* (1979), *The World, the Text, the Critic* (1983), and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) to his final (and fullest) reflections in the introduction to *Mimesis*.¹ For Said, Auerbach was, together with Leo Spitzer and Ernst Robert Curtius, one of the last of the great German comparativists for whom world literature could still be an object of study. Marked inherently but undiminished by its Occidentalism, *Mimesis* remained, for Said, “one of the most admired and influential books of literary criticism ever written.”² Strikingly, what Said valued most about the
book—what he singled out time and again, and in terms that hardly varied across four decades—was not its celebrated philological method, each chapter of *Mimesis* beginning with a literary fragment from which Auerbach adduced nothing less than the entire culture that produced it. Instead, Said turned repeatedly to the penultimate paragraph of the epilogue to recall, as exemplary for modern-day “critical consciousness,” the particular circumstances of the book’s production:

I may also mention that the book was written during the war and at Istanbul, where the libraries were 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 and 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. . . . On the other hand, it is quite possible that the book owes its existence to just this lack of a rich and specialized library. If it had been possible for me to acquaint myself with all the work that has been done on so many subjects, I might never have reached the point of writing.

While we’ve since come to appreciate that Auerbach’s isolation as a German Jewish exile was rather more legend than fact, Said took this passage to suggest that “it was precisely his distance from home—in all senses of that word—that made possible the superb undertaking of *Mimesis*: “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.”

Transforming this distance into a requisite condition for critical consciousness *tout court*—a consciousness for which, in the memorable phrase by Hugh of St. Victor’s quoted by Auerbach and repeated frequently by Said, “the entire world is as a foreign place”—Auerbach became for Said an image of the consummate cosmopolitan, “equally wary of an imperial universalism and the beleaguered solace of tribal identities.” A figure, in short, very much like Said himself.
If this is the Auerbach with whom Anglo-American readers are familiar today, they may well decide that the Auerbach discussed by Jacques Rancière is someone else entirely. And they would largely be correct. Though Said and Rancière each wrote about the Gospel tale of Peter’s denial of Christ from which Auerbach developed his important account of *figura*, this is where their common interests seem to end. If this is the Auerbach with whom Anglo-American readers are familiar today, they may well decide that the Auerbach discussed by Jacques Rancière is someone else entirely. And they would largely be correct. Though Said and Rancière each wrote about the Gospel tale of Peter’s denial of Christ from which Auerbach developed his important account of *figura*, this is where their common interests seem to end. What drew Said to *Mimesis*, as Aamir Mufti put it, “is not so much the Auerbachian text, the text whose author-function bears the name of Auerbach, but rather Auerbach as text,” the writer “himself” in his existential situation. Rancière, on the other hand, is much less interested in Auerbach’s biography than in his writing—specifically, in the history *Mimesis* recounts of the rise and fall of the classical doctrine of decorum, the hierarchical alignment of literary genres with the class identities of their represented subjects: “There were high genres, devoted to the imitation of noble actions and characters, and low genres devoted to common people and base subject matters. The hierarchy of genres also submitted style to a principle of hierarchical convenience: kings had to act and speak as kings do, and common people as common people do. The convention was not simply an academic constraint. There was a homology between the rationality of poetic fiction and the intelligibility of human actions, conceived of as an adequation between ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking.”

Just as, to my knowledge, Rancière has never remarked upon Auerbach’s exile in Istanbul (let alone construed it as the condition of his achievement as a critic), Said showed scant interest in the question of decorum in *Mimesis* until his late introduction. I want to follow Rancière here as he reads a long passage from Tacitus’s *Annals* that occurs in the middle of the second chapter of *Mimesis*. This fragment merits close attention not only because it tends to be overlooked, preceding as it does the story of Peter’s denial that forms the highpoint of that chapter and, indeed, of the entire book. The passage will also help to illuminate some of the political issues at stake in Said’s and Rancière’s respective approaches to Auerbach. Here, first, is the passage from Tacitus:

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Thus stood affairs at Rome, when a sedition made its appearance in the legions in Pannonia, without any fresh grounds [*nullis novis causis*], save that the accession of a new prince promised impunity to tumult, and held out the hope of advantages to be derived from a civil war. Three legions
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occupied a summer camp together, commanded by Junius Blaesus, who, upon notice of the death of Augustus and accession of Tiberius, had granted the soldiers a recess from their wonted duties for some days, as a time either of public mourning or festivity. From this beginning they waxed wanton and quarrelsome, lent their ears to the discourses of every profligate, and at last they longed for a life of dissipation and idleness, and spurned all military discipline and labor. In the camp was one Percennius, formerly a busy leader of theatrical factions [dux olim theatralium operarum], after that a common soldier, of a petulant tongue, and from his experience in theatrical party zeal [miscere coetus histrionali studio doctus], well qualified to stir up the bad passions of a crowd. Upon minds uninformed, and agitated with doubts as to what might be the condition of military service now that Augustus was dead, he wrought gradually by confabulations by night, or when day verged towards its close; and when all the better-disposed had retired to their respective quarters, he would congregate all the most depraved about him.

Lastly, when now also other ministers of sedition were at hand to second his designs, in imitation of a general solemnly haranguing his men, he asked them—“Why did they obey, like slaves, a few centurions and fewer tribunes? When would they be bold enough to demand redress, unless they approached the prince, yet a novice, and tottering on his throne, either with entreaties or arms? Enough had they erred in remaining passive through so many years, since decrepit with age and maimed with wounds, after a course of service of thirty or forty years, they were still doomed to carry arms; nor even to those who were discharged was there any end of service, but they were still kept to the colors, and under another name endured the same hardships. And if any of them survived so many dangers, still were they dragged into countries far remote, where, under the name of lands, they are presented with swampy fens, or mountain wastes. But surely, burdensome and ungainful of itself was the occupation of war;—ten asses a day the poor price of their persons and lives; out of this they must buy clothes, and tents, and arms,—out of this the cruelty of centurions must be redeemed, and occasional exemptions from duty; but, by Hercules, stripes, wounds, hard winters and laborious summers, bloody wars and barren peace, were miseries eternally to be endured; nor remained there other remedy than to enter the service upon certain conditions, as that their pay should be a denarius a day, sixteen years be the utmost term of serving; beyond that period to be no longer obliged to follow the colors, but have their reward in money, paid
them in the camp where they earned it. Did the praetorian guards, who had
double pay,—they who after sixteen years’ service were sent home, undergo
more dangers? This was not said in disparagement of the city guards; their
own lot, however, was, serving among uncivilized nations, to have the enemy
in view from their tents.”

The general body received this harangue with shouts of applause, but
stimulated by various motives,—some showing, in all the bitterness of re-
proach, the marks of stripes, others their hoary heads, many their tattered
vestments and naked bodies.∞

As you may recall, Auerbach argues throughout this second chapter
of Mimesis that the New Testament succeeded in providing a complex
and serious rendering of the lives of common people where the Romans
writers failed to do so, bound as they were by rules of decorum that
mandated for the depiction of the lower classes the low language of
comedy. As a result, Roman writing could not be realistic since it lacked,
in its adherence to unchanging ethical categories, all capacity for histor-
ical consciousness. There could be in it, for Auerbach, “no serious liter-
ary treatment of everyday occupations and social classes—merchants,
artisans, peasants, slaves—of everyday scenes and places—home, shop,
field, store—of everyday customs and institutions—marriage, children,
work, earning a living—in short, of the people and its life.”∞≤

The Tacitus passage may seem initially to fulfill these criteria for
realism in the highly particularized details included in the soldiers’
complaints. Auerbach notes, indeed, that “the grievances of the soldiers
discussed in Percennius’s speech—excessive length of service, hardships,
insufficient pay, inadequate old-age provision, corruption, envy of the
easier life of the metropolitan troops—are presented vividly and graphi-
cally in a manner not frequently encountered even in modern histo-
rians.”∞≥ But the fact that these grievances are presented not in Tacitus’s
voice, but as “utterances of the ringleader Percennius,” makes them
something other than historically typical or realistic: “The factual infor-
mation [Tacitus] gives on the causes of the revolt—information pre-
sented in the form of a ringleader’s speech and not discussed further—
he invalidates in advance by stating at the outset his own view of the real
causes of the revolt in purely ethical terms: nullis novis causis.”∞∂ That
Percennius is further portrayed as a master of imitation—trained in the
theater, he mimics “a general solemnly haranguing his men”—disquali-
ifies him still further; in place of the “silence of military discipline,” we are given only the negative values associated with what Rancière terms, in The Names of History, “the roar of urban theatrocracy.” Why, then, put Percennius on stage at all if Tacitus was hardly “interested in the soldiers’ demands and never intended to discuss them objectively”? The reason, Auerbach explains, is “purely aesthetic”:

The grand style of historiography requires grandiloquent speeches, which as a rule are fictitious. Their function is graphic dramatization (illustratio) of a given occurrence, or at times the presentation of great political or moral ideas; in either case they are intended as the rhetorical bravura pieces of the presentation. The writer is permitted a certain sympathetic entering into the thoughts of the supposed speaker, and even a certain realism. Essentially, however, such speeches are products of a specific stylistic tradition cultivated in the schools for rhetors. The composition of speeches which one person or another might have delivered on one or another great historical occasion was a favorite exercise. Tacitus is a master of his craft, and his speeches are not sheer display; they are really imbued with the character and the situation of the persons supposed to have delivered them; but they too are primarily rhetorical. Percennius does not speak in his own language; he speaks Tacitean, that is, he speaks with extreme terseness, as a matter of disposition, and highly rhetorically. Undoubtedly his words—though given as indirect discourse—vibrate with the actual excitement of mutinous soldiers and their leader. Yet even if we assume that Percennius was a gifted demagogue, such brevity, incisiveness, and order are not possible in a rebellious propaganda speech, and of soldiers’ slang there is not the slightest trace.

What Auerbach seems to be pondering here is nothing less than a question we have learned to pose in a rather different context: “Can the plebeian speak?” To which, for Rancière, the answer would be “no”: “Percennius doesn’t speak; rather, Tacitus lends him his tongue.” If we were expecting him to declaim in propria persona, we soon realize that “Percennius had no place to speak,” since, as a represented member of the poor, he has only “an essential relation with nontruth.” The justifications for the revolt that are credited to Percennius are not refuted by or even commented on by Tacitus; the historian has no need to do either, since the argument Percennius provides can be neither true nor false:
They have, fundamentally, no relation to the truth. Their illegitimacy is not due to their content but to the simple fact that Percennius is not in the position of legitimate speaker. A man of his rank has no business thinking and expressing his thought. And his speech is ordinarily reproduced only in the “base” genres of satire and comedy. It is ruled out that an essential conflict would be expressed through his mouth, ruled out that we would see in him, in a modern sense, the symptomatic representative of a historical movement that operates in the depths of a society. The speech of the man of the common people is by definition without depth.19

Thus Tacitus, as Rancière reads Auerbach, explains the revolt twice, doubly dispossessing Percennius by stripping him both of his justifications and his voice.20 According to Rancière, Auerbach here would be marking, “in his own way, the relation between a politics of knowledge and a poetics of narrative around the question of the politics of the other.”21 But this other is not simply excluded by Tacitus, whose discourse nonetheless manages, precisely, to give a place “to what it declares to have no place.”22 While Auerbach left underemphasized the question of “the modality of the poem’s enunciation,” Rancière suggests that what makes Percennius’s speech not only fascinating but politically efficacious is its “indirect style,” the narrator’s “they” replacing the expected “you” in Percennius’s address to his audience. What results from this substitution is much less a new synthesis than a torsion between two distinct pronominal points of view—both of which nonetheless inhere at once: “The indirect style, in practice disjoining meaning and truth, in effect cancels the opposition between legitimate and illegitimate speakers. The latter are just as much validated as suspected. The homogeneity of the narrative-discourse thereby constituted comes to contradict the heterogeneity of the subjects it represents, the unequal quality of the speakers to guarantee, by their status, the reference of their speech. Although Percennius may well be the radical other, the one excluded from legitimate speech, his discourse is included, in a specific suspension of the relations between meaning and truth.”23 For Rancière, then, Tacitus records in his discourse a speech event impossible to imagine phenomenally as a historical utterance. Rancière stresses that this very impossibility is what opens a political future: “By invalidating the voice of Percennius, substituting his own speech for the soldier’s, Tacitus does more than give him a historical identity. He also creates a model of
subversive eloquence for the orators and simple soldiers of the future. The latter henceforth will not repeat Percennius, whose voice has been lost, but Tacitus, who states the reasons of all those like Percennius better than they do.”

Rancière’s discussion of this passage runs over five dense pages in *The Names of History*. By way of contrast, Edward Said says of this same material only that “Tacitus, for example, was simply not interested in talking about or representing the everyday, excellent historian though he was.” Notwithstanding his deep antipathy to identity politics, Said clearly identified with Auerbach, who “often seems to function as a stand-in or alter ego for Said himself.” Of course, Said’s identification with an exiled German Jew is especially poignant, given his lifelong exertions on behalf of Palestine. But projecting oneself into an other always risks an effacement of difference: “In order to be able to understand a humanistic text,” Said wrote of *Mimesis*, “one must try to do so as if one is the author of that text, living the author’s reality, undergoing the kind of life experiences intrinsic to his or her life, and so forth, all by that combination of erudition and sympathy that is the hallmark of philological hermeneutics.” Said performed this surrogation strikingly when, in the absence of direct quotation, he, rather than Auerbach, seems to be narrating the epilogue to *Mimesis*: “[Auerbach] explains in the concluding chapter of *Mimesis* that, even had he wanted to, he could not have made use of the available scholarly resources, first of all because he was in wartime Istanbul when the book was written and no Western research libraries were accessible for him to consult, second because had he been able to use references from the extremely voluminous secondary literature, the material would have swamped him and he would never have written the book.” Whose story is *Mimesis*? Taking Auerbach’s place as the narrator, Said sought here to “live the author’s reality” even at the level of voice.

In “Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization,” Rancière pursues a different confusion of tongues, a politics of “impossible identification, an identification that cannot be embodied by he or she who utters it.” Rather than erase the difference between one subject and another, impossible identifications take “the difference between voice and body” to generate otherwise unimaginable political effects:
“We are the wretched of the earth” is the kind of sentence that no wretched of the earth would ever utter. Or, to take a personal example, for my generation politics in France relied on an impossible identification—an identification with the bodies of the Algerians beaten to death and thrown into the Seine by the French police, in the name of the French people, in October 1961. We could not identify with those Algerians, but we could question our identification with the “French people” in whose name they were murdered. That is to say, we could act as political subjects in the interval or the gap between two identities, neither of which we could assume. That process of subjectivization had no proper name, but it found its name, its cross name, in the 1968 assumption “We are all German Jews”—a “wrong” identification, an identification in terms of the denial of an absolute wrong.29

To say “we are all German Jews” is quite different from identifying with one particular German Jew. If that latter act constitutes, for Said, the essence of “critical consciousness,” Rancière may have learned a different lesson from Auerbach—namely, how a politics can be predicated on an impossible phenomenality of voice.