EXILE AND INTERPRETATION:
REINVENTING EUROPEAN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY IN THE
AGE OF GERMAN TYRANNY AND BARBARISM

(Or “How German-Speaking Jewish Intellectual Exiles – Hans Baron, Karl Popper, Leo Strauss, Erich Auerbach – Transformed Modern Intellectual History”)

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INTRODUCTION

Exile and Interpretation contextualizes ideologically and politically Hans Baron, Erich Auerbach, Leo Strauss and Karl Popper’s scholarship. These German-speaking Jewish intellectuals, who are not normally considered together, fled continental Europe with the rise of Nazism in the 1930s. For each, the political calamity of European fascism was simultaneously a profound intellectual crisis.

We choose these four refugee intellectuals not only because of their shared existential experience as exiled Jews, but, most importantly, because they exemplify how scholarship was often used polemically in the 1930s and 1940s to fight Nazism and fascism. We especially want to show how scholarship of an arcane character was enlisted in this struggle. We want to complement work that has been done, for instance, on Jacob Talmon or Hannah Arendt whose polemical intentions are more obvious or more well-known. Auerbach fought fascism through his rejection of Aryan philology, Baron by his repudiation of völkisch ideology of history, Strauss via his polemic against Hobsbes’ historicism as the source of modern German political nihilism and Popper by attacking Plato’s metaphysical “essentialism” and historicism as the philosophical origin of fascism.

Our four exiles also radically transformed their respective fields of scholarly expertise. In philology, Auerbach invented the field of comparative literature with his book Mimesis. In history, Baron’s The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance led to the creation of the Atlantic Republican tradition of historiography. In the history of political thought, Strauss’s Natural Right and History and Popper’s The Open Society and Its Enemies transformed post-WWII political philosophy’s canon by controversially renarrating it as decline and deterioration rather than advancing enlightenment.

Hans Baron (1900-1988) claimed in his celebrated work, The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance, 1955, that “The method of interpreting great turning-points in the history of thought against their social or political background has yet not rendered its full service in the study of the Italian Renaissance.” In our chapter, “Hans Baron: Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Tyranny and Barbarism,” we claim that the method of interpreting great turning-points in the life and mind of this prominent historian of political thought against his social and political background renders important results regarding properly understanding Baron’s magnum opus and its unique mode of historical thought, namely the view that history progresses through a series of major crises.

Our goal therefore is to trace the development of Baron’s historical thought and imagination. During his life, two world wars and two German revolutions took place – the revolution of 1918-1919, which led to the creation of the Weimar Republic, and the Nazi revolution of 1933, which ushered in the establishment of the Third Reich. His was the “Age of Catastrophe” as Eric Hobsbawm termed the years from the First World War to the Second. We ask therefore how these crises and catastrophes influenced the writing of The Crisis. Further, we inquire how the crisis of German ideology -- as a triumph of völkisch ideology based on the concept of the Volk
as an organic, ethnic community in biological terms, overt racism and militant anti-Semitism, all signaling a turning away from humanist and Enlightenment ideas and eventually leading to the crisis of German Jewry and to Baron’s own exilic displacement -- contributed to the making of *The Crisis*. No wonder that a deep sense of crisis pervaded Baron’s historical thought as well as his analysis and findings, making the themes of civic humanism and crisis-history as unique modes of historical thought hallmarks of *The Crisis*.

Karl Popper (1902-94), too, deployed an extremely idiosyncratic history of political thought to combat fascism. His *Poverty of Historicism* (1944-45) and his very unconventional but influential *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) were what he called his “war effort” against Hitler written from exile in New Zealand where he fled in 1937. As Popper confessed in 1946, *The Open Society* was a “fighting book,” which he decided to write the day he heard about Germany’s 1938 occupation of his Austrian homeland. Popper’s conception of historicism was quite different from Strauss’s. For Popper, historicism was the false and dangerous belief in historical inevitability. Plato purportedly invented historicism, inserting it like a Trojan horse into the heart of Western humanism. Whereas the *Poverty of Historicism* put forward the theory that fascism was based on historicist thinking, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* purported to provide historical evidence that this tradition began with Heraclitus, Plato and Aristotle. Nazism, according to Popper, exploited our reverence for these classical Greeks and their alleged historical determinism to justify Hitler’s rise as Germany’s inevitable destiny.

Much like Baron, Auerbach and Strauss, then, Popper waged war on fascism through scholarship. He sought to combat it by exposing its deep historicist roots. We will also show that Popper defended, in *The Open Society* especially, an equally controversial hermeneutics that justified his blaming the classical Greeks for introducing historicism and fascism. As with Strauss, one cannot possibly understand Popper’s controversial hermeneutics and its integral connection to his history of political thought outside the context of his “war effort” against Hitler.

Leo Strauss (1899-73), like the three other Jewish intellectuals in our study used scholarship to fight fascism, especially once he left Germany in 1932. He fought fascism by constructing an extremely idiosyncratic history of Western political thought that *seems* to trace Europe’s abandonment of classical natural right (Plato and Aristotle) to the invention of historicism (the view that all truth was historically relative) by Machiavelli and Hobbes. Their invention, according to Strauss, eventually led like a slowly-gathering ideological storm to moral relativism, political nihilism and therefore ultimately to Hitler. According to Strauss, because historicism reduced morality to mere “arbitrary” preference, it led straight to the “madness” of fascism. But as we will show, the real culprits of this story for Strauss were not these philosophers alone. The more important and really dangerous culprit behind the rise of historicism was the German Historical School of Goethe, Herder, Ranke, Weber, Troeltsch and Meinecke. By “history” in the title of his seminal 1953 *Natural Right and History*, Strauss has in mind the German Historical School and its contribution to the rise of fascism as much as he does Machiavelli and Hobbes. On Strauss’s account, then, Machiavelli originated historicism, Hobbes refined it philosophically and the German Historical School turned it into a perilous ideology
that was quickly put crudely to use by Nazis to justify their actions. Strauss wanted to expose the fascist implications of this historiographical and philosophical tradition and make philosophy once again beneficial or safe for politics. And making philosophy safe for politics also made politics safe for philosophizing fearlessly like Socrates, which some scholars insist was Strauss’s real and greatest underlying ideological worry.

Strauss not only devoted his career to narrating an idiosyncratic history of Western political thought that he claimed exposed the philosophical sources of fascism. He also defended a highly controversial method of reading “exactly” or esoterically “between the lines,” which he famously articulated in his 1941 “Persecution and the Art of Writing” and in other war-time unpublished writings. We further suggest that this controversial hermeneutical strategy was crucial to his struggle against fascism because his polemical history of political thought depended upon it. One simply cannot make sense of Strauss’s famous and contentious hermeneutics without situating it within his anti-fascism and anti-historicism.

Our chapter on Erich Auerbach (1892-1957), “Erich Auerbach and the Crisis of German Philology: European Humanism in the Age of Tyranny and Aryan Philology,” argues that Auerbach’s main goal was the rejection of Aryan philology which eliminated the Old Testament from the Christian canon and hence from the very fabric of European culture and civilization. Auerbach was a humanist philologist who deployed philological study to resist Nazi barbarism by combating its racist philology. Accordingly, following the Nazi assumption of power in 1933 and, with it the triumph of Aryan philology, Auerbach began writing his famous essay “Figura,” published in 1938. In this essay, he strove to make the Old Testament inseparable from the New Testament. And later, beginning in 1942, which was the most crucial year of WWII, he started writing Mimesis where he made figural interpretation essential to any possible understanding of the history of Western humanist literature, culture and civilization.

With this broad ideological and philological context in mind, “Figura” should be considered not only a mere philological study but also, and more importantly, a crucial stage in Auerbach’s response to the crisis of German philology. More specifically, it marks his first sustained and systematic attack on Aryan philology, and Mimesis, in turn, is his affirmation against Aryan philology’s racist and völkish views of the humanist, Judaeo-Christian foundations of European civilization. No wonder that Auerbach considered figura an Ansatzpunkt, a point of departure providing insight into very large literary or cultural movements – in this case the separation between classical and Christian forms of thought and attitudes. Yet, if figura is a philological Ansatzpunkt in general, it is also an Ansatzpunkt in Auerbach’s philological enterprise in particular, namely his struggle against Aryan philology. We can say therefore in Auerbach’s terms that the essay “Figura” is a figura of Mimesis, or conversely, that Mimesis is the fulfillment and realization of “Figura.”
Hans Baron:
Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of
Tyranny and Barbarism

Abstract

“The method of interpreting great turning-points in the history of thought against their social or political background has yet not rendered its full service in the study of the Italian Renaissance,” wrote Hans Baron (1900-1988) in *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*, 1955, which strove to redress this problem. One however may argue as well that the method of interpreting great turning-points in the life and mind of this prominent historian of the history of political thought against their social and political background may render as well important results with regard of the making of Baron’s *magnum opus* and its unique mode of historical thought, or the view that history progresses through a series of major crises.

In what will follow, our goal is to trace the development of Baron’s historical thought and imagination. During his life took place two German revolutions – the revolution of 1918-1919, which led to the creation of the Weimar Republic, and the Nazi revolution of 1933, which ushered in the establishment of the Third Reich – and two World Wars. His was the “Age of Catastrophe” as Eric Hobsbawm termed the years from the First World War to the Second, or of *historia calamitatum*. We ask therefore how these crises and catastrophes influenced the writing of *The Crisis*. Further, we inquire how the crisis of German ideology – the triumph of völkish ideology based on the concept of the Volk as an organic, ethnic community in biological terms, overt racism and militant anti-Semitism – which signaled the turning away from humanist and Enlightenment ideas and eventually to the crisis of German Jewry and to Baron’s own exilic displacement, contributed to the making of *The Crisis*. No wonder that deep sense of crisis pervaded Baron’s historical thought as well as his analysis and findings, and the themes of civic humanism and crisis-history as a unique mode of historical thought are the hallmarks of *The Crisis*. 
Introduction

[Baron] was probably one of the last great historical scholars who believed that something like absolute truth was attainable in matters of interpretation. His indefatigable labors were directed toward that end. Indeed, Baron’s stance toward his work was precisely opposite to the current fashion of “moving on” to some new or related topic, once a “project” is finished. Instead, he carried on a series lifelong conversations – face-to-face, by letter, in print, and above all [in] the more efficient theater of his own capacious intellect – with all his teachers, friends, junior colleagues, critics, and especially with the dead souls of the Italian humanists into whom it became his mission to infuse vibrant new life.

Werner Gundersheimer, “Hans Baron’s Renaissance Humanism,” 1996

Anyone who reads Baron’s *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny* cannot fail to recognize that the work was not written by an unbiased and detached historian.\(^1\) Baron’s work constantly portrays in most vivid terms a tremendous political crisis of terrifying proportions, a “life-or-death struggle”\(^2\) between the Florentine Republic and “tyranny,”\(^3\) which had far reaching consequences not only for the survival of liberty in the Republic on the Arno in early Renaissance Italy but also for the modern world as well. Baron has in mind “Florence’s political crisis,” (460) and struggle against the Duke of Milan Gian Galeazzo Visconti (1395-1402), who strove to unite all of northern Italy. In this crucial, existential struggle for the survival of Florence, the Republic on

* The authors would like to acknowledge the help of the Riccardo Fubini, Kay Schiller, Anthony Molho and Werner Gundersheimer, who shared with us their enormous erudition with regard to Hans Baron’s life, time and thought. We would like to thank also John J. A. Pocock, Jonathan Steinberg, Stephen Whitfield and Ronald Witt, who read the paper and provide us with valuable comments and suggestions.

1 Certainly, Baron was not like his former student in Berlin Nicolai Rubinstein (1911-2002), the author of *The Government of Florence under the Medici* (1966), who depicted the Medicean political authority in Florence as an exemplar of family-led party power, not as a tyrant’s rule. Rubinstein says that he was a student of Baron in “Germany, Italy, and England,” in *Out of the Third Reich: Refugee Historians in Post-War Britain*, ed. Peter Alter (I. B. Tauris: London, 1998), p. 239.


the Arno “defended civic freedom and finally remained the only antagonist to the threat of
despotism.” (357) Against the “triumphant progress of Tyranny,” stood only Florence’s struggle
“for the survival of civic freedom.” (xxv-xxvi) Hence, the “generation which was young about
the year 1400 witnessed events in the [Italian] Peninsula that were decisive for the survival of
freedom and the emergence of a system of independents states.” (26) And there could be no
doubt on which side Baron stood. The Florentine Republic “was left alone to confront one of
those challenges of history in which a nation, facing eclipse or regeneration, has to prove its
worth in a fight for survival.” (35)

No wonder that The Crisis is pervaded by a constant sense of war reaching its climax, an
existential struggle for survival approaching its “eleventh hour,” (34), and a sheer sense of
impending “final catastrophe” (42) looming on the horizon. The use of “hour” denotes that the
course of history is based on a unique twelve-hour clock with hourly progress signifying
history’s final culmination. Like a clock, history constantly moves forward; its time and course is
almost fixed beforehand and carried on without any interruption. Yet Baron can read the moving
of the clock; he can decipher the course and progress of historical time or the nature of the
historical process. History’s essential dimension is crisis; hence the concept of crisis-history
pervades Baron’s historical thought in The Crisis. Crisis-history is marked by catastrophes. And
crises and catastrophes, or historia calamitatum, call for the muse of history, recalling the words
of Walter Benjamin shortly before his death in exile in 1940:

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past.

Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling
wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.4

(New York, 1969), pp. 257-8. On Benjamin’s apocalypse history, see Anson Rabinbach, In the Shadow of
While Benjamin’s “catastrophic antihistoricism explicitly challenged the nineteenth century’s triumphant philosophy of progress” and “redemption,”5 Baron’s crisis-history in contrast, as we shall shortly see, is based on “misfortune, regeneration,” and eventual “salvation.”6

Baron wrote that The Crisis was “primarily intended to determine the impact of ideas, in a crucial period of war, on the nascent Weltanschauung of the Quattrocento Renaissance.”7 And he portrayed the Florentine republic’s struggle in Manichaean terms as taking place between light and darkness, or between “civic freedom” (xxvi) and “universal tyranny” (35), which stood against liberty and republicanism. In this historical scenario, Florence was accorded a unique role: “the hour” will come “when Florence could rightly claim to be savior of the libertas Italae.” (30)

Crisis and humanism were thus inextricably connected. When “Tyranny was marching” all over the land, (xxvi), bringing “the Florentine Commonwealth into a mortal danger,” her culture was quickly transformed. (11) The “Milanese wars had a great and unmistakable impact on the Florentine mind.” (78) As a result, Florence’s existential “war of survival” (458) was transformed into a crucial struggle for humanism and liberty in general: in this crucial existential crisis when “Florence was thrown into a fight for her existence” (11), at “that very moment with comparative suddenness, a change in Humanism as well as in the arts took place which ever

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5 Rabinbach, In the Shadow of Catastrophe. p. 8.
since have been considered to have given birth to the mature pattern of the Renaissance” (xxv).

Existential political crisis, Florence’s “life-or-death struggle with Renaissance tyranny,” thus gave rise to a “new civic philosophy,” or a “new type of Humanism – Civic Humanism,” (459) in which “citizens and scholars had worked together to serve the bonum commune.” Baron also referred to this civic humanism as “civic-political Humanism” based on “vita active and civilis.” He thus “established a causal link between the emergence of civic humanism and the political threat posed by the imperialism of the Visconti.”

     War and political struggle, then, had their reward, creating, or regenerating, a new type of humanistic thought and culture which exercised important influence not only on the history of the Renaissance but on modern history as well. “Humanism, as molded by the Florentine crisis, produced a pattern of conduct and thought which was not to remain limited to the Florentine humanists.” (460). For, as Baron argued, in many respects “civic humanism was “the salt in the humanistic contribution to the rise of the modern world.” (461) Hence, whenever we want “to visualize” civic humanism’s “contribution to modernity and its historical growth, we must revive the memory of what happened in Florence and among her citizens and humanists during the early Quattrocento.” (461-62)

Clearly, these are not the words of an unbiased scholar but rather of a partisan historian fully engaged in, and politically committed to, the subject he is writing about. Moreover, these are

10 Ibid., pp. 195, 201.
words of a scholar immersed in the struggle he was describing, thus taking an unmistakable side with Florence’s cause of liberty and republicanism. These are the words and views, more specifically, of a scholar taking a clear stand on the complex politics of past and present history rather than a historian writing objectively as possible about the history of politics. The politics of history in Baron’s time, we argue, influenced the kind of the history of politics he wrote – a history of crisis and catastrophe. As Baron conceded in 1971, when “between 1935 and 1955 the ‘sfide’ [challenges] of varying ‘totalitarianisms’ to the older European traditions largely determined the political and intellectual climate, I began to interpret some basic aspect of the early-Renaissance conflicts on the eve of the nascent Quattrocento state-system in this light.”

(Emphasis added). In Baron’s mind, then, the politics of present history were inextricably linked to a politics of the past. Baron appropriated the early Florentine Renaissance “as a means of defense against the threats” which totalitarian regimes “posed to Western democracy and civilization.”

Those who knew Baron recall a stubborn man, “a scholar who remained obstinately attached to a bygone age, who tenaciously sought to preserve and consolidate his own identity with respect to a tradition and points of reference that became further and further removed by exile, the catastrophes of Nazism and of war, and then the passing of the years and the emergence of new generation.” He even seemed to some “essentially apolitical, in conformity with the German academic tradition.” On the contrary, we insist that he was a very political historian from the

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13 Kay Schiller, “Hans Baron’s Humanism,” p. 52.
14 Anthony Molho, “Hans Baron’s Crisis,” in David S. Peterson and Daniel E. Bornstein, eds. Florence and Beyond: Culture, Society and Politics in Renaissance Italy (Toronto: Center for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2008), p. 77. Even in one of the hardest times of his life in exile, without a job and with two young children in London, Baron wrote to Walter Goetz in 1935: “I am attached to my work and my spiritual world far too much to give it up without trying my utmost.” See Molho, “Hans Baron’s Crisis,” p. 80.
very beginning when he wrote his first research seminar paper in Leipzig in 1920. The heated politics of history, including especially the völkisch revolution in history and historiography, during the Weimar Republic were essential parts of his life from the outset not to mention the anti-Semitism and the rise of Nazism, which forced him to go into exile. In this regard, Baron’s Crisis is only the culmination of a long series of writings in which he wrote the history of politics of the past in light of the politics of history in his time. The Crisis thus reflects the crises in Baron’s time as well as the crises of his life.

When dealing with Baron’s life and thought, it is important to note as well that the experience of exilic displacement was complex and agonizing. “His work, though reflective of the cultural constructs of its time and place of origin (like the man itself), has something of the character of an isolate.” Further, it took him sixteen agonizing years to secure a permanent academic job, and even this was not a regular teaching position. “It is crucial to recognize that, unlike most refugee scholars in America, Baron never held a regular academic appointment.” Instead, he “pursued his research in the interstices of his responsibilities as a bibliographer at the Newberry Library, which in his day had not yet become the center of scholarly interchange into which it evolved.”

In what follows, we trace the development of Baron’s historical thought and imagination along several main stages in his life: his youthful discovery of the Italian Renaissance in Leipzig; his subsequent attack on German nationalistic, völkisch historiography, which stressed the

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16 Compared to Baron’s life in exile, the career in exile of Paul Oskar Kristeller (1905-1999), the important scholar of Renaissance Humanism, was a “success story” in terms of both scholarly recognition and creativity. In 1933 he moved to Italy, got a job as a lecturer in Pisa and completed two major studies in the Renaissance. In 1939, he fled Italy to the USA due to the enactment of Mussolini’s racial laws in August 1938. He then taught at Yale University and later moved to Columbia where he taught until his retirement in 1973. See Schiller, “Hans Baron’s Humanism,” p. 81. See also Kay Schiller, “Paul Oskar Kristeller, Ernst Cassirer and the ‘Humanistic Turn’ in American Emigration,” in David Kettler and Gerhard Lauer (eds.), Exile, Science and Bildung: The Contested Legacies of German Émigré Intellectuals (New York: Palgrave, 2005), p. 129.
creation of an original, autonomous German humanism without Italian influence; his epiphany at Florence in 1925 where he discovered civic humanism; and finally the close link he made during the early 1940’s, when Nazi barbarism was putting the whole of European civilization and the world as a whole at risk, between political crisis and the emergence of civic humanism. Each of these discoveries was based on a major turning point, or crisis, in Baron’s life and times.

It is crucially important to note that, for Baron, the word “crisis” signified a very precise phenomenon: “a turning-point in the growth of an organism, institutions, or people threatened by some weakness or disease, but finally regaining health and strength by successful resistance or adaptation to a vital challenge.” (443) Baron borrowed this type of historical thought, based on crisis, regeneration and salvation, from the German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), who asserted “that the most definitive innovations in history originate from the great experiences of danger.” Accordingly, Baron discerned two “crises” which took place in the early Italian Renaissance. One was:

in the political life of Italy [the Milanese challenge to Florentine independence], the other in the genesis of humanistic culture. When both came to a head about 1400, it was the revolutionary shift in Italian politics which deeply influenced the outcome of the cultural crisis. (443)

Many historians have invoked the theme of crisis in their studies, yet during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the focus of this theme was mostly “on critical moments when national character and institutions were thought to have been decisively shaped and tested.”

focus, in contrast, was on a single city-state, namely Florence, which, in his view, underwent crises of both politics and of culture simultaneously.

A note on terminology is in order. Throughout this study, we use the concept “exile” and not “migrant” in order to describe the fate of those German-speaking Jewish intellectuals who fled Germany from the fear, horrors and barbarism of Nazism. We therefore closely follow the terminology of the German-Jewish exile and philosopher Karl Löwith (1897-1973), who wrote: From historical point of view it is possible that the idea of the migrant is based on the European experience of émigrés during the French Revolution. However, we were no political refugees, as in our view we had been Germans for generations, while for the others we were suddenly Jews – German Jews who were going abroad only because Germany had deprived them of the conditions of their martial and moral existence. The German-Jewish emigrants were overwhelming exiles – that is to say, people who had been expelled against their expectations and wishes.20

The German-speaking intellectuals our study addresses were not political refugees but rather victims of a “movement [Nazism] that enlisted many of their erstwhile colleagues and almost all of their own students, who convicted them of guilt for the crisis [in German society], and who triumphantly proclaimed that their expulsion marked the end of the crisis.”21

In what follows, our goal is not to provide an analysis of the intellectual sources of Baron’s historical interpretation. This has been done in various excellent studies on Baron listed in the footnotes of the present study.22 Our aim is reveal the formation of Baron’s historical thought

20 Karl Löwith, My Life in Germany Before and After 1933 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994 [1986], p. 95. It should be noted that from “1933 Löwith was forced to consider an alternative that he had not sought: to be Jew, to give up his university post, to escape to Italy as an exile rather than an emigrant.” See Reinhart Koselleck, “Foreword” in Löwith, My Life in Germany Before and After 1933, p. x.
and imagination; or, more specifically, to understand the making of *The Crisis* in light of the crises and major political turning-points in Baron’s time as well as his own existential state of exilic displacement. Baron believed in the method of interpreting great turning-points in the history of thought against their social or political background. This is what we try to do with regard of Baron himself. He came of age intellectually between two German Revolutions, namely the Revolution of 1918-19 and the creation of the Weimar Republic and the Nazi Revolution of 1933 that established the Third Reich. He witnessed a crisis of German ideology\(^{23}\) – the triumph of *völkish* ideology with its overt racism and militant anti-Semitism, which signaled the turning away from the humanist and Enlightenment ideals of *Bildung* thus leading, among others, to the crisis of German Jewry. Baron was eighteen years old when the first German revolution took place and thirty-three years old when the second engulfed Germany. No wonder that the theme of crisis played such a seminal role in his work.

Baron’s exile was caused by major historical, political and cultural crises in Germany, and the beginning of his exilic displacement in America was marked by the outbreak of World War II. For Baron, all these crises were more than mere political upheavals and cultural transformations, but rather fearsome threats to his individual well-being. The crisis of German ideology, with the rise and triumph of *völkish* ideology and the turning away from humanist and Enlightenment ideas, the crisis of German Jewry and the struggle of European civilization against Nazi barbarism touched the very core of Baron’s existence. He lived, then, in what Eric Hobsbawm has called the “Age of Catastrophe”:

The decades from the outbreak of the First World War to the aftermath of the Second, was an Age of Catastrophe … For forty years it stumbles from one calamity to another. There were times when even intelligent conservatives would not take bets on its survival … While the economy tottered, the institutions of liberal democracy virtually disappeared between 1917 and 1942 from all but a fringe of Europe and parts of North America and Australia.²⁴

Baron’s *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*, in short, was a child of this catastrophic age beget as a fighting application of intellectual history that our study features among other examples and tries to contextualize. It reflected acutely our 20th century calamity by deliberately reading this catastrophe into an earlier 15th century crisis. Baron was a very “political” intellectual historian as we have said and will show in what follows. Werner Gundersheimer is quite correct in insisting that Baron therefore devoted himself to “infus[ing] vibrant new life” into the “dead soul” of Renaissance humanism though Baron infused more than just new life but something substantially new. He imagined an exceptional moment as much as he discovered an old one.

Finally, in reconstructing Baron’s *Crisis*, we have been handicapped by too little self-reflection on his part regarding the personal trauma of his exile. We have only rare glimpses scattered in his writings and letters about his ordeal in Germany prior to his exile and the hardships he suffered afterwards in exile in Italy, England and America. In this regard, Baron was of course not unique among fellow German-speaking Jewish intellectual exiles: “With very few exceptions, memoirs including those of scholars who eventually arrived in America, keep strangely silent about any incident of harassment suffered before an escape was managed, and

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identifying the specific events that crystallizes a refugee’s decision to leave Germany often is next to impossible.”

Hedgehogs and Foxes: Baron and the Early Italian Renaissance

Some day it will be seen that there was no active and critical historical research [in Germany] after 1933, that it indeed could not have existed, and that therefore the critical historical scholarship of Germany had survived solely in emigration.

Arthur Rosenberg, 1938

When defeated Germany turned into a monstrous tyranny, we became the guardians of German history; from 1933 to 1945, German history was being written here [the USA] and in England or not at all.

Fritz Stern, “German History in America, 1884-1984,” 1986

Hans Baron was an acclaimed German historian of the history of political thought and literature in the Italian Renaissance. Among his works are Calvin’s Staatsanschauung und das Konfessionalle Zeitalter (Calvin’s View of the State in the Confessional Period), 1924; Leonardo Bruni Aretino: Humanistisch-Philosophische Schriften (Leonardo Bruni Aretino: Humanist Philosophical Writings), 1928; The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny, 1955; Humanistic and Political Literature in Florence and Venice at the Beginning of the Quattrocento: Studies in Criticism and Chronology, 1955; From Petrarch to Bruni: Studies in Humanistic and Political Literature, 1968; Petrarch’s Secretum: Its Making and Its Meaning, 1985 and In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism: Essays on the Transition from Medieval to Modern Thought, 2 vols., 1988. At the time of his death, Baron had been working for almost twenty years on a biography of Leonardo

Bruni (c. 1369-1444), the famous Florentine humanist, historian and statesman, whom Baron discovered in 1925 and made the cornerstone of his interpretation of the early Italian Renaissance and civic humanism.

As can be clearly seen from his list of works, compared to fellow, German-Jewish exiled historians of the same generation like Felix Gilbert (1905-91), Gerhard Masur (1901-75) and Hajo Holborn (1902-69), Baron dedicated his life mostly to a single topic – the early Italian Renaissance. (Besides his youthful dissertation on Calvin, he also published some essays on other subjects in 1930s and 1940s in his desperate bid to find academic employment in Italy, England and America.26)

Baron wrote that his was an “agitated” life marked by “war, exile, migration, and repeated changes of the language.”27 Yet, this troubled life provided him with a tremendous sense of mission regarding his chosen historical field of study. As Baron admitted, most of his “publications have revolved around a common center” – Florentine humanism – and “their raison d’être has been a distinctive approach to the early Renaissance in Italy to which I have remained loyal even though it led to controversy with some of my seniors and coevals.”28 As will become clear in the following, Baron had something very important to prove in the history of the early Italian Renaissance; namely, its decisive significance to the “humanistic contribution to the rise of the modern world.” (461) More broadly, he devoted himself to showing that modern history since the Renaissance remained a narrative of humanist and enlightened ideas of republicanism and liberty rather than of racism, chauvinism, tyranny and despotism.

26 See Kay Schiller, “Made ‘Fit for America,’” p. 351.
28 Ibid., p. 183.
Again, when compared with fellow German-Jewish intellectual exiles like Paul Oskar Kristeller (1905-99), Hannah Arendt (1906-75), Leo Strauss (1899-1973) and Eric Auerbach (1892-1957), Baron mostly obsessed over a singular theme. As in the parable “the Hedgehog and the Fox,” Baron was the indefatigable Hedgehog who knew only one big thing and not the fox who knew many little things. Indeed, Baron opposed the now current fashion of “moving on” to some new or related topic, once a project was “finished.” Instead, “he carried on a series lifelong conversations – face-to-face, by letter, in print, and above all … in the more efficient theater of his own capacious intellect – with all his teachers, friends, junior colleagues, critics, and especially with the dead souls of the Italian humanists into whom it became his mission to infuse vibrant new life.”

Many have observed “the passionate intensity underlying [Baron’s] work” attested to by “two absolutist vocabularies.” The first consists of “scientism – mathematical precision, the language of proof or correctness.” The second absolute vocabulary consists of the use of “modern historical events” and comparing them “by analogy to late medieval circumstances in unequivocal, even absolutist, terms.” Baron thus compared Duke of Milan Gian Galeazzo Visconti with Napoleon and Hitler, and boldly claimed that this is “the only perspective” according to which we ought to construct the Florentine crisis of 1402 (40). In other words, the only alternative to republican civic virtues was Gian Galeazzo, Napoleon and Hitler’s “tyranny.” Indeed tyranny is a crucially important term for Baron yet it “loses any precise significance and

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30 Gundersheimer, “Hans Baron’s Renaissance Humanism,” p. 142. Further, according to Gundersheimer: “To my knowledge, he never took any of his (quite learned, perceptive, and even sympathetic) critics seriously. ‘Controversy? Controversy? There is no controversy!’ he indignantly told me one day, when I referred to some of the issues that had been raised. An amazing man, totally focused on the work, and in some sense a person of another time.” Gundersheimer in a personal letter to the authors.
becomes an all-purpose pejorative synonym for monarchical regimes of various types.” The effect of this absolutist rhetoric on Baron’s students was powerful: “Larger and more powerful than a baron, we might think of him as a prince of Renaissance studies and of ourselves as in some measure his subjects.”

In contrast to common assumptions about Baron, he did not retreat to some ivory tower, removed from the acute problems and pressing anxieties of his time. One main reason is because during the Weimar republic, the “intellectual climate was obviously not one in which serene historiography, aloof from political struggle, could flourish; rather, the opposite was the case.” Baron’s historical approach “clearly fused scholarly ambitions and political passions of a high order.” As one of Baron’s students remarked: it became “natural for him to think of scholarship as a kind of battlefield, not unlike the rough, contested terrain which separated the Milanese from the Florentines.” He tended describe certain colleagues as “all[ies]” in “what must have felt like an endless Kulturkampf.”

In the first 1955 edition of The Crisis, Baron discussed the immediate circumstances in which he wrote it, which clearly explains its unique form and content. He notes that it took him “ten years of work on this book,” or from 1942 to 1952. More specifically, he acknowledges that he developed The Crisis’ central themes during the first half of the 1940s: “The sections dealing with the crisis in politics and the changes in political and historical thought (Parts I, II, and portions of Part V) originated in 1942-1945.” These important parts deal with the “historical analysis” of his study. In other words, he began with the all-embracing thesis of crisis-history as a unique mode of historical thought. War and exile thus crucially informed the formation of

Baron’s thesis of crisis-history. Baron next devoted 1945-1948 while in Princeton correcting “the errors in the accepted chronology of many writings of the period around 1400.” In that period, he “wrote most of the critical and philological sections” on “Leonardo Bruni’s early Humanism.” Baron then moved to the last phase, integrating “the results of these critical investigations with the parts of the historical analysis already worked out.” This final period took place in Chicago, after Baron finally found a permanent academic job as bibliographer and research associate at the Newberry Library in Chicago in 1949. This last part took place “from late 1949 until the submission of the manuscript to the Princeton University Press early in 1952.”34

Although Baron claimed that he worked on The Crisis ten years, one cannot ignore the fact that he began conceiving the book’s central theme during the decline and fall of the Weimar Republic and the triumph of Nazism and World War II. The actual writing The Crisis originated in 1942-45, but its sources in terms of concepts and ideas went back to the 1920s, especially the concept of civic humanism. For in Baron’s mind, the politics of history at the present were always inextricably linked to the history of politics of the past. And the lessons he had learnt during the 1920s and 1930s crucially influenced his work. Indeed, the concept of the crisis of the early Italian Renaissance finally matured in his thinking only in the wake of World War II. As Baron admitted, “the ‘sfide’ [challenges] of varying ‘totalitarianisms’ to the older European traditions largely determined the political and intellectual climate,” in which he wrote and that he began interpreting the Early Italian Renaissance, including especially its invention of civic humanism “in this light” [emphasis added].35 The genesis The Crisis, as will be made clear in the following, went back to the stormy years of the Weimar Republic and its fierce battles over the

meaning and significance of German history. This period was crucial in forming Baron’s historical consciousness and imagination. Baron, of course, had a special interest in the heated historical controversies during the Weimar Republic since he was a Jew and many of the nationalist and völkish ideologies of history were based on overt racism and militant anti-Semitism.

An examination of Baron’s *Crisis* reveals the close proximity between history, culture and politics. Baron claimed that an important political crisis, the imperialistic aspirations of the “the tyrant of Lombardy,” the Duke of Milan Gian Galeazzo Visconti, led to the emergence of new Florentine consciousness of history and the meaning and significance of its republican ideals: “The genesis of Florentine historical thought was decided by the political and military events of a very few years, essentially the brief climatic period of 1400-1402, which ended with Giangaleazzo’s death.” Baron’s main task was accordingly to trace “the response of early Renaissance thought to the challenge of a political crisis.” In his historical explanation, novel “political situations” tend to elicit new “literary products, or influenced their composition.” He therefore called on political historians to use literary studies and to combine “methods of different branches of scholarship.” Based on the lessons he had learnt from his teacher Walter Goetz (1867-1958), who taught him “that history should be a study of both politics and culture,” Baron claimed that reluctance “among political historians to follow lessons to be learned from literary studies,” on the one hand, and “too little interest on the part of literary scholars in the impact of socio-political developments, still prevent us” from “visualizing the

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39 Baron, the dedication to the first edition of *The Crisis* (1955), p. vi.
mutual dependence of politics and culture.”

This close examination of both politics and culture constituted the core of The Crisis. His study aimed to show “how superficial our knowledge of the growth of Humanism remains until it is placed in the framework of political writing and thought preceding, and contemporary with, the literary work of the humanists.” (448)

But Baron was interested in far more than merely contextualizing the interrelationship between politics and culture in early fifteenth century Florence. Contextualization was invariably, in part, selectively emphasizing past occurrences and philosophical themes, which we deem significant. Historical interpretation is always value laden. As Baron writes in the “Epilogue” to The Crisis:

Any comparative historical appraisal is bound to be qualitative; that is, its validity depends on what value we ascribe to the developments which we compare. If we can make one of the groups or movements of the Renaissance better understood and, in consequence, better appreciated, a certain shift of emphasis will be in order. This is all we can hope for, and this has been attempted for early Renaissance Florence in the present work.” (456).

The Crisis read Renaissance Italy in the evaluative light of the crises of Weimar history, culture and ideology. It addressed not only the early Renaissance in Italy but also Germany and the civilization of Europe as a whole during the first half the twentieth century. History “bears the marks of the life of those who write it” and “scholarship in the human sciences is inextricably linked to the existential preconditions of the scholar at work.”

In this sense Baron did not so much as invent the crisis of the early Italian Renaissance as he imposed the terms of the crises of German ideology, of German Jewry and of European civilization as a whole as well as his own


\[41\] Schiller, “Paul Oskar Kristeller, Ernst Cassirer and the ‘Humanistic Turn’ in American Emigration,” p. 125.
existential exilic crisis, on the early Italian Renaissance and the struggles of the Florentine Republic.

Seen in the broad context of German and Western civilization in crisis, it is worth comparing Baron’s work to that of other prominent, German-speaking, Jewish émigrés because doing so reveals his unique mode of historical explanation. First, while Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, Karl Popper (1902-94), and others searched for the ideological “origins” and the intellectual “sources” of Nazism, fascism and totalitarianism, Baron instead focused on the contribution of Renaissance humanism to the best in modernity. And in contrast to philosopher-sociologists Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) and Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969) who wrote *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) in order “to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism,”42 Baron aimed to trace the rise of civic humanism in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, based on the revival of classical ideas, and its continuing positive impact on modernity. He thus marshaled the world of early Italian Renaissance humanism against the barbarism of Nazism and Hitlerism. Baron believed, like Bruni in the past and like his famous teacher and later colleague at the University of Berlin, Werner Jaeger (1888-1961), that antiquity was not “a golden age never again to be realized, but an exemplary parallel to the present,” (460-1), an age to be imitated and emulated.

More importantly, we need to keep in mind that Baron was part of a large group of German-Jewish exiled *Bildungsbürgertum* [middle-class cultured intellectuals] – Ernst Kantorowicz (1895-1963), Paul Kristeller, Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945) and others – who invoked the values of Renaissance humanism against the horrors of Nazism. The Renaissance served them as a kind of

remedy or “learned counter-world (gelehrte Gegenwelt)” to the nihilism and cultural destruction of modern industrial society as well as the collapse of traditional religious and moral standards.\textsuperscript{43}

Life and Study in Weimar Germany

The decades from the outbreak of the First World War to the aftermath of the Second, was an Age of Catastrophe … For forty years it stumbles from one calamity to another. There were times when even intelligent conservatives would not take bets on its survival.


Nobody who lived in Germany in the twenties and early thirties could escape politics.

Felix Gilbert, \textit{A European Past: Memoirs 1905-1945}

We were highly politicized – not perhaps surprisingly since politics had wrenched our lives out of their course – and tended to be contemptuous of the philistines who did not think politics the most important thing in their lives.


Baron was born in Berlin in 1900, the son of a Jewish physician. After finishing his education at the Leibniz-Gymnasium in Berlin, he studied for two years at Friedrich-Wilhelms Universität, Berlin. There, Baron joined a group of Jewish students, born at the turn of the twentieth century, including Gerhard Masur, Hajo Holborn, Hans Rosenberg (1904-88) and Felix Gilbert to name only a few. They were fortunate enough not to serve in the bloody battles of World War I – hence they did not belong to the so-called \textit{Frontkämpfegeneration} – where millions of young men “walked eye-deep in hell / believing in old men’s lies,” in Ezra Pound’s words,\textsuperscript{44} and everyone heard, as e. e. cummings wrote, “death’s clever enormous voice” that left “all the silence filled with vivid noiseless boys.”\textsuperscript{45} All began their studies in Berlin under Ernst Troeltsch

\textsuperscript{43} Kay Schiller in a personal letter to the authors.


(1865–1923), Max Lenz (1850-1932) and Friedrich Meinecke (1862–1954). Yet all of them suffered from the trauma of their times nonetheless. Felix Gilbert wrote that for his generation:

“War, revolution, and social turmoil, in an interlocking chain, shaped the crucial years” of “youth.” These were “turbulent years of defeat, revolution, civil war, and inflation,” hence, those who had “grown up before 1914” had “little belief in the duration of stability.”

Generally, the dominant generational experience for this group was the “collapse of the prewar bourgeois social order, which had been – or at least had seemed to be – a solid basis for an enlightened, liberal sophisticated intellectual culture, found in particular among the educated Protestant and Jewish elites.” More specifically, these young and talented Jewish students “felt a deep sense of insecurity now that traditional German political culture was in upheaval and the social fabric was threatened from both the extreme left and right.” No wonder that for all of them, “history came to be seen as a mode of thought which could provide a new sense of identity and continuity in a time of social upheaval and social crisis.” They all turned to the humanistic and enlightened ideals of Western civilization in order to find assurance and compensation for their shattered identity.

This group of young Jewish students also experienced firsthand the rising tide of racism and anti-Semitism in Germany at the beginning of the century, which strove to exclude Jews from German cultural life. After Albert Einstein returned to Germany in 1914, he was astonished to see “worthy Jews basely caricatured and the sight made my heart bleed. I saw how schools, comic papers, and innumerable other forces of the Gentile majority undermined the confidence

48 Mommsen, “German Historiography during the Weimar Republic and the Émigré Historians,” p. 53.
49 Paul Oskar Kristeller, the important scholar of Renaissance humanism, admitted that Platonism was a philosophia perennis (eternal philosophy) for him and that “this tradition has been a rock of intellectual and moral support” throughout his life. See Schiller, “Paul Oskar Kristeller, Ernst Cassirer and the ‘Humanistic Turn’ in American Emigration,” p. 126.
of even the best of my fellow Jews.”

During the Weimar Republic, “anti-Semitism was even more precocious during the years of hyperinflation between 1919 and 1923 than in 1933, the year Hitler finally came to power.” World War I and the Treaty of Versailles, 1919, “imposed new strictures upon Germany historical scholarship and led to a new retreat to a nationalist position.” German historians of the 1920s saw their main task as justifying “the country’s historical path since Bismarck, the rejection of Germany’s war guilt – in short in defense of Germany’s ‘special path’” in history, or “the Sonderweg.” Further, the 1920s witnessed “the Volkish revolution” in German history and historiography, which “became an anti-Jewish revolution.” Volkish ideology existed, of course, before the Great War, “but afterward it was suddenly transformed into a politically effective system of thought,” and it was “after the war that the ideology acquired a mass base.” This was also visibly apparent in the historical profession: “The volkish forces rapidly increased their influence among the younger nationalists [historians] during the 1920’s.”

Volksgeschichte provided an alternative to the established German historiography. “For it, the center of history was the Volk, conceived not as a people in a democratic sense but as an ethnic community in biological, racist terms,” emphasizing moreover “the cultural and racial superiority of the Germans over all other ethnic groups.” Volksgeschichte thus served as a means of ethnic struggle, as a “kämpfende Wissenschaft or a fighting science.”

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52 Ernst Schulin, “German and American Historiography in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” in *An Interrupted Past*, eds. Lehmann and Sheehan, p. 19.
Jew had become a principle figure in Volkish and in much of conservative thought.”56 “Die Juden sind unser Unglück!” (“The Jews are our misfortune!”). This phrase, coined in 1879 by Heinrich von Treitschke, later appeared as the motto in big bold letters at the bottom of the front page of each issue of the anti-Semitic Nazi weekly, Der Stürmer (“The Attacker”), beginning with its first edition in 1923. völkish ideology, based on Blutsgemeinschaft (community of blood), Volksseele (national soul) and Volksgeist (national spirit), thus greatly impacted German politics and culture as well as German history and historiography during the Weimar Republic.57 Another important dimension of völkish ideology of history was “the distinction between Culture and Civilization.” Its adherents glorified volkish “Culture” and rejected the concept of Western “Civilization.”58 Present politics of history during the Weimar Republic thus determined the history of politics of the past.

It was during this time that young Baron left Berlin to study for two semesters (1920-21) with the medievalist and cultural historian Walter Goetz at the University of Leipzig.59 This sojourn at Leipzig proved to be one of the most crucial and fruitful decisions affecting the development of Baron’s thinking. Goetz was one of the most influential historians of the Weimar Republic, along with Friedrich Meinecke, Hans Delbrück (1848-1929), Otto Hintze (1861-1940) and other distinguished scholars who were trained in the nineteenth century and “stood in the classical national tradition” of German “historiography.”60 As for Goetz, he was very much involved in politics and his work “was informed by lively social interests and militant democratic politics.”61

Little wonder that shortly after “the worker’s and soldiers’ councils seized power” in Leipzig

57 For a recent important literary description of German anti-Semitism before and during World War II, see Jonathan Littell, The Kindly Ones (French: Les Bienveillantes), 2006.
59 Schiller, “Hans Baron’s Humanism,” p. 53.
during the revolution of 1918-19, Goetz became the head of “a citizens’ committee.” Goetz was a liberal, republican member of the German Democratic Party (DDP) and a supporter, albeit critical, of the Weimar Republic. He belonged to the group “Vernunftrepublikaner”—republicans based on reason, in contrast to Herzensrepublikaner—republicans by heart. While the first “accepted the new political conditions in Weimar without enthusiasm but as a matter of fact” and “decided to work on this new basis, since there seemed to be no reasonable alternative,” the later were “mostly younger and often Jewish” and accordingly “remained completely marginal in the [historical] profession.” Between the years 1920 to 1928 Goetz, was one of the DDP’s deputies in the Reichstag. With the Nazi revolution of 1933, and given his liberal and republican views, Goetz was forced to retire “because he had represented a liberal party in the Reichstag.”

Goetz, moreover, was an important “progressive” historian who played a central role in the struggles within the German historical profession regarding the direction of German history and historiography during the Weimar Republic. More specifically, Goetz “set out to refute by historical evidence the belief that there existed some ongoing essence of the German Volk.” He fought against those “who dream of an enclosed state based on German culture,” demonstrating historically and culturally that “contemporary Germans were a mixture of many races.” Accordingly, he emphasized “the multiplicity of German culture and the impossibility of

63 Schiller, “Hans Baron’s Humanism,” p. 57.
64 Fubini, “Renaissance Historian,” p. 545.
65 Mommsen, “German Historiography during the Weimar Republic and the Émigré Historians,” p. 38.
achieving some unitary definition thereof and pointed out the conceptual difficulties of notions such as *Volkskulture*, or *Volkstum*, or *Volksgeist.*”

It should come of no surprise that Goetz also became associated with a distinguished group of progressive-minded historians from America and the Continent, such as the American historian James Shotwell (1874-1965), the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne (1862-1935) and the French historian Lucien Febvre (1878–1956), who sought in the midst the ruins of European culture after 1918, to fashion a de-nationalized “Republic of Letters” through new international journals, collaborative encyclopedias and professional exchange organizations. These efforts were closely tied up with such seminal experiments as the *Annales* movement (1929) and the famous *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1930).

German historical scholarship in the 1920s and 1930s “reflected the structural problems of the [Weimar] Republic as a whole. The majority of historians sided politically with the enemies of the Republic, or were at best ‘republicans of the head and not of the heart’ (*Vernunftrepublikaner*).” Fierce “attempts to ‘revise’ the Treaty of Versailles, criticism of democracy, and distance from if not overt hostility to the [Weimar] constitution characterized scholarly works.” A “new ‘völkisch’ conception of history” gained momentum whose advocates called for a new “political history of the folk,” exhorting their colleagues “to be political historians by adapting their research and teaching ‘incessantly and in all situations to the political demands of [their] *Volk*.”” The heated politics of history during the Weimar Republic influenced the history of politics historians were expected to write, namely political-folk history (*politische Volksgeschichte*). As we shall see later, Baron wrote against this political-folk history,

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69 Muller, *The Other God that Failed*, p. 98.
70 Winfried Schulze, “German Historiography from 1930s to the 1950s,” in *Paths of Continuity: Central European Historiography from the 1930s to the 1950s*, eds. Hartmut Lehmann and James Van Horn Melton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 21-3.
yet he too retained the belief in writing political history according to present political aims and goals, or the view of history as a kämpfende Wissenschaft based on endless Kulturkampf.

The waves of nationalist thinking which swept through the German historical profession during the First World War reached “a new peak” during the Weimar Republic, and “those who preached moderation were initially, at least, only a small group.” One of them was the progressive historian Goetz.71 Along with very few others, Goetz stood against the overwhelming number of historians, including especially conservative nationalist historians and völkisch historians closer to Nazi ideology, who opposed the Weimar Republic.72 Most historians had “already accepted so much of the völkisch and anti-democratic thought” that they were able “to make peace” with the Nazi regime “rather easily.”73 Hence the “sharp division that supposedly existed between the bulk of traditional scholars and Volkshistoriker cannot be sustained,” and there was no “deep division between mainline and völkisch historians.”74 Most historians endorsed the views of authoritarian nationalism and hence later on cooperated with the Nazis after 1933. As Hans Rothfels (1891-1976) was to write: “Without doubt, the fierce opposition of many historians toward the republican-democratic state and the parliamentary system represented a point of affinity with National Socialist propaganda.”75 The apologetic protestations of German historians that “except of a handful of fanatics, German historians during the Nazi years remained loyal to the professional ethos of scholar objectivity” is now

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75 Hans Rothfels as cited by Schulze, “German Historiography from 1930s to the 1950s,” p, 29.
widely accepted as false. It is not so much that German historians “supported the Nazis but that they acquiesced and that their political biases undermined Weimar democracy.”

Goetz was among those rare historians who did not cooperate with the Nazi and therefore was effectively silenced in 1933. Already in 1924, he criticized fellow historians, claiming that the “test of the historian is not cultivation of piety for misunderstood past, but the pitiless exploration of the truth.” What Germany most needs is “clarity about itself,” yet German historians are failing to provide it. Castigating fellow historians, he proclaimed: “Preceptors of the nation! Do you really think that you are fulfilling an educational task if you command history to stop in its course and return to an old condition?” The German tradition of historical writing “had lost the ability to approach objectively the political realities of the post-1918 period.”

Baron did his first work on the Italian Renaissance and humanism in Goetz’s research seminar in Leipzig in 1920. Later, he recalled that this seminar first introduced him to the study of Renaissance humanism, a subject which was to remain his lifelong scholarly preoccupation. Baron never explained why he turned to this subject, but it seems clear that Goetz’s views and seminar provided him with the atmosphere and intellectual support for developing his attacks on the then prevailing nationalistic and völkisch interpretation of history, especially with regard to the development of humanism in Germany. In a revealing statement, which exposed his earliest involvement in the politics of history of his time, young Baron wrote that in Goetz’s seminar, he “came upon the prevailing [nationalist and völkisch] theories of those years, according to which Humanism north of the Alps, and in particular in Germany, developed from a native, late

77 Iggers, book review of Walter Frank Und Sein Reichsinstitut Für Geschichte Des Neuen Deutschland, p. 188.
medieval background essentially independent of any – at least and salutary – influence from the south,” namely, Italy.\textsuperscript{82}

In Goetz’s seminar, then, Baron found space for scrutinizing and rejecting nationalistic and \textit{völkisch} theories of German history. He was thus able to begin forming his “own opinion,” concluding that all the current theories were to a degree prejudiced and that the change in the intellectual climate in the rest of Europe would not have been possible without the changes in interest, education, and thought discernible in Italy during the Quattrocento. That seminar was held in 1920, and a caustic critic may say that all my later studies have been an effort to prove that my first impression was correct.\textsuperscript{83}

Baron’s rejection of the nationalization of German history, or its nationalistic and \textit{völkisch} interpretation, not only attests to his increasing historical consciousness but also recalls Jacob Burckhardt’s prophetic sarcastic remark in 1872 that one would only have to wait for a few years “until the whole of world history beginning with Adam would be coated with German triumphalism.”\textsuperscript{84} From an early age, then, the politics of history in Baron’s time crucially shaped the content and form of the history he wrote about.

As we have been suggesting, Baron’s views are not hard to understand given the powerful role of nationalistic and \textit{völkisch} thinking in German historiography at that time. In Germany the idea of national identity was closely associated with the idea of ethnicity. In particular, Johann Gottfried Herder’s ideas of the \textit{Volk} (people) forming a \textit{Blutgemeinschaft} (community of

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., p. 183. For example, Ludwig Woltmann (1871-1907), the father of political anthropology in Germany, published in 1905 his book \textit{The Germans and the Italian Renaissance}, in which he claimed that the outstanding men of the Renaissance, such as Dante and Michelangelo, were descendent of the Germanic tribes and not of the Romans. See, Sheila Faith Weiss, \textit{Race, Hygiene and National Efficiency: The Eugenics of Wilhelm Schallmayer} (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987), p. 96.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., p. 183.

blood), and the *Volksseele* (national soul) and the *Volksgeist* (national spirit) forming a specific historical individuality had enormous influence on subsequent generations of German historians. When, during the Weimar Republic, attempts were made to define the German nation politically rather than ethnically, many historians objected. The medievalist Johannes Haller (1865-1947), an old warhorse of German national historiography, claimed in 1923 that a “six-hundred-year old past which has left deep marks in the life of a people simply cannot be erased by parliamentary decree.”

He was a German nationalist for whom *Kulturkampf* never ended and was not alone in his views. In 1924, Georg von Below (1858-1927) provided a like-minded overview of the history of German historiography:

We are unable to imagine culture without declaring our commitment to our *Volkstum*. Unlike Enlightenment thinkers, we do not believe either in natural law or in universal constitutional values … historians in Germany have worked hard to exclude such alien French radicalism from German blood. Romanticism gave to us an understanding of the *Volksgeist* and helped us to build the German nation. Now [during the Weimar republic] the nation is dejected. We have been robbed of our German freedom. German historiography of the good old kind will once again encourage and support the rebuilding of our nation.  

In light of these views, when the democratic revolution of 1918-19 swept away the German monarchy, “the strength of anti-revolutionary sentiment in the overwhelming majority of German historians was impressively confirmed. Almost to a man, they condemned the German revolution and many refused to accept the republican state which emerged from it.”

Like the historians in Imperial Germany before them, they were “committed to the national paradigm;”

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hence they were very “often imperialist, anti-democratic and anti-parliamentary as well as anti-pluralist and anti-socialist.” Walter Goetz, in contrast, was among the very few calling for “a revision of the national tradition in German historiography.” Goetz was the only historian of stature “who was openly exposed on the moderate political left.” He was “the spokesman” of a small group of “progressive historians” who after 1918 “demanded a decisive break with the authoritarian traditions of German historiography and a fundamental reorientation of German historiography,” calling on his fellow historians to “stop praising prewar conditions and blaming those who had, allegedly, arbitrarily destroyed them; instead they ought to the tell the public how Germany had gone wrong in the past.” Evidently, such a plea of the progressive historians for the reorientation of German history and historiography provoked violent opposition from the nationalist historians who adopted völkische arguments and combined them with a grossdeutsch position. Among those who rejected the views of Goetz and other progressive historians was Below, who argued that “political necessities required remaining faithful to the well-established tenets of German historiography” based on “the principles of German Folkdom and German freedom, which contrasted sharply with West European individualism and the egalitarian principles of the Enlightenment.”

The “overwhelming anti-republicanism” among German historians during the Weimar Republic “was underpinned by the theory of German Sonderweg,” or Germany’s “special path” in history, according to which the “German nation-state was different from and superior to the West European nation-states on several accounts,” most importantly in terms of “the Prussian

89 Kater, “Refugee Historians in America,” p. 79.
idea of the state standing above society and party politics.”  

An important example of this trend is Gerhard Ritter’s influential 1940 *Machtstaat und Utopia* (state built on power and utopia), which was “an elaborate justification of the German path” and “placed state authority and military needs higher than liberal principles.”  

Ritter (1888-1967), like so many colleagues, “justified the expansionist eastward aims of the Nazis by seeking to demonstrate the cultural superiority of Germans over Slavs.”  

A product of Wilhelmine Germany with its Prussian traditions, Ritter claimed the nation is a living organism and hence the state had a right to life, namely, territorial expansion.

Goetz’s rejection of the national and *völkisch* paradigm of German history and historiography, along with its imperialist, anti-democratic, anti-parliamentary, anti-pluralist and anti-socialist implications, and his call for revising the national tradition in German historiography, influenced enormously Baron’s rejection in the early 1920s of the nationalistic origins and understanding of German humanism. As a tribute to Goetz’s crucial influence, Baron dedicated the first 1955 edition of *The Crisis* to Goetz on the occasion of his 87th birthday.  

Goetz, it should be noted, was one of very few German scholars (perhaps the only one) with whom Baron resumed correspondence following World War II.  

Goetz may well have advised Baron early on that “in the Florence of the fifteenth century, original historical thinking developed from the ‘connection between the writing of history and political activity.’” Baron would subsequently proceed to treat the humanist Leonardo Bruni as “the most prominent exponent of the fruitful union between the writing of history and activity in the service of the city-state” of Florence.

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93 Mommsen, “German Historiography during the Weimar Republic and the Émigré Historians,” p. 37.
95 Baron, the dedication to the first edition of *The Crisis* (1955), p. vi.
96 Anthony Molho in a personal letter to the authors.
When Baron returned to Berlin in 1921, his scholarly interests had greatly shifted. He studied now with Ernst Troeltsch at the University of Berlin. Troeltsch, Professor of Philosophy, also greatly influenced young Baron’s career and the formation of his historical understanding. From Troeltsch, Baron received not only direct advice about the theme of his dissertation, Calvinism and the Anglo-Saxon origins of modern republicanism, but “probably also a more direct political orientation.” 98 A liberal Protestant theologian, Troeltsch made major scholarly contributions to theology, social ethics, philosophy of religion, philosophy of history, and sociology of religion. More specifically, he was deeply preoccupied with the advent of modern civilization and its implications for Christianity, as can be seen for example in his masterpiece *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches* (1912). However, during the early years of the twentieth century, Troeltsch became increasingly concerned with the present condition and future prospects of Western civilization. In contrast to the optimism of many of his contemporary liberal Protestant thinkers, who believed in the progress of Western civilization, Troeltsch became pessimistic about its future. In 1906, he expressed his disillusion most clearly:

Are the actual circumstances propitious for the concept liberty? This is doubtful. Our economic progress is bringing us closer to a new servitude, and our great military and administrative apparatuses, in spite of the existence of a parliament, are certainly not favorable to the spirit of liberty. 99

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Troeltsch lived to see his worst fears confirmed in the carnage of trench warfare of World War I and in Germany’s halting attempts to establish a new political settlement in the form of the Weimar Republic following World War I.\textsuperscript{100}

Troeltsch was also very politically active. In 1918, he had “co-founded the German Democratic Party” (DDP) “and represented it for two years in the Prussian constitutional assembly.”\textsuperscript{101} Earlier during his years in Heidelberg (1894-1915), he had been a member of the Baden Upper House. Later, in Berlin, Troeltsch was a member of the Prussian Landtag (the provincial legislature), and, for a number of years, parliamentary secretary of state in the Prussian Ministry. As was the case with other prominent figures in Germany – such as the sociologist and political economist Max Weber (1864-1920), the liberal historian Friedrich Meinecke, the Jewish industrialist, politician, writer, and statesman Walther Rathenau (1867–1922), and the novelist Thomas Mann (1875 –1955) – Troeltsch was among those of high rank who, “even though raised on the Wilhelmine ideals of national pride and the politics of might, began to reexamine their traditional conceptions under the impact of war and defeat and professed their loyalty to the new [Weimar] republic as the best hope for national renewal and the restoration of the social order.” Hence, they were called in Meinecke’s words “‘\textit{Vernunftrepublikaner}’ – republicans based on reason.”\textsuperscript{102} As for Troeltsch, he “energetically urged upon his countrymen the need to turn to Anglo-Saxon and American constitutional tradition along the lines he had already put forward in his theological and sociological analysis of ‘the significance of Protestantism in the formation of the modern world,’” which served as the

\textsuperscript{100} See “Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923),” in \textit{Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Western Theology} at http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/bce/troeltsch.htm

\textsuperscript{101} Schiller, “Hans Baron’s Humanism,” p. 58.

\textsuperscript{102} Fubini, “Renaissance Historian,” p. 545; Schiller, “Hans Baron’s Humanism,” p. 57.
inspiration of Baron’s dissertation on Calvin. As early as 1919, Troeltsch published a famous series of essays, *Deutschland und Westeuropa*, in which he “pleaded for a symbiosis of the German and the West European intellectual traditions.” And in 1923, the year of his death, he advocated a “cultural synthesis” which would combine “the valid aspects of both the West European and German traditions.” Yet, although Troeltsch’s call had little effect, his ideas, Western orientation (*Westorientierung*) and enthusiasm for republicanism had a crucial effect on his student, Baron.

Troeltsch died suddenly in 1923 compelling Baron to complete his Ph. D. dissertation under Friedrich Meinecke. He published it in 1924 as *Calvin’s View of the State in the Confessional Period* (*Calvin Staatsanschauung und das konfessionelle Zeitalter*). It closely followed a line of interpretation which Troeltsch had outlined in *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*. Indeed, Troeltsch’s search for “the significance of Protestantism in the formation of the modern world” was a great “inspiration for Baron’s dissertation.” According to Baron’s own words, Troeltsch’s work provided “an accurate consideration of the development of European political concepts from the waning of the Middle Ages to the modern period.” It encouraged him to seek in Calvin’s writings “the seeds of republican political ideas,” namely, “the assertion of ‘a republican liberty, in contrast to hereditary monarchical tyranny.’” The origins of the modern world and republicanism and liberty and tyranny, which played such an important role in *The Crisis*, were already on Baron’s mind during the 1920s. However, in contrast to Troeltsch who dated “the beginning of the modern period from the Enlightenment,” because “through it is first established an autonomous secular culture in contrast to one that is theologically based and

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104 Mommsen, “German Historiography during the Weimar Republic and the Émigré Historians,” p. 37.
105 Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins*, p. 397.
107 Ibid., pp. 547-8.
controlled.” Baron rather believed modernity began with the early Italian Renaissance. On the other hand, Baron clearly followed Troeltsch’s philosophy of history which stressed that history “required us to come to grip with the idea of an abiding system of values which shall give us our standards, even though every such system seems always to be undermined and washed away” by “the immense stream of historical life.” Troeltsch firmly believed that the impasse reached during his time, exemplified by the horrors of World War I and its subsequent social and political upheavals, demanded “a renovation of European idea of humanity.” Hence, he called for “deepening the spiritual cultural contents which the history of the West has brought us,” which Baron would soon respond to in his own studies.

According to Otto Hintze, Troeltsch’s colleague in Berlin, Troeltsch believed “that world history had rational meaning and was motivated by an invincible ethical driving force.” This view influenced Baron’s thinking as we will see later. Further, Troeltsch like Meinecke stressed that history is “a real and meaningful flow of events which could be grasped only in its full, living reality.” For Troeltsch, “history is no longer merely one way of looking at things” but “the basis of all thought about values and norms.” History had meaning because “real values manifest themselves in history.” And since “the most comprehensive unity of meaning we know is a culture,” Troeltsch believed that “there can only be the history of individual cultures such as that of Western Civilization.” His geographical unit of historical inquiry then was the whole history of the West and not one nation or single Volk’s history. Troeltsch was thoroughly Western oriented (Westorientierte).

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We should note that Troeltsch’s history of Europeanism was also directed against the historian and philosopher Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* (1918-23). In contrast to Spengler’s book, which was deeply pessimistic regarding the future of European civilization, Troeltsch believed that Western civilization embodied “the traditions of rationality, humanity, and liberality through which the modern world can gain new strength and new harmony.” No wonder that for him Spengler’s book was “an invitation to return to barbarism by sacrificing the rational and scholarly ideas of the West.”

Meinecke too, as we have already suggested, importantly influenced the development of Baron’s intellectual life. This towering figure of German history of his generation “had shaken up German intellectual historical scholarship by emphasizing the relations among intellectual movements, political thought, and political actions,” which were all the things Baron later addressed in *The Crisis*. Further, and according to his student Felix Gilbert, Meinecke, “was a defender of the [Weimar] republic.” He was, in his own words, “a republican by reason” – ‘*Vernunftrepublikaner*’ – and the “republic seemed to him the appropriate form of government after World War I.” No wonder that because of Meinecke’s presence and liberal views, “the historical seminar of the University of Berlin was the center of gravity for history students with a democratic and intellectually adventurous outlook.”

Among them was Hans Baron. As Gilbert as recalled, “Life at that time, and particularly life at the University of Berlin, was very much politicized.” Likewise, the exiled Austrian-Jewish economic and social historian Sidney Pollard (1925-1998) remembered: “We were highly politicized – not perhaps surprisingly since

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politics had wrenched our lives out of their course – and tended to be contemptuous of the philistines who did not think politics the most important thing in their lives.”

The 1920s were Baron’s formative years as an historian, not only because of the Revolution of 1918-19, the creation of the Weimar Republic and the rising tide of völkish ideology, racism and anti-Semitism, but also because of the prominent scholars he worked with who shaped his overall thinking, influenced the broad horizons of his work as well its content and form and stimulated his historical thought and imagination. Many of them were liberals and republicans who supported the Weimar Republic. Young Baron was surrounded and guided by influential teachers who took an active part in the stormy political life of the Weimar years. Both Goetz and Troeltsch were “passionately adversaries of racial antisemitism” and “saw their respective professorships in philosophy at Berlin and history at Leipzig as public and political offices.”

Approaching history as a means of understanding their own times, both strongly believed that the primary purpose of history was the practical task of clarifying the problems of the present. History and politics were inextricably interwoven for both. Baron clearly carried their agenda into his work, especially The Crisis. Indeed, according to Felix Gilbert, nobody “who lived in Germany in the twenties and early thirties could escape politics.” And Baron was no exception:

[A]t the advent of the Weimar republic it is likely that he [Baron] participated in the fervent climate of political debates, which must have been especially heated in the Berlin circle of such a perceptive and sensitive teacher as Ernst Troeltsch. From the latter he received not only a direct advice for the subject of his dissertation (which involved delicate, relevant themes such as

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115 Schiller, “Hans Baron’s Humanism,” p. 58.
116 Gilbert, A European Past, p. 77.
Calvinist and Anglo Saxon origins of modern republicanism, the conservatism of the dominant Lutheran church, and the sociological interpretation of religions) but probably also a more direct political orientation.\textsuperscript{117}

Life and scholarship were inseparable for Baron. His dissertation was greatly influenced by Troeltsch’s Western orientation and search for the foundations of republicanism. Baron was “particularly interested in the larger issue of the role of the Age of Confessionalism in the development of Enlightenment philosophy and the rise of modern liberal nation-state.”\textsuperscript{118} The goal of his dissertation, as Baron wrote, was to provide “an accurate consideration of the development of European political concepts – des europäischen Staatsdenkens – from the waning of the Middle Ages to the modern period, represented by an important example, that of the ideas – der Gedankenwelt – of the politically most influential Reformers.”\textsuperscript{119} However, Calvin’s View of the State in the Confessional Period was the first and the last major study which Baron wrote outside of field of Renaissance and humanism. He seems to have had something more important, something more significantly relevant to his existential predicament in Weimar Germany, to establish via historical scholarship.

Following Goetz and Troeltsch, Baron rejected the nationalistic, chauvinist and völkisch, view of German history. Of course being a Jew in Weimar Germany gave him more than enough reasons for rejecting the völkisch ideology of history with all its imperialist, anti-democratic, anti-parliamentary and anti-republicanism connotations. After all, he lived in Berlin where, as the Betty Scholem wrote in the 1920s to her son Gerhard Scholem in Jerusalem, “Anti-Semitism

\textsuperscript{117} Fubini, “Renaissance Historian,” pp. 544-5.
\textsuperscript{118} Schiller, “Hans Baron’s Humanism,” p. 53.
\textsuperscript{119} Baron as cited in Fubini, “Renaissance Historian,” p. 547.
has so badly infiltrated and infected people that you hear them cursing the Jews wherever you go, completely openly and with less inhibition than ever before.”¹²⁰

Such daily experiences of hate and humiliation surely affected Baron’s thinking. Rejecting the völkish ideology of history based on Blutgemeinschaft, Volksseele and Volksgeist, Baron emphasized “the percepts of historicism which had re-established the Judeo-Christian foundations of European culture in Greek and Roman antiquity as well as the Near East.”¹²¹ In contrast to the narrow nationalist, racist and chauvinist, glorification of ‘German Culture,’ he stressed, following Troeltsch, the notion of Western ‘Civilization’ based on the humanist traditions of classicism, Renaissance and Enlightenment. More specifically, Baron underscored Europe’s humanistic tradition by inventing the concept of “civic-humanism,” which embodied for him the classics, the Renaissance and humanism. Baron’s quest, in his own words, was after “the innermost center of the Western world,”¹²² or “the origins of the positive values of modern European civilization – in the tradition of Burckhardt and Dilthey – rather than merely [providing] an interpretation of Italian history.”¹²³ Renaissance and humanism became an important historical-political tool in his combat with völkish ideology, racism and anti-Semitism. The history of political thought, then for him, became a weapon for fighting politically in the present as much as it was equally a narrative for making sense of the past. The politics of history during the Weimar Republic, in short, crucially influenced the formation of Baron’s historical thought as well as its form and content.

Baron once observed that “Troeltsch and Walter Goetz were my personal teachers in Leipzig and Berlin, and in Dilthey I am used to see my intellectual grandfather (the father is

¹²⁰ Elon, The Pity of it All, p. 374.
¹²² Baron, Calvins Staatsanschauung und das konfessionelle Zeitalter, as cited by Schiller, “Hans Baron’s Humanism,” p. 54, n. 12.
The German historian, psychologist, sociologist and hermeneutic philosopher, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), developed a historical approach called *Geisteswissenschaften* (human sciences, cultural sciences), which was in fact the first real “history of ideas” historically contextualized. He was mainly concerned with “Weltanschauung” – the general spirit of the times. For Dilthey, the Renaissance ruptured the Christian-medieval intellectual synthesis. Baron not only accepted this view enthusiastically but also followed Dilthey’s lead, tracing the relations between ideas and the social, political and economic contexts that produced them. As we will see, civic humanism embodied, for Baron, the tight relationship between city-state politics, particularly in Florence, and humanist thinking. In Dilthey’s sense, “Baron wanted to reestablish political concepts among the general cultural factors of the age” and “to treat them as he might any other cultural expression rather than sticking strictly to scholarly definitions.”

If Dilthey was Baron’s intellectual grandfather, then Troeltsch was his father in another important sense. While Troeltsch interpreted the message of Christianity as a theology of social action, as in his study *The Social Teachings of the Christian Church*, Baron similarly aimed to show that humanistic thinking and values went hand-in-hand with political commitment. In contrast to Burckhardt’s identification of humanism and individualism, Baron rather strove to prove that “humanistic culture was compatible with political commitment,” thus emphasizing the inextricable connection between civic humanism and republicanism.

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124 Baron as cited by Molho, “Hans Baron’s Crisis,” p. 83.
125 See Schiller, “Hans Baron’s Humanism,” p. 57.
An Epiphany at Florence – The Discovery of ‘Civic Humanism’

In that new study [of Leonardo Bruni and his generation] perplexing surprises awaited me. 
Baron, “The Course of my Studies in Florentine Humanism,” 1965

[T]he breadth of an historian’s insight into the past depends on the breadth and the originality of the ideas of man and of politics on which he draws. 
Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*

Historical interpretation is “insight.” Insight, in turn, requires comprehensive and novel thinking about the human predicament. And Weimar Germany and its demise was the human predicament at its worst.

Shortly after Baron finished his dissertation and published it in 1924, he completely dropped his Calvin scholarship for the study of the early Italian Renaissance. Around this time, he wrote, “I attempted seriously to define the relationship between the humanistic aspirations south and north of the Alps,” which was clearly a return to the topic of his 1920 Leipzig seminar paper.128 Baron’s renewed interest in Renaissance and humanism “was directly connected to his association with Goetz and was accompanied by a diminishing concern for the historical problems raised by the teaching of Troeltsch.”129 Given his return to the Renaissance, it seems surprising that he had written in his Calvin study:
The quintessential character of the Renaissance only represented the autochthonous product of an ancient Mediterranean mind, which flourished for a short moment, yet faded away before it

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had reached perfection. Therefore, it did not have the vigor to reshape the innermost center of the Western world.\textsuperscript{130}

But now the whole picture of the Renaissance was about to be transformed in Baron’s mind as he radically changed his above negative views of the Renaissance, stressing instead its unique place in the history of modernity, or its singular role in shaping “the innermost center of the Western world.” Evidently, Baron had something important to prove politically by studying the Italian Renaissance.

In order to pursue his newly interest in the Renaissance, Baron received a 1925 stipend “for research on Ficino and Mirandola” and thus crossed the Alps the same year to work in Florentine libraries.\textsuperscript{131} His goal was to study “Florentine Neoplatonism,” especially the works of Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) and Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) and "their influence on Erasmian humanism."\textsuperscript{132} He was no longer concerned with the repudiation of the rise of a unique German humanism, the subject of his Leipzig seminar paper, but rather with the influence of Italian humanism on Erasmus, or on Western civilization as a whole.

Yet, while working in the Florentine archives, he made a startling discovery, an epiphany of sorts, which forever influenced the course of his early Italian Renaissance studies. Baron found material extolling the values of “a politically active, patriotic citizenry.” Now, the works produced by the Neoplatonic generation seemed abstruse and removed from

\textsuperscript{130} Baron, \textit{Calvins Staatsanschauung und das konfessionelle Zeitalter}, as cited by Schiller, “Hans Baron’s Humanism,” p. 54.
\textsuperscript{131} Baron, “The Course of my Studies in Florentine Humanism,” p. 184.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., pp. 183-4.
the daily life of the city – material for the student of philosophy rather than historians eager to grasp the guiding ideas and emotive and moral forces that helped Florence to remain a vital political and cultural center during the Quattrocento.\textsuperscript{133}

This startling discovery was a kind of conversion, which led to a radical reorientation in Baron’s scholarly work. Following this discovery, Baron wrote, “after some minor publications on the Neoplatonists, I gave my Platonic materials to Paul Oskar Kristeller” and “turned to the then much less-known early Renaissance generation, whose intellectual leader had been Bruni. In that new study perplexing surprises awaited me.”\textsuperscript{134} And the ramifications of these surprises were of momentous import not only for the history of the early Italian Renaissance and humanism but for the whole course and progress of modern history as well.

We do not know the precise details of this important “Renaissance” turn in Baron’s thinking, yet in view of the political situation in Weimar Germany then, it is perhaps hardly astonishing that, like his mentors Goetz and Troeltsch, Baron too championed the values of a Western humanist orientation in German studies and politics. He admitted that some “aspects of the transformation of humanistic thought in the civic atmosphere of early-Quattrocento Florence were sketched for the first time” in his “preface” to his 1928 “edition of Leonardo Bruni Aretino: Humanist Philosophical Writings” where the “term ‘civic Humanism’ (Bürgerhumanismus) was first used.”\textsuperscript{135} Having now turned to the study of the Renaissance, Baron discovered a whole new world of civic humanism and republican thought in the Florentine libraries. And from now on civic humanism became the focus of his work. Thus, Baron’s studies, which revealed the power

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., pp. 183-4.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., p. 184.
\textsuperscript{135} Baron, \textit{Crisis}, p. 466, n. 2. Fubini, in contrast to Baron’s words above, claimed that the first use of this important term by Baron appeared in a book review in 1925. See Fubini, “Renaissance Historian,” p. 560.
and merit of civic virtues and republicanism, were carried out with tribulations of his own times firmly in mind.

Baron’s notion of civic humanism is a translation “of the original Bürgerhumanismus,” coined on the model of the famous “concept of Bildung – the educational ideal of man’s self formation but also the basis for the growth of solid bourgeoisie and the citizen’s inspiration with the required patriotic sentiments.” Bildung denoted the ideals of humanism and Enlightenment. No wonder that when Baron defined the new Florentine patriotism he had found he did so not in terms of Volk of blood, race and ethnicity, but rather preferred to quote the nineteenth century French historian, Fustel de Coulanges (1830-1889), who wrote: “True patriotism is not the love of the soil, it is the love of the past, it is the respect for the generations that have preceded us.”

According to George Mosse, Bildung refers to “the cultivation of reason and aesthetic test; its purpose [is] to lead the individual from superstition to enlightenment.” Bildung, humanism and Enlightenment, were thus closely connected: Several propositions of the Enlightenment were basic to the concept of Bildung – the optimism about the potential of human nature and the autonomy of man; the belief that acquired knowledge would activate the moral imperative; and last, but not least, the belief that all who were willing to use and develop their reason can attain this idea. Further, “it was the degree of a person’s Bildung, not his religious or national heritage, which ultimately decided the degree of equality.” The rise of völkisch ideology and Nazism signaled the end of the ideal of Bildung in Germany. And for German Jews, this spelled nothing less than a disaster. During the nineteenth century, Jews embraced Bildung in order to integrate into

138 Ibid., p. 6.
German society and their emancipation was based extensively on the new social, political and cultural space this concept offered them. Yet by the time of the Weimar Republic, their world began turning upside down; *Bildung* ceased being considered a cultural ideal. Once racial chauvinism got the upper hand, the erosion of the classical concept of *Bildung* “gained its full momentum.” Further, the “link between *Bildung* and the Enlightenment had been destroyed” by National Socialism, “instead, *Bildung* was linked to racism and nationalism.” This transformation had begun to take place after “World War I,” or during the Weimar Republic.\(^{139}\) It was in this broad ideological and cultural context that Baron revived the concept *Bildung* in the form of *Bürgerhumanismus* just as the former was being abandoned.

For German Jews, the gradual abandonment of the ideals of *Bildung* in Weimar Germany had severe ramifications: it meant not only their exclusion from cultural life but also the “separation between Germans and Jews.”\(^{140}\) No wonder, then, that Jewish intellectuals who were “about to become disenfranchised turned to *Bildung* and the Enlightenment in order to keep the door open to the gentile world, to create a space where they could remain German Jews.” A vivid and agonizing example of this appeal to *Bildung* appeared in the Jewish journal *Der Morgan* in 1935, two years after Hitler rose to power: We “wish to pledge our alliance to Humboldt’s ideals” of *Bildung* and Enlightenment, “for together with Lessing and Kant, Goethe and Schiller, they represent the inner German spirit of which we are part and which we can never lose as long as it informs our striving.”\(^{141}\) Later on, once the “humanist ideals of *Bildung* and the Enlightenment” began being rejected in Nazi Germany, it was “the German-Jewish *Bildungsbürgertum* [middle-class cultured bourgeois] which, more than any other single group, preserved” in exile

\(^{139}\) Ibid., pp. 14, 74. On the history of the Jews in Germany, see also Elon, *The Pity of it All: A History of Jews in Germany*, 1743-1933.

\(^{140}\) Mosse, *German Jews Beyond Judaism*, p. 81.

\(^{141}\) Ibid., pp. 78, 80-81.
“Germany’s better self across dictatorship, war, holocaust, and defeat.” Baron belonged to this important tradition of German-Jewish Bildungsbürgertum who attempted in exile to keep alive and revive the humanist ideals of Bildung and Enlightenment. His Crisis is a supreme example of this tradition.

For Baron, as we have been emphasizing, civic humanism played an important role not only in the history of politics in the past but also in the politics of history of contemporary Germany. The study of history was for him at least “as important as moral philosophy,” something Baron had learnt from Troeltsch as we have seen. Against the rising tide of German chauvinism, and in face of the growth of the völkish interpretation of history, Baron developed the concept of “civic humanism” as an important tool of an enlightened, inclusive citizenry. The “Florentine wars of independence,” Baron wrote, kindled “the rise of humanistic education which endeavored to prepare citizens for engagements in the task of their own age and state – civic Humanism.” (457) At this decisive moment “when Florence was defending its heritage of liberty,” a new “conception of education arose, whose object was not only to train learned men but to produce good citizens.” This new educational spirit inspired “men to take part in the daily life and in the public affairs of the community. At this point the citizens’ ideas merged with the humanistic mode of thought.”

The realm of education, according to Karl Mannheim, was essential to creation of the “modern bourgeoisie” which “had from the beginning a two-fold social root – on the one hand the owners of capital, on the other those individuals whose only capital consisted in their education.”

142 Ibid., p. 82.
Renaissance and humanism were posited in Baron’s thought against racism, tyranny and despotism. Civic humanism had a crucial social, political and educational, function: its subject Baron wrote was “the creation of a group of intellectual interests and disciplines that could be pursued by members of an active political citizenry.” Or conversely, the new culture of civic humanism “was to be not only one in which a citizen could share, but one which would educate him as a member of his society and respublica and help him to become a good citizen.” Civic humanism had assumed thus a crucial historical role. In this context, history was accorded a prominent role in the ideology of civic humanism. Baron therefore concluded that Florence’s introduction of civic humanism privileged historical education a singular role: in “an environment in which the ultimate aim was a humanistic education for good citizenship, nothing was more indispensable than knowledge of the history and the traditions of one’s own patria.”

Education became an indispensable part of respublica.

In this regard, Baron’s thinking was influenced by yet another colleague at the University of Berlin, Werner Jaeger. Jaeger sought to found a movement for “Third Humanism” (Dritte Humanismus), after that of the Renaissance (Erasmus) and the humanism-Hellenism of the Johann Wolfgang von Goethe period. Following the disaster of World War I and the instrumentalization of education during the Weimar Republic, a nostalgic yearning for a “Third Humanism” arose in Germany most eloquently articulated by Jaeger. But Jaeger’s concept of “Third Humanism” was essentially “a movement of reaction.” He conceived of “Greek humanism, along with the neohumanism of the early nineteenth century (precisely the ‘second humanism’ to which the ‘third’ was connected), as a patrimony inherited in a special and privileged by German culture, viewed as the product of the last and most efficacious of the

European Renaissance.” Jaeger’s humanism was “a mystical and exclusive cult to which only a spiritual elite can have access.” No wonder that Jaeger vigorously attacked “the individualistic orientation of Enlightenment humanism,” claiming “Humanism is an ideology whose roots date back to the rational cultural system of the eighteenth-century West European Enlightenment and it is therefore incompatible with the intellectual historical presuppositions of National Socialism.” On the other hand, one cannot ignore as well the clearly “millenarian connotations of the term Dritte Humanismus,” which parallels to the “politically wish-dream of a ‘Dritte Reich’” with all its religious and apocalyptic connotations. Jaeger was moreover proposing, in effect, a counter model for re-valuing classical antiquity and classical education that, though universal, was yet only fully understandable to a select band of devotees or intellectual aristocracy (Bildungsaristokratie), or Bildungselite.

Baron of course did not share Jaeger’s nationalist and anti-democratic elitism, or his “crusade for cultural conservatism,” as well as his opposition to mass access to higher education during the Weimar Republic. Yet he and Jaeger shared the same views regarding the authoritative value of the classics. Hence, although Jaeger’s conception of “The Third Humanism” sought “to imbue German society” during the Weimar Republic with “a renewed awareness of cultural values derived from ancient Greek and Rome,” Baron’s quest too was for a return to humanism, but in his case as a bulwark against the völkish and chauvinist ideology of history. Both, then,

responded to the cultural crisis felt by many intellectuals during the Weimar Republic but in radically different ways.\footnote{For a discussion of sense of cultural crisis among German academic during the early twentieth century, see Ringer, \textit{The Decline of the German Mandarins}, pp. 253-4.}

Baron dedicated his 1955 \textit{Humanistic and Political Literature in Florence and Venice at the Beginning of Quattrocento} to Jaeger, acknowledging his deep gratitude \textquotedblleft for the inspiration which my studies of the Renaissance owe to his [Jaeger's] work.\textquotedblright\footnote{Baron, \textit{Humanistic and Political Literature in Florence and Venice at the Beginning of Quattrocento} (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1955), p. v.} It is not hard to see why Baron was so influenced by Jaeger, particularly by his 1934 \textit{Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture}. \textquotedblleft The ancients were persuaded,\textquotedblright Jaeger claimed, \textquotedblleft that education and culture are not a formal art or an abstract theory, distinct from the objective historical structure of a nation's spiritual life. They held them to be embodied in literature, which is the real expression of all higher culture.\textquotedblright\footnote{Werner Jaeger, \textit{Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture}, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), I, p. v. The first volume of this trilogy appeared in Berlin in 1934.} Baron shared this view regarding the early Italian Renaissance; hence he spent so much time and effort describing the humanistic and political literature of the early Renaissance. Further, Baron shared with Jaeger the latter's approach to intellectual history. For instance, in his \textquotedblleft Introduction\textquotedblright to \textit{From Petrarch to Leonardo Bruni: Studies in Humanistic and Political Literature}, 1968, Baron states: \textquotedblleft Unless we know exactly when, where and under what conditions a work was written \ldots we cannot judge the author's intention\textquotedblright or \textquotedblleft the relationship of his work to the actual life of his time.\textquotedblright\footnote{Baron, \textit{From Petrarch to Leonardo Bruni: Studies in Humanistic and Political Literature} (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1968), p. 2.} Yet, the view that \textquotedblleft only an examination of biographical data and historical events coupled with philological criticism\textquotedblright can result in a
better, richer and more comprehensive understanding of classicist and humanist thought and its values had been already defended by Jaeger in his 1914 essay, “Philologie und Historie.”  

Jaeger’s goal in Paideia was not only to describe the content and form of Greek education but also, and more importantly, “to explain the interaction between the historical process by which their character was formed and the intellectual process by which they constructed their ideal of human personality,” or “to explain the life of man through the creative literature which represents his ideals.” This was not a mere academic inquiry since Jaeger believed, as Baron did, “that a solution to this important historical and intellectual problem would bring a deeper understanding of the unique educational genius which is the secret of the undying influence of Greece on all subsequent ages.” [Emphasis added]. By replacing “Greece” with the “early Italian Renaissance,” one would pretty much have Baron’s view. History thus has meaning and significance not only for past generations but also for present ones because, as Jaeger maintained, “our understanding of the Greek type of cultural education” affects our understanding to “the humanism of other centuries,” which in the Weimar Republic “is more hotly debated than ever.” Accordingly, the problem of Paideia “concerns not only the Greeks but ourselves.”  

One of the main outcomes of Baron’s two years of research in the Florentine libraries was his edition of Leonardo Bruni Aretino: Humanistisch-philosophische Schriften - Leonardo Bruni Aretino: Humanist Philosophical Writings, 1928. Baron found Bruni in Florence, but one may  

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157 Jaeger, Paideia, I, pp. ix-xi. According to Schiller, for Jaeger “German Bildung was identical with Greek Paideia” and he “found the teaching of Plato, philosopher of crisis-ridden Athens, equally valid for his own crisis-ridden present, a Paideia for a defense of German Bildung.” See Schiller, “Hans Baron’s Humanism,” p. 65.  
158 Baron’s edition of Bruni’s works received unfavorable review, to say the least, by Walter L. Bullock of the University of Chicago, in which the latter stated that “Dr. Baron’s volume” is “sadly unreliable for the study of Bruni’s exact texts, but a welcome and valuable contribution, actually indispensable, for the study of Bruni’s ideas.” See Walter L. Bullock’s review in Speculum, 4 (Oct., 1929), p. 483.
equally says that Bruni likewise found Baron. By rescuing Bruni from oblivion, notwithstanding his importance for specialists of the early Italian Renaissance, Baron made Bruni a political model for the politics of history’s in Baron’s time.¹⁵⁹ The Florentine humanist, historian and statesman, Baron insisted, was guided “by public spirit, a full engagement in the life of the community, and by a firm republican idealism.”¹⁶⁰ Further, thanks to “Bruni’s efforts of a lifetime, there had come about that change in the inner structure of Florentine Humanism which may be best described as the transition from a classicism unconnected with the citizen’s active life to civic Humanism.” (330) No wonder Baron saw in Bruni’s civic humanism “an ‘ideal synthesis’ of the classicism of early Petrarchean humanism and Burckhardt’s High Renaissance humanism.” Yet, what attracted Baron was the fact that Bruni did not look back “on antiquity as a lost golden age” but rather saw “the ancient times as an age to be imitated and emulated.”¹⁶¹ More generally according to Baron, Florentine humanism “sought to learn from antiquity by looking upon it not melancholically as a golden age never again to be realized, but as an exemplary parallel to the present, encouraging the modern to seek to rival antiquity” in many fields. (460-1) This contention applies as well to Baron himself.

Against the controversies and battles about historiography during the Weimar Republic, Baron raised the banner of classicism, humanism, Renaissance and republicanism. Bruni provided Baron with a glorious example of a Renaissance man, thus serving as an inspiration to Baron’s own sense of mission. Renaissance humanism and republicanism were important European cultural traditions that had to be defended against the rising tide of blood, racism and Volk.

¹⁶¹ Schiller, “Hans Baron’s Humanism,” pp. 66, 80.
Naturally none of this can be separated from Baron’s life as a Jew in Germany during the upheavals of the Weimar Republic. Renaissance humanism sheltered him from the overt racism and chauvinism afflicting contemporary German historiography exemplified by the historian Georg von Below, who declared: “We are unable to imagine culture without declaring our commitment to our Volkstum. Unlike Enlightenment thinkers, we do not believe either in natural law or in universal constitutional values.” Renaissance and humanism, being heirs to the classical world, clearly opposed the cramped historiography of Weimar and later Nazi Germany.

The discovery of Bruni and his circle of humanists and republicans was a kind of revelation or epiphany for Baron. “It had long been rather assumed” he wrote “that by the late Trecento the time of freedom and republicanism in the communes had passed; that in the so-called età della signorie et dei principati Humanism was being shaped primarily in the environment of the courts.” By contrast Baron insisted that

in Bruni and his Florentine followers, political thought and the evaluation of life were being shaped by public spirit, by a full engagement in the life of the community, and by a firm republican idealism. These Florentine humanists were guided by uncompromising ideals of active participation in the state, believing that without a practical commitment to the community human nature cannot really fulfill itself. This “all but forgotten type of early humanistic Aristotelian” was exemplified by Bruni who “had the outlook of one who had learnt from Aristotle that a citizen’s life ought to be devoted to his commonwealth.” Further, on Baron’s account, Bruni’s Aristotelian humanism was transmitted through Cicero. Although the Roman philosopher is usually considered as a Stoic sage, Baron found that in the decades “before and after 1400,” Bruni and other humanists “began

164 Ibid., p. 185.
to rediscover the Roman aspects of Cicero’s life and thought, and it was from the vintage point of Cicero’s civic interests that Bruni later also enlarged upon the views of the moral philosophy of Aristotle.”¹⁶⁵

For Baron, the discovery of civic humanism was monumental: “For the first time since the beginning of the Middle Ages, a powerful intellectual influence was exerted by the specifically Roman and civic quality of Cicero’s writings.”¹⁶⁶ Baron had found a whole new horizon of political thinking which had purportedly transformed the history of the West radically. Civic humanism signified not only the active political participation of “the Florentine patriciate” but also, and more importantly for Baron, “commitment of this stratum of Florentine society to the city-state republican government and to the ideals of liberty and freedom traditionally associated with republicanism,”¹⁶⁷ hence establishing an “intimate connection of morality with political virtues.”¹⁶⁸ Needless to say, all these discoveries of humanism and republicanism, of civic humanism and the love of liberty, were made during the decline of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Nazism. Baron plainly had something very important historically to prove and the politics of history of his time influenced the history of politics he wrote and made the center of his life – civic humanism versus tyranny and republicanism versus despotism.

The discovery of Aristotelian humanistic views through Cicero on the part of early Renaissance writers led to yet another important revelation by Baron: “The discovery that Bruni and his generation were capable through Cicero of seeing Roman life in a more genuinely

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 185.
¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 185.
¹⁶⁷ Schiller, “Hans Baron’s Humanism,” 62.
¹⁶⁸ Baron, Leonardo Bruni Aretino, as cited by Schiller, “Hans Baron’s Humanism,” p. 63.
historical light led to another surprise;”¹⁶⁹ namely, the creation of “a new type of historical thinking,”¹⁷⁰ or the formation of a unique mode of Renaissance and humanist historical thought: Bruni and his contemporaries made history an indispensable part of the citizen’s outlook and education … they were the first to view the rise and fall of Rome and the later growth of the Italian states as natural phenomena to be explained by secular causes … and these insights were the source of Machiavelli’s ideas as well as the earliest instance of modern thinking about history.¹⁷¹

Clearly for Baron, then, the early Italian Renaissance’s humanism stood at the origins of modernity. He thus accepted Burckhardt’s “fundamental discovery, that the Renaissance somehow was a prototype of the modern world.”¹⁷² Thus, Baron observed in 1944: “we need the Renaissance as a testing ground for many observations on the pattern of the modern world.”¹⁷³ For him “as for most of his generation, the historical definition of humanism was the equivalent of the formulation of an actual paradigm of ‘modernity,’ which also meant making an ideological statement with more-or-less indirect political implications.”¹⁷⁴

Baron was unable after the Nazi revolution, however, to work out the full implications of his archival discoveries in Italy once the Nazis came to power. If racism and anti-Semitism considerably disturbed Baron’s life during the Weimar republic, now the whole of his existence was seriously at risk. Baron soon found himself and his family in exile. But as it turned out, in the midst of the terrible hardship and agony of exilic displacement, Baron made yet another important discovery, namely the discovery of crisis-history as a unique mode of historical

thought, which found its fullest expression in Baron’s 1955 *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*. In 1920, Baron discovered Renaissance and Humanism; in 1925 he discovered civic humanism, and now in exile, in the wake of the Nazi Revolution and World War II, he constructed his unique mode of historical thought according to which crisis drives historical progress.

**Exile**

You shall leave everything you love most dearly:  
this is the arrow that the bow of exile  
shoots first. You are to know the bitter taste  
of others’ bread, how salty it is, and know  
how hard a path it is for one who goes  
descending and ascending others’ stairs.  

*Dante Alighieri, Paradiso*

It is not easy to generalize about exiles, nor do they lend themselves to abstraction. Yet exile is a common experience and so searing that it should invite reflection. No experience is more fundamental, and not one has been used metaphorically more seriously.  

*Judith N. Shklar, Political Thought and Political Thinkers, 1998*

Even those who can find a new homeland and obtain citizenship rights in another country will take a large part of their life to heal this breach, and indeed, even more so if they took their Germanness for granted and perceived themselves as German before Hitler.  

*Karl Löwith, My Life in Germany Before and after, 1933*

During the 1920s, Baron responded to the grave political realities of his time by formulating a “new approach to the renaissance,”¹⁷⁵ based on the emergence of civic humanism and republican liberty. He believed now, following Jacob Burckhardt, that the Renaissance led to a decisive transformation in Western tradition: “the coming of the early Renaissance” should be understood “as a fundamental transformation in Weltanschauung.”¹⁷⁶ Accordingly, Baron’s interests shifted

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¹⁷⁶ Baron, “Moot Problems of Renaissance Interpretation,” p. 28.
from Calvin and the Protestant Reformation to the early Italian Renaissance. The politics of history during the Weimar Republic influenced the history of politics Baron strove to write.

Baron’s intellectual shift is clearly evident in his course of studies. Apart from his youthful dissertation devoted to Calvin, Baron soon totally immersed himself in the study of one historical period exclusively – the early Italian Renaissance. Historians generally work on several major topics and themes during their lifetime, writing on a variety of subjects according to their present concerns. But not Baron; he became nearly obsessed with the early Italian Renaissance and with civic humanism and republican liberty as a bulwark against tyranny and despotism. To fully understand his preoccupation, one must examine the ideological sources of Baron’s works.

Having been excluded from center of German national culture by racism, anti-Semitism and völkish ideology, Baron turned to the civilization of Renaissance Italy in order to explain the tragic course of German history in his own time as well as find assurance and compensation for his shattered cultural identity.

The Nazi revolution of 1933, to use Sidney Pollard’s words, “had wrenched” Baron’s life and many others in Germany “out of their course.” Having come of age during the early years of the Weimar Republic, Baron saw its collapse, the Nazi seizure of power and the establishment of the Third Reich and had his life and its normative foundations turned upside down, forcing him to flee with his family into exile. Baron could just as easily have written what Löwith wrote about the new German barbarism: “The German solution to the Jewish question is in principle only the most overt aspect of barbarity, which sanctions every brutality in the service of a monstrous state.” But Löwith believed pessimistically that having been “confronted with this dehumanization of the human being, mere humanism [was] incapable of rising even one

effective protest.” Hans Baron thought otherwise; hence he dedicated his life to exploring the rise of humanism and its eventual triumph against tyranny and despotism in the early Italian Renaissance as an evocative lesson for the present.

After working in Italy between the years 1925-27, Baron returned to Berlin. He published an edition of Bruni’s works, *Leonardo Bruni Aretino: Humanist Philosophical Writings* in 1928 and, in 1929 he “finished his Habilitation on the civic humanist Leonardo Bruni” under Meinecke in Berlin. He then worked as a Privatdozent at the University of Berlin from 1929 to 1933, teaching medieval and modern history. He also worked as “an assistant of the Historical Committee of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences” in Munich.

Then the 1933 Nazi Revolution took place with Hitler becoming Chancellor on January 30. On April 1, the Nazis passed several anti-Jewish laws including the Arianization of Jewish businesses, and, in several German states, Jews were ordered to leave their passports in police stations. On April 7, the Nazi “Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service” was enacted, which “deprived both politically unreliable and non-’Aryan’ university personnel of their civil-service status, canceling their tenure privileges and dismissing them” thereby putting “a quick end to Baron’s career in German academia.” The law re-established a “national” civil service and allowed tenured civil servants to be dismissed. This meant that, among others, Jews and political opponents could no longer serve as teachers, professors, judges or in other government positions. As a result, nearly “1700 faculty members and young scholars

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178 Ibid., p. 147.
179 Schiller, “Made ‘fit for America,’” p. 347.
181 On the situation in Germany immediately following the Nazi Revolution, see George L. Mosse’s autobiography, *Confronting History – A Memoir* (Madison: Wisconsin Univ. Press, 2000), especially chap. iv.
182 Kater, “Refugee Historians in America: Preemigration Germany to 1939,” p. 73.
183 Schiller, “Made ‘fit for America,’” p. 347.
lost their places.” An estimated “80 percent of these men were dismissed on racial grounds.”

Walter Goetz, Baron’s teacher in Leipzig, was among the few Aryan historians who fell victim to this law. Shortly after, a similar law was passed concerning lawyers, doctors, tax consultant and notaries. In May 1933, Baron’s “contract with the Bavarian Academy was terminated” as the institute submitted to the “Führer Principle” (Führer-prinzip – meaning the Führer’s commands superseded all written law.) And, finally, “in September Baron was also dismissed from his position as lecturer in Berlin.” All this undoubtedly put enormous pressure on Baron who was at that time thirty-three years old, married with one child and expecting another. Baron wrote in agony and with a heavy heart: “I had this place, which gave me the means of supporting my life, till my dismissal in June 1933 because of my Jewish religion and descent according to the ‘Civil Servants Acts’ (Berufseamtengesetz).” Thus began sixteen years of hardship in which Baron never had a permanent academic job.

Hitler’s rise to power on January 1933 signified an existential turning-point for German-Jewry in general and for Baron in particular. The Nazi revolution put an end to the Weimar Republic and to a parliamentary democracy. Following the appointment of Adolf Hitler as chancellor on January 30, 1933, the Nazi state or the Third Reich quickly became a regime in which Germans enjoyed no guaranteed basic rights. With “Hitler’s appointment on January 30, 1933, the Weimar Republic had ended and been replaced by a totalitarian dictatorship.” After a suspicious fire in the Reichstag on February 28, 1933, the government issued a decree which suspended constitutional civil rights and created a state of emergency in which official decrees could be

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185 Schiller, “Made ‘fit for America,’” p. 347; Schulze, “German Historiography from 1930s to the 1950s,” p. 25.
186 Baron as cited by Molho, “Hans Baron’s Crisis,” p. 63.
187 The year 1933, wrote Koselleck, “cuts all the threads” of Karl Löwith’s “middle class existence.” See Koselleck, “Foreword” in Karl Löwith, My Life in Germany Before and After 1933, p. x.
188 Gilbert, A European Past, p. 122.
enacted without parliamentary confirmation. As for the Jews, “the Jewish policy of the Nazis was entirely in accord with the brutal and barbarian system they established in Germany.” The boycott of Jewish doctors, shops, lawyers and stores began on April 1, 1933 followed by book burnings on May 10 when German students gathered in Berlin and other German cities to burn books containing “un-German” ideas. Works by Freud, Einstein, Thomas Mann, Jack London, H. G. Wells and many others went up in flames as the cheering students gave the Nazi salute while singing Nazi songs and anthems. At one of the Berlin bonfires, Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels declared:

The era of extreme Jewish intellectualism is now at an end. The breakthrough of the German revolution has again cleared the way on the German path … The future German man will not just be a man of books, but a man of character. It is to this end that we want to educate you. As a young person, to already have the courage to face the pitiless glare, to overcome the fear of death, and to regain respect for death – this is the task of this young generation. And thus you do well in this midnight hour to commit to the flames the evil spirit of the past. This is a strong, great and symbolic deed – a deed which should document the following for the world to know – Here the intellectual foundation of the November (Weimar, Democratic) Republic is sinking to the ground, but from this wreckage the phoenix of a new spirit will triumphantly rise.

All of this constituted an existential turning point and severe crisis for Baron:

Who could have thought that one’s own national comrades (Volksgenossen), with which one thought oneself united for life, could take away future, and people (Volk), and fatherland, and all that was considered sacred. This experience is now reserved to us, Jews.

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189 Ibid., p. 124.
He lamented that he and other German Jews like him had considered themselves “not Zionists at all, but rather real Germans.” Now pondering the prospect of exile for the first time, he grieved that life in Germany “under the Swastika flag” and dominated by racism and anti-Semitism “was enough to make him want to withdraw from the world.” At a “time when so many gods have proved to be empty,” Baron bemoaned in July 1933, he finally realized that we have to “fight our way abroad,” namely go into exile. Later in September, he continued: “It hurts so much to leave home with so many memories of human inadequacies.” Thus Baron’s life in Germany came to a close when he shortly thereafter left for exile in Italy in 1935. Baron, however, never felt exiled from the German culture which nurtured him and throughout his life, he continued to engage it through the prisms of civic humanism, republicanism and the his unique concept of crisis-history.

As far back as his 1920 seminar paper, we know that Baron already eschewed practicing detached historical scholarship. His era’s politics of history had already captured his imagination thanks to the influence of his teachers thus deeply informing the politics of history he proceeded to write about. In face of “the conservative consensus” within the historical profession before and after Hitler’s rise to power, which “proved highly receptive to a national of ‘folkish’ reorientation of the guild,” and against Nazism and Fascism in general, Baron dedicated himself to reviving the humanist tradition of republicanism. As he says in the subtitle of one of his books, he committed himself to tracing the “Transition from Medieval to Modern

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191 Baron’s letter to Walter Goetz 23 March 1933 as cited by Molho, “Hans Baron’s Crisis,” p. 78.
192 Molho, “Hans Baron’s Crisis,” p. 78.
193 Baron’s letter to Walter Goetz 11 July 1933 as cited by Molho, “Hans Baron’s Crisis,” p. 79.
194 Baron’s letter to Walter Goetz 26 September 1933 as cited by Molho, “Hans Baron’s Crisis,” pp. 79.
195 Schulze, “German Historiography from 1930s to the 1950s,” p. 27.
Thought” by reviving the humanist values and ideals of the Renaissance against German barbarism. He thus marshaled history in order to respond to the evils and horrors of the present.

Such politicizing of history was hardly unique to Baron. To the contrary, Karl Löwith was the unique case whose “existential turning point” came only after 1933 “under the spell of National Socialist terror.” Löwith saw himself “apolitical before 1933, and had lived accordingly.” Only later, he felt “forced to preserve a [humanist] tradition” of which the overt opposition “was [German] barbarism.” For Baron, as for many other German-speaking, Jewish intellectuals driven into exile, “the textual space of past ages was not only an object of scholarly inquiry but also source of consolation for the drama of the present.” No wonder that so many exiles like Baron, Cassirer, Kristeller and Auerbach found refuge in Renaissance humanism. Betrayed by German culture and society, which had replaced the classical, humanistic and enlightenment ideas of Bildung with the chauvinist notion of Volk, and consequently excluded from the center of German life and culture by anti-Semitism and völkish racial history, Baron and his fellow German-Jewish Bildungsbürgertum turned to the humanist and enlightened ideals of Western civilization in order to find assurance and compensation for their shattered identities and exilic displacement.

For Baron and other Jewish intellectuals, especially after the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, which excluded Jews from German life and culture, it became clear that “the pursuit of an academic career in Nazi Germany was impossible,” and “life under this regime would be unbearable.” For all of them, barbarism had become the rule and measure of life with “the brutal and barbarian

197 Koselleck, “Foreword” in Karl Löwith, My Life in Germany Before and After 1933, p. xiii.
198 Schiller, “Paul Oskar Kristeller, Ernst Cassirer and the ‘Humanistic Turn’ in American Emigration,” p. 126.
system” the Nazis “established in Germany.” An enlightened nation had become barbarian. In these circumstances, exile became the only solution: “The political situation in Germany is gradually becoming so bad”, Felix Gilbert’s friend, Heinz Holldack, wrote in February 1933, that I yearn for my day when I’ll be able to put this country and its barbaric people behind me. You probably can’t even imagine how extensive the personal terrorism is already. The uniformed bandits come into your apartment and ask what newspapers you subscribe to; they go into cafés and collect money and everyone gives because he is afraid. Another writer lamented that Germany was quickly sinking from enlightenment into barbarism: “Who would ever thought things would come to this sorry pass in our supposedly enlightened nation? We are in the same boat as the Italians.” Exile, then, was the only escape from the brutal barbarism overwhelming their lives. Yet, exile involved great suffering too as Löwith makes plain: Even those who can find a new homeland and obtain citizenship rights in another country will take a large part of their life to heal this breach, and indeed, even more so if they took their Germanness for granted and perceived themselves as German before Hitler.  

Exile, then, created innumerable existential problems. “The departure from Germany loomed so overwhelming in my mind that I had not much sense of what was going around me,” wrote Felix Gilbert after traveling to London at the end of 1933. He admitted that he arrived in a state of shock, “unappreciative, critical, and negative during” all his stay in England; “Unhappiness about leaving Germany on the one hand, the need to find a way to exist and work in an alien

199 Gilbert, A European Past, p. 124.
200 Ibid., p. 130.
201 Ibid., p. 135.
country on the other” was always on his mind. Gilbert’s gloom lifted once he migrated to the USA in 1936. Many years later, he wrote that the “immense relief I felt in getting away from Europe I find, in retrospect, astonishing.” America provided him and fellow Jewish exiles, as was the case for many millions before him throughout the centuries, the “feeling of being at home.” Hence, when Gilbert returned to Europe as a soldier in the US Army during World War II, he wrote: “I did not feel that I was going home. It was clear to me that after the war I would return to the United States.” If events forced Gilbert to go to exile, during his exilic stay in the United States, he gradually found a new home, a kingdom in the new world. And when he was stationed in Berlin as a member of American occupation forces, Gilbert pondered the meaning of history and its lessons. Whereas once he believed that “society would inevitably become more fair and just,” now, after the horrors and catastrophes of the war, he “felt little of this hope in the darkness of postwar Berlin.” He realized that he “had not changed the world; the world had changed me.” For Baron, the opposite proved true; he did not change thanks to the war but instead sought to change the world through writing of The Crisis.

Exile seems to have provided many exiles with a great sense of mission. As a thirteen-year old boy, Sidney Pollard witnessed the Austrian Anschluss of 1938. His family was forced to leave its spacious apartment in Vienna and move “to a one-room flat in the ghetto of Leopoldstadt.” His father lost his income, and on his way to school young Pollard “saw the horror of the notorious ‘scrubbing,’ as well-dressed, middle-age [Jewish] people were on their knees in the street, forced to clear the pavements, with toothbrushes and other unsuitable gear, of the painted election slogans, surrounded by jeering crowds.” Later in 1938, Pollard was sent to England in a “Kindertransport,” which was sadly, but so movingly and brilliantly, described in W. G. Sebald’s

204 Ibid., p. 177.
205 Ibid., p. 220.
Later on, when age permitted, Pollard volunteered for army service: “Unlike my British fellow soldiers who were conscripted to fight a conventional war against and enemy state, at least in the early stage, for me it was to fight pure brutal barbarous evil which had wrecked my life and threatened to destroy civilization as I know it.” Such was also the case with the famous French-Jewish historian Marc Bloch (1886-1944), co-founder of the highly influential Annales School of French social history, who joined the French Resistance in 1942 in “a world assailed by the most appalling barbarism” only to die fighting in 1944.

The road to exile was very hard and the course of “the arrow that the bow of exile shoots,” in Dane’s poetic words, very agonizing. Baron fled to Italy with his wife in 1935. He already had plans to publish two books, Die Entstehung des historischen Denkens in italienischen Humanismus (The Origin of Historical Thought in Italian Humanism) and Lebensanschauung und Bildungsidee des italienischen Humanismus (The View of Life and the Idea of Education in Italian Humanism). He also had another in mind: “a volume of essays of specific philological problems” in the Renaissance. He hoped that publishing these works would greatly facilitate his chances of continuing his academic career in Italy as many Jewish scholars, such as Kristeller and Löwith, did. As can be clearly seen from the titles of these proposed works, there is no mention yet of the crisis of the early Italian Renaissance. These studies were to be devoted to important cultural, intellectual and philological dimensions of the Italian Renaissance. The crisis

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210 Schiller, “Made ‘fit for America,’” p. 347.
211 Molho, “Hans Baron’s Crisis,” p. 64.
212 After Hitler’s rise to power, “a total number of 75 German-Jewish émigré humanists” found temporary refuge in Italy, where some of them found academic jobs, particularly “scholars specializing in Renaissance studies.” See Schiller, “Hans Baron’s Humanism,” p. 67.
of the early Italian Renaissance was not as yet conceived in Baron’s mind and he had yet to formulate his unique crisis-history mode of historical thought, the view that history progresses through a series of crises or major turning-points.

Baron, however, never succeeded in completing any of these works in Italy. Consequently, being unable to find an academic job there, he moved with his wife and two young children to exile in London at the end 1936. Naturally, he was very depressed and bitter: “God knows whether there will be a way out for us,” he wrote that year, wondering “whether I will still be able to do scholarly work on a continuous basis,” adding that for “now there is not even the faintest trace of blue in the sky.”213 We do not know the actual details of the Baron family’s life in London. Yet Walter Ullmann (1910-83), the Austrian-Jewish scholar of medieval political thought, provides a glimpse of the hardship awaiting Jewish exiles in London in the second half of the 1930’s. He observed that the times, “were hard, depressing, wearing and full of cares” in which “I came to know bitter poverty, need, deprivation, and social uncertainty and anxiety about the future.”214

Baron stayed in England from 1936 until 1938 and, not finding a permanent academic job in Albion, he moved to the United States. Yet, while in England and without an official affiliation and a permanent job, he continued his research as a private scholar and his stay there “proved to be quite useful and productive.”215 During these years in London, he was probably working on the above proposed books. Evidence appears in a letter he wrote in 1936 to Walter Adams, General Secretary of the SPSL (Society for the Protection of Science and Learning) in which he requested financial help so that he could “devout himself to the completion of his magnum

opus,”\textsuperscript{216} namely “The Origin of Historical Thought in Italian Humanism.” Alas, nothing came of his request. Instead, Baron wrote and published several important articles in the fields of his expertise on the Italian Renaissance such as “Cicero and the Roman Civic Spirit,” 1938, “Franciscan Poverty and Civic Wealth as Factors in the Rise of Humanistic Thought,” 1938, “The Historical Background of the Florentine Renaissance,” 1938, “A Sociological Interpretation of the Early Renaissance in Florence,” 1939, as well as studies on the German Reformation such as “Religion and Politics in the German Imperial Cities,” 1937, “Calvinist Republicanism,” 1939, and “Imperial Reform and the Habsburgs,” 1939. As a result, neither his first proposed book, “The Origin of Historical Thought in Italian Humanism,” nor the second, “The View of Life and the Idea of Education in Italian Humanism,” nor even another “book on Cicero in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance ever saw the light of the day.”\textsuperscript{217}

Among these essays, of special interest for our purposes is “The Historical Background of the Florentine Renaissance” because here we see Baron associating, for the first time, political danger with the emergence of civic humanism: “Whoever wishes to understand” the history of humanism “as a whole must also study it in its youth,” or before the age of the Medici, “when Florence was still a free republic whose citizens were eager to absorb classical ideas about the state, society, and morals because they found a model for their own lives in the civic life of ancient Athens and Rome.”\textsuperscript{218} From “the end of 1380s into the first half of Cosimo de’ Medici’s principate, the Florentines lived in extreme danger” because “the Visconti of Milan established a powerful monarchy in Lombardy.” More specifically, Florence was “in the outmost danger of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{216} Walter Adams as cited by Schiller, “Made ‘fit for America,’” p. 351.
  \item \textsuperscript{217} Schiller, “Made ‘fit for America,’” p. 351.
  \item \textsuperscript{218} Baron, “The Background of the Early Florentine Renaissance,” in Baron, \textit{In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism}, I, pp. 3-4. It should be noted that in this book of collected essays, Baron changed the title of the essay from “The Historical Background of the Florentine Renaissance” to the above: “The Background of the Early Florentine Renaissance.”
\end{itemize}
becoming a dependent town in Viscontean territory” like Pisa, Siena, Bologna and others [emphases ours]. In order to preserve its liberty and republican freedom, Baron continues, “Florence [had to] modify its constitution.” This was done by “a small committee that could take advantage of the political situation.” Alongside this constitutional transformation, a change took place in the intellectual sphere. In the stormy years when Florence was defending its heritage of liberty, its intellectual life, too, took a new direction. A conception of education arose, whose object was not only to train learned men but to produce good citizens; an education that inspired men to take part in the daily life and in the public affairs of the community. At this point the citizens’ ideas merged with the humanist mode of thought.219

Thus civic humanism was born in Florence according to Baron. And hence, too, was born in Baron’s thinking “the idea, which was to dominate much of his later interpretation,” that the “threat of Visconti aggression” brought “Florentine humanists and citizens together in a common defence of civil liberty against tyranny.”220 In Chapter 18 of The Crisis – “Ideas Born of the Florentine Crisis” – Baron used verbatim the arguments he first used in this earlier essay, arguing that the Milanese threat led not only to the rise of civic humanism and the modification of Florence’s constitution but also led to “Florence and Her Cultural Mission,” “Freedom and the Florentine Constitution,” and “The Ideal of a Citizen-Army.” (412-39). However, in 1938, Baron had not yet defined the struggle in terms of crisis, but rather in terms of peril and danger. In other words, in 1938, Baron mostly focused on Florence’s “extreme peril” because of the Duke of Milan’s tyranny and imperialism. Only later would he make this specific historical crisis

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emblematic of his crisis mode of historical interpretation. Florence’s “gravest crisis,”221 which was no less than a political as well as “cultural crisis” or “catastrophe” became paradigmatically generalizable (9, 443) [Emphases ours]. But the model was the same; political struggle led to the emergence of civic humanism.

Baron’s English sojourn came to an end after he failed to find academic employment yet again. But fortunately, he managed to secure a temporary position in the United States as an assistant professor at Queens College in Flushing, New York from 1939-42. He then received a Guggenheim Fellowship (1942-3) and an American Philosophical Society Grant (1943-4). He was next appointed member of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton (1944-8) and then Research Fellow at the Newberry Library, Chicago from 1949 until his retirement in 1970-71. But, despite his exilic tribulations and changes of employment, he remained preoccupied with civic humanism and republican liberty. He was indeed the Hedgehog who knows only one big thing.

The very year Baron began teaching in America, World War II erupted, which also influenced enormously his historical thinking. As was the case with his previous “perplexing discovery” in Florence in 1925, Baron discovered in this new world crisis-history as a unique mode of historical thought according to which the nature of the history is characterized by crises and the course and progress of history is based on major turning-points. It was upon this unique mode of historical thought that Baron eventually constructed The Crisis, which gave his celebrated study not only its name but also its singular form and content.

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221 Baron, “Preface,” in Baron, In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism, I, p. vii.
Exile and Interpretation: The Making of *The Crisis*

To articulate the past historically….means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger….The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers.
Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, VI, 1944

[T] the most definitive innovations in history originate from the great experiences of danger – ‘misfortune, regeneration, salvation.’
Baron (after Ranke), “Articulation and Unity in the Italian Renaissance and in the Modern West,” 1944

[W]e need the Renaissance as a testing ground for many observations on the pattern of the modern world.
Baron, “Articulation and Unity in the Italian Renaissance and in the Modern West,” 1944

We have now arrived at a point in our long journey when we may ask why Baron began using the term “crisis” in America or, conversely, why only there did he begin developing his model of crisis-history, which constituted the core and the heart of *The Crisis*. We ask therefore which crisis, or crises, contributed to the making of Baron’s *Crisis*? Earlier we saw that the stormy years of Weimar crucially influenced Baron’s evolving historical consciousness and contributed to the ideas and the goals he embraced in his previous studies of the early Italian Renaissance. At that time, he discovered civic humanism. Yet, Baron’s thinking did not deviate radically in the wake of the Nazi revolution of 1933 and, all during the 1930s, he still contemplated writing several studies on Renaissance historical thought and education. On the other hand, in 1938, as we have seen, Baron first made the connection between political struggle and the emergence of civic humanism. And then many years later in 1955, Baron published a new study, *The Crisis*, which he started in 1942, based on a unique mode of historical thought – crisis-history. It should be noted that, during the 1950s appeared as well, Hanna Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1951, Jacob Talmon’s *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, 1952 and Leo’s Strauss’s *Natural Right and History*, 1953. All were, in very different ways, reactions to the trauma and
catastrophes of Nazis barbarism and the horrors of World War II. The important connections between these studies and Baron’s writings will be made clear shortly.

The crisis which deeply informed Baron’s writing of *The Crisis* was Hitler’s racist policies and aggressive and ruthless expansionism culminating in the tragedies constituting World War II. The Nazi revolution transformed Germany; yet World War II endangered the whole fabric of Western civilization and its cherished traditions of classicism, humanism and Enlightenment. Baron began writing of *The Crisis* not after 1933 when the Nazis came to power but, as he says, in 1942, which was the most crucial year in the Second World War because it bore witness to so many decisive turning points. The same drive to save classical, Renaissance, humanist and Enlightenment traditions of Western civilization from the horrors of Nazism, Hitlerism and Fascism is also clearly apparent in works like Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), which he also started writing in 1942, and in other writings we have been referring to. Like Baron, these German-speaking, Jewish intellectuals turned to the classics and usually to Enlightenment humanism as well in their battle against the völkish ideology of history and culture.

It is hardly surprising, then, that Baron says that he started the writing of *The Crisis* in 1942. During that year, some of the war’s most decisive battles took place at Stalingrad, El Alamein and Midway, finally turning the tide of World War II in favor of the Allies. If our overall thesis about Baron is correct, these decisive turning points shed additional important contextual light on the form and content of Baron’s book, including its uniquely urgent language of crisis and catastrophe. Baron must have felt during these war years of exile that the old world he knew was in enormous peril. First, his beloved Germany succumbed to Nazi barbarism preceded by Mussolini’s fascism overrunning Italy, the birth place of Renaissance and Humanism, and now
with World War Two, the whole of European civilization was engulfed in a crucial struggle for existence against the forces of tyranny and despotism. No wonder that Baron began describing in 1941 Florence’s battle against the Renaissance tyranny of Milan in terms of “life-or-death struggle.”

But we need now to return to Baron’s life in America and his difficulties finding a permanent academic job. After three years, Baron “lost his assistant professorship in New York (1939-1942) due to war-related budget cuts.” He was literally broken and devastated. In March 1943, Betty Drury, Secretary of the American Jewish Committee which helped exiled scholars settle in the US, wrote: “Hans Baron – A broken man … lost job at Queen’s College last year, did not received renewal of Guggenheim award. Nervously overwrought.” Yet Baron knew that salvation came after suffering and that danger and misfortune sometimes led to regeneration. And as he wrote, during the very year he started writing The Crisis.

Baron admitted that the course of his life, the troubles, misery and suffering of wars and exile, had profoundly influenced the content and form of his work:

More than few students in my generation have experienced a troubling disproportion between the broad new horizons opened by the impact of their agitated lives, and a failure to produce a full and comprehensive presentation of their new visions. War, exile, migration, and repeated changes of the language in which I set down the results of my studies had the effect that only too often I have to be content with writing essays or suggestions instead of rounded books.

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222 Baron, “Toward A More Positive Evaluation of the Fifteenth-Century Renaissance,” p. 26. This article is based on Baron’s speech in 1941 at the American Historical Association in Chicago.
224 Betty Drury as cited by Molho, “Hans Baron’s Crisis,” p. 81.
His was a “fragmentary a life’s work.” 225 On this rare occasion, Baron fully admitted the sad impact of the horrors of his times and the agony of his life upon his studies and the terrible price he had to pay because of exile and war, referring as well to feelings fellow exiles shared of “a troubling disproportion between the broad new horizons opened by the impact of their agitated lives, and a failure to produce full and comprehensive presentations of their new visions.” We witness here the sheer agony of a scholar who sadly noted how much time he had to spend away from his beloved studies because of the historical circumstances of his time. War, exile, migration, and frequent changes of languages greatly contributed to the sad fact “that only too often” he had “to be content with writing essays or suggestions instead of rounded books.” 226

The price of exile cost his scholarship dearly. As the German-Jewish economic historian Helmut Otto Pappe (1907-1997) wrote: “Having to emigrate is a matter of mixed feelings. As a consequence, I have been deprived of twenty-five years of scholarly work. To that extent Hitler has beaten me.” 227 Exile however led not only to hard life, but in the case of Baron’s also to “fragmentary a life’s work.” 228

However once in America, because of the various grants and fellowships he received, Baron was finally able to begin writing a “rounded book.” Armed now with a new mode of historical thought and imagination, Baron could at last concentrate on a long-term project, which eventually developed into a major historical study – *The Crisis*. All the various threads of his previous works on Renaissance humanism could be now arranged according to a master, overarching thesis. Exile provided a new interpretative perspective regarding the course of

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226 Ibid., p. 182.
228 Baron, “The Course of my Studies in Florentine Humanism,” p. 182.
history in general and the progress of the early Italian Renaissance in particular. Baron’s 1941 talk to the American Historical Association in Chicago, where he characterized the contest between Florence and Milan in terms of “life-or-death struggle,” testifies to this new interpretative turn:

Republican freedom and civic initiative … were forced to develop their full bearing on political ideals and thought in their life-or-death struggle with Renaissance tyranny.229

Additional evidence of Baron’s new historical thinking appears in his essay “Articulation and Unity in the Italian Renaissance and in the Modern West,” which he published in 1944 but was actually prepared for the American Historical Association meeting in Columbus Ohio, December 1942. The meeting was cancelled at the request of the US Office of Defense Transportation following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor the previous year, leading United States entry into World War Two in both the Pacific and European theaters. And 1942 supplied Baron with examples of the kinds of decisive “turning-points” around which he had begun constructing history. As we noted earlier, in June 4-7, the Battle of Midway, which was unquestionably World War II’s most significant naval battle, took place. In October-November, the second battle of El Alamein occurred, which was a turning point in the North African campaign. And then by February 1943, the battle of Stalingrad finally ended, which many hailed as saving European civilization. All these turning-points transformed the tide of the war in favor of the Allies. These crucial events resonate in the first sentence of the “Introduction” of the 1955 edition of The Crisis, where Baron urges that “the method of interpreting great turning-points in the history of thought against their social or political background” should also be used “in the study of the Italian Renaissance.” (xxv).

The roots of Baron’s 1942 “Articulation and Unity” may be found in a short essay, “Universal Tendencies,” 1833, written by Leopold von Ranke. Baron borrowed many themes from Ranke’s essay such as his discussions of “European balance of power,” the evolution of European history from the “city-state” to “a world system of nations” and more. The main difference between these two works is that Ranke began his discussion of the evolution of modern history with the age of Louis XIV (1638-1715), the Sun King, while Baron began, as one might expect, with the early Italian Renaissance and Florence’s struggle against Milan. But what matters most for us is the fact that, in “Articulation and Unity,” Baron developed for the first time his unique mode of historical thought, or crisis-history as a general historical interpretation which he applied to explaining the connection between political crises and the emergence of new modes of humanist thought in the early Italian Renaissance. This association between political danger and the emergence of civic humanism had been made already by Baron in 1938, but now for the first time, he deployed his approach into historical interpretation based on crises as a general historical interpretative tool with which he defined and explained the Florentine political crisis and the emergence of civic humanism. From now on, crisis and history became inextricably linked in Baron’s historical thought. History’s essential dimension is crisis. Crisis comprises the nature of the historical process.

Baron’s essay begins with “the study of the Renaissance has proved itself a fine sensitive instrument for many schools of historical thought in the past,” and then asks “whether it may not serve this purpose again, the more the stirring new experiences through which we live [the horrors of Nazism and World War II] modify and revise accepted notions of the modern western

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world.”

Moreover, “in the light of 20th century experience,” the “Renaissance reveals itself at last as the first stage” in “a three-phase evolution of the pattern of the modern west – an evolution from the system in which the politically sovereign and culturally creative element was the city-state” to “a world-system of nations.”

The “nature of the historical process,” continued Baron, may be found in the writings of Ranke who asserted “that the most definitive innovations in history originate from the great experiences of danger – ‘misfortune, regeneration, salvation.’” As Ranke had written: “War, Heraclitus tells us, is the father of all things. Out of the conflict of opposing forces, in the great moment of danger, disaster, resurgence, and deliverance, new developments proceed most decisively.”

Baron thus appears to have discovered in Ranke’s words an important clue for constructing his unique mode of historical thinking – crisis-history based on “misfortune, regeneration, salvation.” On this scheme of interpretation, war was the ultimate political crisis, explaining not only the early Italian Renaissance but modern Western history and World War Two as well. In other words, in light of the Second World War’s catastrophes and with the help of Ranke’s views, Baron developed a general historical interpretation which explained not only Florence’s struggle against Milan and the rise of civic humanism but also illuminated the “three-phase[s] evolution of the pattern of the modern west.”

In Baron’s newly-discovered mode of historical interpretation, the first phase, or crisis, in the evolution of the modern west took place in the early Renaissance with Florence’s struggle against Milanese tyranny. The second major crisis in the evolution of “the soul of Europe” in its

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231 Baron, “Articulation and Unity in the Italian Renaissance and in the Modern West,” p. 123. In the first footnote to this article, Baron wrote that his “conclusions about the political background of the Renaissance” presented in this essay “are based on studies soon to be published in book form.” It took him, however, more than ten years to publish The Crisis.

232 Ibid., p. 127.


struggle for “abiding self-consciousness and individual independence of co-operating nations” occurred with Louis XIV’s attempts “to build up a political and cultural hegemony – the second attempt to found a ‘Universal Monarchy’ in modern Europe, following the one by Spain in the 16th century.” The third phase or major turning-point in “the growth of nation-individuality and of a state-system repeated itself in the Napoleonic period” when France again “threatened to establish a universal empire.” In all these cases of major political crisis, “the supreme danger was met by national regeneration and vitalization of the other European countries.” Once more, we have another revealing example of how the politics of history in Baron’s time influenced the history of politics he was writing. And now, according to Baron, we were witnessing a fourth stage or crisis in the modern history of the west: “we know that there was still to follow a fourth European crisis of similar character.” In sum, with the Nazi occupation of most of civilized Europe, “we are here on the trail of a permanent pattern of European growth” or Europe’s struggle for “abiding self-consciousness and individual independence of co-operating nations.” Crisis, regeneration and salvation thus marked “the nature of the historical process.”235 This was the ultimate mark, and also sad burden, of European history in the past and now this sad weight was once more revealing itself unmistakably in the horrors of the present war against the barbarism of Nazism and Hitlerism.

Armed with his new broad historical framework of crisis and regeneration, Baron could now compare Florence’s struggle against Milan to that of the Netherlands against Spain during the sixteenth century and England’s later struggle against France: as Florence raised “aloft the flag of liberty” so the Netherlands “defended a great principle of liberty in its resistance to Spain, and as did England in its defense against Louis XIV, when it saved the foundation of a European

state-system.”

(We note here again Baron’s use of salvation as an explanatory concept.) In this grand struggle for “the soul of Europe,” Baron even compared Florence’s struggle against the absolutism of the Milanese Visconti to the “Glorious Revolution” in England at the end of the seventeenth century. Baron writes:

Florence had lived first through what we may call her Tudor and Stuart periods and then through her ‘Glorious Revolution’ with all the psychological effects of a passage from reluctantly born subjection to final liberty.

It is hardly surprising, then, that Baron enthusiastically quoted the early twentieth century Italian historian Francesco Landogna’s moving description of Florence’s salvation in 1402 after the miraculous death of the Duke of Milan due to the outbreak of the plague:

Already near ruin, and completely surrounded by enemies ready to divide the spoils; having resisted for years with a fierce passion which seems to be folly: on the verge of definite collapse, she [Florence] is unexpectedly saved by the death of the man who had nearly brought her destruction.

And at this juncture in his essay, Baron added what would become one of the main themes of The Crisis: “we need the Renaissance as a testing ground for many observations on the pattern of the modern world.”

The seeds of The Crisis, as a unified, all-embracing historical theory of the early Italian Renaissance and its role in the evolution of the modern world had thus already appeared in 1942.

Within this broad context of history, crisis and salvation, Baron identified the struggle of Florence, a republic which stood alone against the despotism of the Duke of Milan, with England’s struggle against Napoleon and later Hitler. As Florence did in 1402, so England stood

236 Ibid., pp. 128, 132.
237 Ibid., pp. 133-5.
238 Ibid., p. 138.
alone in the war against Germany and almost succumbed “until the historic moment had passed and unforeseen developments had upset the apparently inevitable course of fate.” No wonder that later in *The Crisis* Baron should so clearly connect Florence’s struggle for civic humanism, liberty, and republicanism with the struggle against Nazi tyranny in his own time: One cannot trace the history of this explosive stage in the genesis of the states-system of the Renaissance without being struck by its resemblance to events in modern history when unifying conquest loomed over Europe. In a like fashion, Napoleon and Hitler, poised on the coast of the English channel and made confident by their victories over every relevant power but one, waited for the propitious time for their final leap - until the historic moment had passed and unforeseen developments had upset the apparently inevitable course of fate. This is the only perspective from which one can adequately reconstruct the crisis of the summer of 1402 and grasp its material and psychological significance for the political history of the Renaissance, and in particular for the growth of the Florentine civic spirit. (40)

Baron thus admitted that *The Crisis* was inspired, at least in part, “by the struggle of Western democracies against Hitler’s violent expansionism.” Indeed, Baron was as much defending “republicanism against tyranny and despotism” not only in the early Renaissance but “also in his own present.”239

In 1953, Baron published another important essay that bears on our concerns here, namely “A Struggle for Liberty in the Renaissance: Florence, Venice, and Milan in the Early Quattrocento.” This work was written in 1951 but not published until 1953. Here for the first time, Baron introduced the concepts “political crisis” and “the crisis of 1402.”240 Based on his earlier “Articulation and Unity,” Baron observed that he had been developing the ideas in this new

239 Schiller, “Hans Baron’s Humanism,” p. 84.
essay “gradually over the past ten years,” namely since 1942. In his new work, he described Florence’s wars with the Duke of Milan in terms of “great political catastrophes” stemming from “a dynamic antagonism between republican liberty and the efficiency of despotic rule,” which constituted an important chapter in “the general history of the fight for liberty.” Next, Baron proceeded to cast Florence’s struggle as “the political crisis of Italy.” His unique crisis-history mode of historical thought was now fully developed. And thanks to this new mode of historical imagination based on crisis, the whole course and progress of the early Italian Renaissance became, for him, a field of fierce struggle for liberation, freedom and Republicanism against the menace of tyranny and despotism. Further, the above long paragraph above, which later appeared verbatim in The Crisis in which Baron identified the Duke of Milan with Napoleon and Hitler, occurs for the first time in this essay along with Gregorio Dati’s famous patriotic statement. Thus, according to Dati:

To be conquered and become subjects, this never seemed to the Florentines to be a possibility; for their minds are so alien and adverse to such an idea that they could not bring themselves to accept it in any of their thoughts. Each time they imagined themselves to have many remedies; and certainly, a heart that is free and sure of itself never fails to bring it about that some way and remedy is found. Always they comforted themselves with the hope, which in their eyes was a certainty on which they could count, that a Commonwealth cannot die, while the Duke [of Milan, Gian Galeazzo] was a single, mortal man, whose end would mean the end of his empire … Yet the Florentines never rested; one remedy had worn thin or failed, they immediately

241 Ibid., note # 1, p. 265.
242 Ibid., pp. 265, 268, 276, 280.
restored to some other … And one may say that all the freedom of Italy lay in the hands of the Florentines alone, that every other power had deserted them.²⁴⁴

Needless to say, these remarks clearly reflect Baron’s view regarding England’s heroic struggle against Germany in the Second World War. The crisis of World War Two thus crucially influenced the making - the writing, the thesis and ideas – of The Crisis.

We now come to the year 1955 when The Crisis finally appeared and where Baron’s thesis of crisis-history and civic humanism was fully developed as a unique mode of historical thought into a “rounded book.” What began in 1925 with the discovery of Bruni and his circle on civic humanists, transformed during the span of thirty years into a full historical interpretation based upon a unique mode of historical thought, or crisis-history. Two German revolutions and another world war had convinced Baron about the validity and power of his historical interpretation. Crisis and history had become so entangled with each other that it is hardly surprising that he made them the cornerstone of his singular mode of historical thought.

Ranke once remarked: “Out of the conflict of opposing forces, in the great moment of danger, disaster, resurgence, and deliverance, new developments proceed most decisively.”²⁴⁵ Or in Baron’s paraphrase, the “most definitive innovations in history originate from the great experiences of danger—‘misfortune, regeneration, salvation.’”²⁴⁶ This was true not only of Florence in 1402 but also of Baron’s time as well, and, of course, of his life itself. The true mark of the historical process may indeed be crisis, but after misfortune comes regeneration and salvation. This is the great lesson of Baron’s The Crisis as well of his life.

²⁴⁴ Gregorio Dati, Istoria of Florence 1380-1406, as cited in The Crisis, p.188.
²⁴⁵ Ranke, “Universal Tendencies,” p. 150.
Epilogue

The humanist ideals of Bildung and the Enlightenment lived on, even under the Nazis. Among liberals and left-wing intellectuals, the flame was kept alive from exile; whether it continued to burn inside Germany is more difficult to determine. But it was the German Jewish Bildungsbourgertum [middle-class cultured intellectuals] which, more than any other single group, preserved Germany’s better self across dictatorship, war, holocaust, and defeat.

George L. Mosse, German Jews Beyond Judaism, 1985

Before concluding, we would like to address three important issues concerning the nature, content and form of Baron’s Crisis. First, it has been claimed that we should regard Baron’s Crisis as an American product or as “an American work.” Yet, if we should read The Crisis in the broad context of the struggles over the politics of history during the Weimar Republic, the Nazi Revolution and World War II, then the place where Baron wrote his celebrated work is not so important. The time, or the historical context, is the most important. Had he ended up in Turkey with Erich Auerbach who wrote Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature (1946), or joined Popper in exile in New Zealand where he composed both The Open Society and Its Enemies (1945) and The Poverty of Historicism (1957), he may well have written the same work. For the place was not the issue; the mission was all that concerned Baron. As Baron admitted in 1971:

It is true that, when between 1935 and 1955 the ‘sside’ [challenges] of varying ‘totalitarianisms’ to the older European traditions largely determined the political and intellectual climate, I began to interpret some basic aspect of the early-Renaissance conflicts on the eve of the nascent Quattrocento state-system in this light (and rightly so, as I think, the ‘Crisis’ proves). But this

247 Molho, “Hans Baron’s Crisis,” p. 75.
was an expansion and modification of a concept of ‘civic humanism’ formed in an earlier period. [Emphasis added].

Nowhere is evidence so plainly conclusive as to just how much the politics of history in Baron’s time so crucially informed the very history of politics of the early Italian Renaissance he was writing about.

Thus, at the beginning in 1920, Baron attacked the völkish revolution in history and historiography in his research seminar at Leipzig; then later constructed civic-humanism during the upheavals of Weimar Republic; and later on, when totalitarian regimes, such as Nazism and Fascism, endangered the whole European civilization with its classical, Renaissance, humanist, republican and Enlightenment traditions, Baron developed crisis-history as the clue to the evolution of the modern world. In all these cases, Renaissance humanism was crucial and central. Indeed, Baron was the Hedgehog who knows only one big thing. Yet, as Baron further admitted in the above letter, “his main inspiration” stemmed from “the exciting intellectual and ethical problems posed by Dilthey, Max Weber and Werner Jaeger’s ‘Third Humanism.’” The politics of history during the Weimar Republic thus greatly contributed to the origins of Baron’s Crisis, or to his awareness of the great threat facing his cherished European ideals by völkish ideology. Thus, as was the case with the writings of Cassirer, Popper, Strauss and Auerbach, to name only a few German-speaking, Jewish exiles, fascism’s threat to well-founded, humanist European traditions enormously influenced the composition of The Crisis as well as its unique form and content. Like the others, Baron was a Jew. Hence, this peril profoundly affected his very existential condition and not merely his academic life as a scholar. But he was unique in

249 Ibid, p. 85.
defending European traditions of humanism and republicanism, Renaissance and Enlightenment, in an age of tyranny, despotism and barbarism.

Second, some have argued that “issues of Jewish history” were “strikingly absent” from Baron’s “scholarly works.” This may seem right at first glance since there are indeed no explicit arguments or discussions of Jewish thought and history in his works. This was equally true of many other Jewish intellectuals who fled Europe from fascism: “In all the disciplines of social sciences, almost all Jews were shown to be careful in the exercise of their profession and in all the themes used for their research to limit the weight of their own past and to adopt a stance that does not place them ‘outside’ society.” They refused “categorically the logic of exclusion that is imposed on them.” Baron’s avoidance of issues pertaining to Jewish history thus seems in keeping with the thinking of fellow Jewish intellectuals driven into exile.

Yet, if our argument is correct, then all of Baron’s works are in fact a reaction to the two German revolutions that took place during his life, and his discovery of “civic humanism” was an emergency call to his crisis-ridden Germany to return to western humanistic traditions. In other words, his call amounted to a desperate attempt to re-establish, through Bildung and civic humanism, the Judeo-Christian foundations of European culture as a whole in face of the chauvinist and racist, völkisch ideology of history and historiography threatening to overrun European culture. While Baron eschewed directly discussing Jewish thought and history, he was a fine example of this thought and culture at its secular best. When the fate of Western civilization teetered precariously on the edge of the abyss, the legacy and values of Jewish history surely coursed through his thinking.

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250 Schiller, “Hans Baron’s Humanism,” p. 98
By emphasizing the merit of returning to the classical and Judeo-Christian humanist foundations of European history and culture, Baron’s thought mirrored the efforts of other prominent German-speaking, Jewish scholars whose exile pushed them to defend European civilization against fascist barbarism. All of them were German-speaking Jewish Bildungsbürgertum and were therefore dedicated to keeping alive the humanist ideals of Bildung, Renaissance, humanism and Enlightenment. Like them all, Baron was part of what George L. Mosse called “German Jews without Judaism,” who searched “for a personal identity beyond religion and nationality.” German nationalism, Nazism and Fascism “had wrenched” their lives “out of their course,” causing them all to marshal history, politics and literature in the fight against those who stood against the best of European civilization:

The humanist ideals of Bildung and the Enlightenment lived on, even under the Nazis. Among liberals and left-wing intellectuals, the flame was kept alive from exile; whether it continued to burn inside Germany is more difficult to determine. But it was the German Jewish Bildungsbürgertum [middle-class cultured intellectuals] which, more than any other single group, preserved Germany’s better self across dictatorship, war, holocaust, and defeat.

Fritz Stern has likewise claimed that German-Jewish intellectuals preserved the best of German culture from exile. According to him, when “German turned into a monstrous tyranny, we became the guardians of German history; from 1933 to 1945, German history was being written here [USA] and in England or not at all” [emphases ours]. And Arthur Rosenberg (1889-1943), another German-Jewish exiled historian, similarly observed: “Some day it will be seen that there was no active and critical historical research [in Germany] after 1933, that it indeed could not have existed, and that therefore the critical historical scholarship of Germany

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252 Mosse, German Jews Beyond Judaism, p. 2.
253 Ibid., p. 82.
had survived solely in emigration” [emphases ours]. This sense of great historical mission, which German-speaking, Jewish exiled historians like Baron bore, wove exile and interpretation inextricably together. In Baron’s case, as we have been at pains to show, the crisis of exilic displacement led to the creation of *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny*. For Baron, crisis, civic humanism, republican liberty, tyranny and despotism constituted not only crucial features of the early Italian Renaissance. They were no less central to the political agonies shaping his life. And this explains why he dedicated his life to writing so passionately about humanism and republican liberty in a past age of tyranny and barbarism.

Finally, and third, Baron’s discovery of civic humanism has obviously been historiographically far-reaching but we should not forget that historical discoveries, especially in intellectual history, are points of view in part. And as points of view, the interpretative narratives they occasionally set in motion can take on lives of their own that forget the contexts of their original discovery. Baron’s discovery of civic humanism in early fifteenth-century Florence is such an interpretative narrative. As we have been suggesting, he discovered Florentine civic humanism not just in the gloom of library archives but under the spreading gloom of another kind, namely völkish chauvinism. The latter threatened the civilizing and ennobling tradition whose sources Baron claimed to have unearthed. *Bürgerhumanismus* purportedly erupted in early fifteenth century Florence eventually infusing both German *Bildung* and the Atlantic Republican tradition, which fascism was threatening to annihilate. Nazism jeopardized a grand civilizing narrative that Baron saw himself as embodying and keeping alive in subsequent exile and which he seems to have cherished all-the-more having uncovered its remarkable and fragile origins.

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255 Hans Rosenberg as cited by Schulze, “German Historiography from 1930s to the 1950s,” p. 29.
Now there is no little irony in the fact that what Baron discovered became in his hands political intellectual weaponry for battling the spreading barbarism of his times. Surely his quickness to wield this weapon bears on his claims to have discovered its sources in early fifteenth century Florence. Maybe he found what he found because, in part, he was looking for it so intently and he was looking for it so intently precisely because so much seemed to him to be at stake in the late 1920s, including especially the humanizing tradition of *Bildung*. So what was partially motivated as ideological warfare on Baron’s part paradoxically became, when taken up subsequently by Cambridge School intellectual historians like Pocock and Skinner, a powerful, revisionist paradigm for interpreting modern intellectual history. Moreover, and equally ironically, the “fighting” method of reading historical texts that Baron deployed so candidly exemplifies the very kind of interpretative strategy that Pocock and Skinner have so vigorously eschewed. How odd that Baron’s discovery, and the interpretative method behind it, should produce such unforeseen fruit. Contextualizing how paradigms, including interpretative ones stressing the importance of contextualization itself, actually originate and grow surely deserves our contextualizing attention and efforts too.

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256 The Cambridge School refers to a type of historical methodology, namely contextualism or the study of political philosophical texts in their historical contexts. J.G.A Pocock, Quentin Skinner and John Dunn are its most notable exemplars. Pocock, especially, is credited with discovering the Atlantic Republican tradition referred to above, which he traces back to Florentine civic humanism following Baron.
Karl Popper and the Re-Invention of the History of Political Thought

“As with our children, so with our theories, and ultimately with all the work we do: our products become largely independent of their makers. We gain more knowledge from our children or from our theories than we ever imparted to them. This is how we can lift ourselves out of the morass of our ignorance.”

Introduction

Exiled in 1937 to the remoteness of New Zealand from the Viennese Jewish intellectual culture that nurtured him, Popper read his existential predicament into his interpretations of canonical texts, transforming the history and interpretive practice of Western political thought in the process. For Popper, the epoch’s political emergency was simultaneously an intellectual emergency, leading him to wield the history of political thought as an anti-totalitarian weapon, which he forged on the anvil of a freewheeling account of textual interpretation informed by his scientific method.

This chapter will demonstrate how anti-Semitism and forced exile encouraged Popper to adapt his scientific epistemology to an approach to textual interpretation justifying his idiosyncratic reinventions of Plato, Hegel and Marx as harbingers of modern fascism. In our view, textual interpretation is invariably polemical, especially when we are interpreting Plato, Hegel and Marx. That is, reading political philosophical texts necessarily rewrites them. We are condemned to re-spin whatever we read. But when our interpretations of such figures are self-

described war effort, fortified by a non-foundational epistemology, then we should not be surprised that our resulting re-spinning of Plato, Hegel and Marx should seem so reductively simplistic and polemically ideological.

Fighting Fascism and the Power of Ideas

This chapter examines Popper's approach to textual interpretation as well as some of the interpretations themselves. Popper’s thinking, no less than Auerbach, Baron and Strauss’s, was powerfully informed by the traumatic events of his generation. According to John Watkins, Popper completed the final draft of The Open Society and Its Enemies in October 1942. “With the Japanese drawing closer” to his New Zealand exile, he worked furiously “day and night for days on end” to finish it.258 Shortly thereafter, Popper wrote Ernst Gombrich that publishing the manuscript was most “urgent—if one can say such a thing at a time when only one thing is really important, the winning of the war.”259 As he later recounts, his decision to write The Open Society and Its Enemies “was made in March 1938, on the day I received the news of the invasion of Austria.”260 And as he recalls in his intellectual autobiography, Unended Quest, he “could no longer hold back” from waging intellectual battle against Hitler.261

259 E. H. Gombrich, “Personal Recollection of the Publication of The Open Society in Popper’s Open Society After 50 Years, eds. Ian Jarvie and Sandra Pralong (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 18. Gombrich is quoting from the first of many letters that he received from Popper in 1943. Gombrich played a crucial role in helping Popper publish The Open Society and Its Enemies. Popper first sent the manuscript to Alfred Braithal and Fritz Hellin in the United States. They sent the manuscript to Carl J. Friedrich at Harvard University, hoping that he would recommend it to Harvard University Press, which he did not. In April 1943, Popper wrote Gombrich in England asking him to query publishers there. Cambridge University Press rejected it and, thanks to F. A. Hayek’s assistance, it was finally accepted by Routledge where it appeared in 1945. Popper considered various titles such as A Social Philosophy for Everyman, Three False Prophets: Plato-Hegel-Marx, A Critique of Political Philosophy and The Open Society and its Antagonists before settling on its final title. See Watkins, “Karl Raimond Popper 1902-1994,” 656-59.
261 Karl Popper, Unended Quest, 128.
and Its Enemies was a “fighting book” as he confessed to Isaiah Berlin and A. J. Ayer while visiting Oxford in 1946.²⁶² Moreover, in Unended Quest, Popper describes The Open Society and Its Enemies and The Poverty of Historicism as his “war effort,” which he wrote “as a defence of freedom against the totalitarianism and authoritarian ideas, and as a warning against the dangers of historicist superstitions,” particularly Hegel’s.²⁶³ Given especially the “responsibility of Hegel and the Hegelians for much of what happened in Germany,” Popper felt obliged, “as a philosopher,” to expose Hegelianism for the politically perilous “pseudo-philosophy” that it was.²⁶⁴ Hegel’s historicism “encouraged” and “contributed to” totalitarian philosophizing and political practice.²⁶⁵

Of course, claiming that Hegel encouraged subsequently the rise of 20th century totalitarianism is not equivalent to claiming that he intended to do so. Just because 20th century

²⁶² Cited in David Edmonds and John Eidinow, Wittgenstein’s Poker (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 92. Shortly afterwards in a 1947 unpublished lecture “The Fundamental Ideas of The Open Society and Its Enemies,” Popper says at the outset that “‘The Open Society and Its Enemies’ is a war book.” He continues: “It seems that very few people have noticed that the book is a war book. The reason is, I suppose, not only that the war is never explicitly mentioned but also that it certainly is not a book about the war. It is, rather, a fighting book, an attempt, with the very moderate means at my disposal, to help to fight war.” The book’s “plan was to criticize these views [historicism, collectivism and anti-rationalism], to show their mystical character, and to strike, thereby, at the intellectual roots of totalitarianism in our own midst.” This is why the book, “with a certain amount of ruthlessness attacks those [Plato, Hegel and Marx] who uphold these views.” This why “it does not mince words.” For “holding as I do that these philosophies are largely responsible for the war and its aftermath of cruelty and starvation, I feel that is incumbent upon me to accuse, and to expose, these enemies and to expose them without hesitation.” (Karl-Popper-Sammlung der Universitätsbibliothek Klagenfurt, ????, 2. Popper never relented in insisting that intellectuals and their ideas were mattered politically and significantly: “War Intellektuellen haben schauerliche Dinge gemacht, wir sind eine große Gefahr. Wir bilden uns viel ein – wir wissen nicht, wie wenig wir wissen. Und wir Intellektuellen sind nich nur anmaßend sondern auch bestechlich.” Die Welt, “Im Gespräch mit Karl Popper,” 23 Februar 1990, 4.

²⁶³ Popper, Unended Quest, 131. Malachai Hacohen is correct in insisting that we misunderstand Popper’s political philosophy insofar as we fail to see it primarily as a response to fascism rather than communism. As Hacohen rightly notes, Popper has too often been seen as a Cold Warrior because The Open Society and Its Enemies appeared in 1945 and The Poverty of Historicism first appeared in English in 1957. See, for instance, Malachai Hacohen, Karl Popper: The Formative Years 1902-1945 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 10, where Hacohen writes regarding the The Poverty of Historicism specifically: “Most people read ‘Poverty’ only when it was published as a book, dedicated to the victims of Nazism and communism. As it came out the year after the Soviet repression of the Hungarian and Polish uprisings, and as Popper had the reputation of Marx’s foremost critic, it became another contribution to the cold war. Many of Popper’s arguments made little sense in this context—but no other existed.”

²⁶⁴ Popper, The Open Society and Its Enemies, 584-6.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 586-7.
totalitarians read and were influenced by Hegel does not establish that Hegel was himself a totalitarian. Indeed, he could not have been a totalitarian because the ideology of totalitarianism had not yet been invented when Hegel published *The Philosophy of Right* in 1821. Totalitarianism, as an ideological concept, was simply unavailable to him. Unfortunately, Popper fudged this logical distinction, conflating not just the fact of Hegel’s influence with Hegel’s intentions but conflating influence with intention in Plato and Marx as well. As Quentin Skinner would surely insist, Popper was guilty of interpretive “prolepsis.” More generally, as we will see, Popper misread other seminal philosophical texts, especially Plato’s *Republic*, by rationally reconstructing them anachronistically through the lenses of his political commitments and his emotional baggage of being an assimilated Jew exiled to the hinterlands of impotence in New Zealand while real history was being waged so dramatically and tragically without him in Europe though, as J.G.A. Pocock suggests, “the impotence in question was in fact Popper’s own.” Moreover:

Popper felt impotent because he desired two things: (1) to take part in the *philosophical war* against Hitler, (2) to be a recognized leader and authority figure in an exiled *Gelehrterrepublik* of a strictly German-Austrian and very largely Jewish kind. If he had found himself in London or New York, the exile community would have been large and articulate enough to accord him this role, but it has always been (and still is) a problem for people in New Zealand with high intellectual ambitions that the likeminded group is not big enough. Popper’s relations with the German/Austrian/Jewish refuges in New Zealand would show this clearly; there were quite a number of them, but not enough to give him recognition as the Herr Professor leader of a school

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and authority figure he desperately want to be. There were those—exiles and natives—who did
regard him in that light, but he despised them because they didn’t share his culture.  

**Ambivalence and Assimilation**

Despite the fact that his parents were Jewish by birth and the fact that he was so much a product
of Vienna’s Jewish intellectual culture, Popper was ambivalent about his Jewish identity. Popper
grew up as a quintessential assimilated Viennese *Bildungsbürger*. His parents converted to
Lutheranism in 1900, two years before he was born. In an interview with him not long before he
died, Friedrich Stadler, remarked, “Sie sagen, in Ihrer Familie ist die soziale Frage diskutiert
worden, und die jüdische Frage.” Popper responded “Die jüdische Frage so gut wie nicht.”
When Stadler persisted, “Die spielte keine Rolle?”, Popper responded, “Sehr wenig.”

Popper’s ambivalence about his Jewishness notwithstanding, the Austrofascists, who
came to power under Dollfuß in 1932, were not undecided in the least, which made exile in 1936
prudent for him. According to Watkins, because both his parents were of Jewish descent, not
only was “becoming a university teacher out of the question, but remaining a schoolteacher was
becoming difficult.” He had been “transferred to a school where most of the teachers were
crypto-Nazis, and there, as he put it later, he was ‘treated badly’, while Hennie [his wife], who

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267 From personal correspondence with the authors. Popper helped other German-speaking refugees exiled to New
Zealand. In particular, he invested considerable effort in assisting George Roth, a Viennese pharmacist, find
employment there. Like Popper, Roth did not consider himself Jewish, but was forced to flee nevertheless because
he had two Jewish grandparents and because his wife had Jewish ancestry: “Ich muss jedoch bermerken, dass ich auf
eine Hilfe durch eine jüdische Organisation nicht hoffen kann, da ich dem jüdischen Glauben nie angehört habe.
(Ich bin Protestant). Nach deutschem Gesetz gelte ich jedoch als Jude, weil meine Frau jüdischer Abstammung ist
und viel ich zwei jüdische Gosseltern habe.” (*Karl-Popper-Sammlung*, see # 30 ????, Blatt 2). Also see Peter
Munz, *Beyond Wittgenstein’s Poker* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 13-31 for Popper’s involvement as an advisor to a
German student at Canterbury College during the war.

268 Hans-Joachim Dahms and Friedrich Stadler, “Wundern Sie sich, wen ich nicht nach Wien zurückgehe?: Ein
was teaching at another school and was not of Jewish origin, suffered from being married to a Jew.”  

And as Popper recalled in 1972, “Austria at that time was ruled by a fascist dictatorship, and I realized that Hitler would soon invade the country and make it part of Germany.” Hence, being “of Jewish descent, I decided to immigrate.”

Before emigrating in 1936 from Austria to New Zealand, Popper applied to Britain’s Academic Assistance Council, which helped place refugee academics in British academic positions. Though in the application Popper described himself as “Protestant, namely evangelical but of Jewish origin,” he answered “no” next to the question whether he wished Britain’s Jewish community contacted to help sponsor him. And in his 1936 letter of application to the Universities Bureau of the British Empire for the post of Professor of Philosophy at Canterbury University College, Christchurch New Zealand, Popper again listed his religion as “Protestant.”

Yet in 1969, when the editor of the Jewish Year Book wrote him asking if he would agree to an entry about himself being included, Popper responded that though he was of “Jewish descent,” he “never belonged to the Jewish faith” and that he did not “see on what grounds I could possibly consider myself a Jew.”

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269 Watkins, “Karl Raimond Popper 1902-1904, 650. Watkins notes that this passage appears in a draft of Unended Quest but was deleted from the printed version.


271 Karl Popper, “Application and C.V. for Post of Professor of Philosophy, October 25, 1936,” Karl R. Popper Papers, Macmillan Brown Library, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand, MB 956, Popper, Item 25, Vol. 2. But the Universities Bureau of the British Empire, in its November 27, 1936 recommendation that Popper be appointed to the New Zealand post, deemed him Jewish: “Dr. Popper is a Jew, and is for that reason become ineligible for appointment in the University of Vienna. He has had to take a school appointment and has very inadequate means.” Karl R. Popper Papers, Macmillan Brown Library, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand, MB 959, Popper, Item 6, Vol. 2.

272 Edmonds and Eidenow, Wittgenstein’s Poker, 107-8. In 1982, Popper expressed similar sentiments in an angry letter to a Mr. Smith written in response to Smith’s sarcastic July 28, 1982 letter to The Times in response to its July 26 profile on Popper. Popper writes Smith: “I do not consider myself ‘an assimilated German Jew’: I think this is how ‘the Führer’ would have considered me. In fact, I was born, (like the Führer) in Austria, not in Germany, and I do not accept [racialism], even though it is a fact that I was born in a family that had been Jewish.” (Karl-Popper-Sammlung, ????). Still, as Hacohen following Joseph Agassi notes, Popper later agreed to be included in Herlinde Koelbe, Jüdische Portraits: Photographien und Interviews (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fisher, 1989). Gombrich, it should be noted, was also profiled in this volume. See Malachi Hacohen, “Cosmopolitanism, the European Nation
Hayek’s suggestion that he join him in taking up academic appointments in Salzburg. Writing to Hayek, he responded that anti-Semitism remained too robust in Austria. He then added: “I think that people of Jewish origin, like I [sic] (Hennie is of Lower Austrian peasant origins) should keep away, in order to allow the feeling to die down.”

In *Wittgenstein’s Poker*, Edmonds and Eidenow describe being Jewish “as belonging to a club from which there is no resignation.” And Popper might have appreciated better than he did the futility of trying to resign through assimilation and conversion. After all, as Malachi Hacohen puts it in his recent and very fine study of Popper:

The historian has the right, however, to interrogate Popper’s claim to have overcome the conditions of an “assimilated Jew.” In an open society, those declining to belong to any nationality might be recognized as Weltburger. Popper did not live in such a society. From childhood to death, his closest friends were assimilated Jews. He grew up in an assimilated Jewish family. Progressive Viennese circles were essential to his intellectual formation and Central European networks to his intellectual growth. Both were preponderantly Jewish. His cosmopolitanism emerged from Jewish marginality and reflected the assimilated Jews’

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273 Cited in Hacohen, *Karl Popper: The Formative Years 1902-1945*, 522. Years earlier shortly after Germany’s surrender, Rudolf Carnap wrote Popper asking whether he would ever consider taking up an academic position in Vienna. Popper responded unequivocally, “No, never!” He apparently declined subsequently an offer of a chair at the University of Vienna, which was filled by Victor Kraft. But Popper did return to Vienna for a few months in 1985, taking up a short appointment at the Bolzmann Institute. See Watkins, *Karl Raimond Popper 1902-1994,* 664 and 674. The post-war, reconstituted Viennese Jewish community seems to have always regarded Popper as Jewish. See, for instance, the 80th birthday wishes sent to Popper by Dr. Ivan Hacker in his capacity as President der Israelitischen Kulturgemeinde Wein on October 11, 1982. (*Karl-Popper-Sammlung,* ??????).

274 Edmonds and Eidenow, *Wittgenstein’s Poker*, 107. Leo Strauss called this predicament the “problem of the Western Jewish individual who or whose parents severed his connection with the Jewish community in the expectation that he would thus become a normal member of a purely liberal…universal human society, and who is…perplexed when he finds no such society.” See Leo Strauss [1965], *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 7.
dilemmas. Anti-Semitism drove him to exile. He retained a special relationship to Jewish nationality, condemning it, yet feeling responsible for it.\footnote{Hacohen, \textit{Karl Popper: The Formative Years 1902-1945}, 308-9. Furthermore, according to Hacohen (325), Popper lost sixteen uncles, aunts and cousins, some at Auschwitz, because they were Jewish. Hacohen also rightly emphasizes that most of the Vienna Circle’s membership was Jewish (189). According to Dahms, Vienna Circle members emigrated mostly to the United States directly because academic dismissals in Austria occurred several years after they began in Germany. Though Austria had become sufficiently hostile to Jewish academics prior to the 1938 \textit{Anschluss}, any Jewish civil servants still employed, including university professors, lost their positions almost immediately after the “Law of the Reunification of Austria with the German Reich” was implemented on March 13. Dismissed German Jewish academics, by contrast, “did not immediately wish to take the step which they considered final, namely, the one across the Atlantic Ocean, but wanted first to observe the further development from a location within reach of their home country.” See Hans-Joachim Dohms, “The Emigration of the Vienna Circle” in Friedrich Stadler and Peter Weibel, eds., \textit{The Cultural Exodus from Austria} (Vienna and New York: Springer-Verlag, 1995), 63 and 67. Dohms also notes ironically and citing Carl Hempel that the “strongest motive for spreading Logical Empiricism abroad was the dissolution of the Vienna, Berlin and related groups due to the ideological madness and the terror of National Socialism.” (61). Of course, though Popper was never a logico-positivist, he frequently participated in Vienna Circle discussions. Indeed, Popper’s anti-inductionism, which grounds his philosophy of science, was formulated in response to his ongoing disputes with Vienna Circle positivists.} In short, Popper always remained an assimilated Jew despite his ambivalence about being Jewish. Jewishness indelibly marked him, informing his political theory ineluctably as much as his anti-totalitarianism, his neo-Kantian cosmopolitanism and, as we shall see, his philosophy of science informed it.\footnote{Popper’s assimilationism and anti-Zionism sometimes skirted the edges of anti-Semitism. Reflecting on Jewish emancipation in Austria after WWI, he observed in \textit{Unended Quest}, 121-2, that too many Jews “understandably but not wisely entered politics and journalism.” Regrettably: “Most of them meant well; but the influx of Jews into the parties of the left contributed to the downfall of those parties. It seemed quite obvious that, with much latent popular anti-Semitism about, the best service which a good socialist who happened to be of Jewish origin could render to his party was \textit{not} to try to play a role in it. Strangely enough, few seemed to think of this obvious rule.” Joseph Agassi comments that he seldom heard Popper express anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist views: “I never heard him make any vulgar remark with the exception of his already mentioned anti-semitic and anti-Zionist remarks which were rarely expressed and then very briefly.” To Agassi’s insistence that “the Zionist venture is a \textit{fait accompli}…he responded by suggesting that the U.S. should grant free admission to all Israelis so to reverse the process.” He expressed both “utter indifference to the national sentiment, as he always did when discussing any matter pertaining to nationalism, and his specific, strong distaste for the Jewish national sentiment, thus making lavish acknowledgment of his deep Jewish bond, his protestations to the contrary notwithstanding.” See Joseph Agassi, \textit{A Philosopher’s Apprentice} (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), 128. Agassi also claims that he convinced Popper to “admit the most offensive anti-Semitic expressions” from later editions of \textit{The Open Society and Its Enemies}. (26).} However ambivalent Popper was about his Jewish identity, Peter Munz has doubted that his “Jewishness influenced or motivated” his thinking. According to Munz, Popper never denied his Jewish background but he would have considered it “totally irrelevant to doing philosophy.” Though, according to Munz, he unquestionably saw himself as fighting fascism in \textit{The Poverty}
of Historicism and The Open Society and it Enemies, he never saw himself as “fighting anti-Semitism specifically” in either work. And contrary to Bryan Magee, Munz did not see Popper’s silent response to Magee’s query as to whether he was Jewish as a sign of discomfort and self-doubt. For Munz, Popper’s silence was not the reticence of “confusion, embarrassment or anxiety,” but was rather that of “simply not knowing how to factually characterize himself.” It was merely the “silence of descriptive uncertainty.”

Popper’s ambivalence about being Jewish, despite being victimized by anti-Semitism and being forced into exile, was not accompanied by analogous ambivalence about Zionism. Jewish nationalism was both “stupid” and “wrong” racial pride like so many other nationalisms. Zionism was just the “petrified” tribalism of the European Jewish ghetto displaced to Palestine. Israel’s treatment of Palestinians made him “ashamed in [his] origin.”

According to Hacohen, Popper embodied the spirit of Spätaufklärung (late Enlightenment), which caused him to project his disappointed cosmopolitan political aspirations onto an “imaginary Republic of science” where scientists were citizens of science first and citizens of nations last. As Hacohen nicely says, much like Popper’s imaginary republic of science, his republic of politics was the “last version” of the “old imperial dream” of fin-de-siècle Viennese Jewry: “Timeless and contextless, free of national, ethnic, or racial distinctions,” the open society “was the assimilated Jewish philosopher’s cosmopolitan homeland.” Primarily conceived during Popper’s exile in New Zealand, his open society envisioned a postexilic restoration of an imagined community in which Popper could ‘arrive at his destination and

278 Popper, Unended Quest, 120.
279 Cited in Edmonds and Eidinow, Wittgenstein’s Poker, 108.
A cosmopolitan Jew who refused to be Jewish, then, Popper displaced his frustrated assimilationist dreams into the emancipatory, impartiality of neo-Kantian republicanism and dispassionate science.

In sum then, for Popper, whereas the republic of science required its citizens to assimilate by being non-sectarian and remaining open to criticism in order that epistemological emancipation (truth) might prevail, the open society similarly required its citizens to assimilate by displaying open-mindedness and embracing tolerance so that political emancipation (freedom) might flourish. Both truth and freedom presupposed non-sectarian equanimity but only as a necessary though insufficient condition. By contrast, epistemological and political dogmatism were mutually-reinforcing tribalisms, facilitating falsity and unfreedom. All religions were therefore tribalisms of ignorance and superstition. Likewise all nationalisms, including Zionism, were ethnocentric fantasies overflowing with exclusionary intoxicating fevers.

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Being a Jew and Being of Jewish Origin

Now in suggesting that Jewishness, along with other factors, “informed,” Popper’s political theorizing, we are not claiming that *The Open Society and Its Enemies* and *The Poverty of Historicism* were Jewish philosophy. Conceivably, both books could have been written, and written from the same approach to textual interpretation, by non-Jewish philosophers forced into exile by Nazism because they were communists, socialists, or homosexual. Hence, Popper’s canon and his method of reading and constructing it, are not reducible to whether or not, and in what sense, he considered himself a Jew.

Regardless of whether Popper identified himself as a Jew, the fact of exile clearly informed his political theorizing and interpretative methodology. He wanted to fight fascism but he was unfit for military service as well as too far away from the war. Exile was frustrating but he could still fight philosophically.

When interpreting Popper, or any political philosopher for that matter, one should distinguish *why* he wrote what he did from his *intentions*, or motives, in writing what he did. By *why* someone writes as they do, we mean the background conditions that explain what and how they write. *Why* someone writes as they do in this unconventional sense does not, or need not, directly motivate their writing. Being categorized biologically as a Jew by Nazis conditioned Popper’s political philosophy in part in the sense that had he not been categorized as a Jew, he would not have fled into exile, which directly motivated him, as much as anything did, to write unconventional history of political thought. Being categorized as a Jew by the Nazis, and his fears about what would happen to him if he ignored their categorization, may have had little or nothing to do with Popper’s preference for categorizing himself as merely of “Jewish origin.” And being categorized as a Jew may therefore have had little to do with his motives for
combating fascism via political philosophy. Therefore, one cannot say that he intended to write what he wrote because he considered himself a Jew, however ambivalently. That is, Popper neither wrote *The Open Society and Its Enemies* and *The Poverty of Historicism* intending to defend himself or others as Jews.

But Popper did self-consciously identify himself as a cosmopolitan liberal, exiled against his wishes, resolutely committed to fighting fascism with philosophy quite explicitly and anti-Semitism implicitly (not because he saw himself as Jewish or not but because he saw anti-Semitism as a form of racism, which he abhorred and wanted to annihilate). Rather, Popper saw himself as fighting fascism, and all its attendant prejudices, from distant exile and this is how we should interpret his political philosophizing *in part*. How Popper saw himself doing what he was doing is unquestionably relevant to our getting him right. But how others saw him is equally relevant though perhaps less obviously so. In other words, how others see us may have little to do with how we consciously see ourselves, how we insist on identifying ourselves, and therefore may have little to do overtly or directly with our motives for writing what we do. How others see us constitutes what we are calling a background condition, which nevertheless partially explains why we write as we do. And if how others see us leads them to threaten our lives, then their threats will invariably indirectly motivate us to write as we do however much we adamantly prefer to see ourselves differently. Identities are imposed as much as they are chosen. And maliciously imposed identities powerfully motivate us indirectly whether we like it or not.

Though *being a Jew* is not equivalent to *being of Jewish origin* (which Popper never denied), he sometimes nevertheless felt himself to be a Jew. For instance, by acknowledging that Israel’s mistreatment of Palestinians made him feel “ashamed in [his Jewish] origins,” he implicitly identified with those origins. That is, he implicitly identified with being at least
Jewish if not with being a Jew. To feel ashamed is to acknowledge responsibility. And to acknowledge responsibility is to admit an identity.

The significant logical question, then, is whether Popper could have written *The Open Society and Its Enemies* and *The Poverty of Historicism* from the same motives had he not been deemed Jewish by the Nazis but fled Austria for some other reason. If our answer is “yes,” then even identifying himself as Jewish, let alone being identified as Jewish by others, might well be insignificant to interpreting his writing from exile. Still, being forced into exile would nevertheless remain relevant notwithstanding whether Popper considered himself Jewish or not. For clearly, exile and its frustrations motivated him to fight a war of ideas with such zeal and with such an idiosyncratic account of our political philosophical canon.

In sum, although Popper never identified himself as being Jewish, he explicitly identified himself as being of Jewish origin. (And at least in one case in response to Magee’s query about whether he was a Jew, Popper could not say “no” though he also could not say “yes” either.) We may not be able to determine precisely how, and to what extent, these modes of identification informed his interpretation and construction of our political philosophical canon. But there is little doubt that anti-Semites identified him as a Jew according to their vicious criteria, that Popper understood what this meant and that he fled into exile as a consequence. And this forced exile provided him with more than enough reasons, though there were clearly others as well, to fight fascism by writing eccentric history of political thought. In other words, Jewish identity partially explains indirectly why he wrote political philosophy in the way that he did though it may not directly inform his intentions in writing political philosophy as he did. In this sense at a

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282 Answering “yes” might not make Popper’s sense of Jewish identity irrelevant because it is logically possible that just being considered Jewish or just being considered communist could motivate identical approaches to political philosophizing. Just because two separate causes engender identical effects does not entail that we can effortlessly infer which cause produced which of the two identical effects.
minimum, Charles Taylor is entirely justified in accusing Popper of “argu[ing] from the concentration camp.”

**Historicism and Totalitarianism: “Argument From the Concentration Camp”**

According to Frederick Beiser, “there can be no doubt that historicism was one of the most important intellectual movements of the nineteenth century.” But, Beiser continues, it “not easy to say” just what historicism amounted to as it has “meant many things to many people.”

Nonetheless, Beiser insists that several principles characterize any historicism. First, for every version, “all values and institutions are the product of time and place.” Second, “everything in the human world has to be understood within its specific social-historical context,” making all social-historical phenomenon radically context dependent. Third, despite their commitment to radical context-dependency, historicists have typically insisted that history can nevertheless be formulated scientifically albeit in keeping, as Droysen, Dilthey and Burckhardt in particular have stressed, with its own standards and methods. And finally, radical historical dependency did not necessarily entail that there were no universal moral principles. Troeltsch and Meinecke in particular struggled mightily to avoid conceding that historicism invited moral relativism.

Whether or not Beiser is correct in ascribing these four principles to all varieties of historicism,

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285 Ibid., 158. Beiser continues, “This point is directed against our natural tendency to hypostasize social-historical phenomena, as if they have an identity independent of their context; the historicist teaches that the more concrete we become, i.e. the more we individuate our object, the more we find that its identity depends on its context.”
286 Ibid., 162. Beiser also notes that historicists typically rejected Hegelian and Marxist accounts of history as too metaphysical and superficially scientific. (157).
287 Ibid., 168.
one can safely say that they informed its German variant, which is why in our discussion of Strauss we earlier characterized this variant as the German Historical School.  

Now Popper rejected both historical and moral relativism, insisting that both kinds of relativists confuse relativism with fallibilism. Whereas for Popper, absolute truth in the Cartesian sense was illusory, “there exists a very different doctrine of absolute truth, in fact a fallibilist doctrine, which asserts that mistakes we make can be absolute mistakes, in the sense that our theories can be absolutely false, that they can fall short of the truth.” We may not be able to prove our theories absolutely true but we can expose them as often being absolutely false. So Popper hesitated conceding, much like Troeltsch and Meinecke, that moral relativism followed from radical historical dependency or from what he called “historical frameworks.” This conclusion was tempting but it was a myth all the same. And like Strauss, he warned that this “false story” though “widely accepted, especially in Germany” for some time now had “invaded America” where it had become very regrettably “almost all-pervasive.”

Notwithstanding Popper’s palpable anti-historical and moral relativism and therefore what looks like traditional anti-historicism, Popper understood historicism very differently and unconventionally. He idiosyncratically defined historicism as historical inevitability (though he eventually regretted doing so) and argued repeatedly against it. Consequently, we should not

288 Also see Dwight E. Lee and Robert N. Beck, “The Meaning of ‘Historicism,’” *The American Historical Review*, 59 (April, 1954), 570-73 for characterizing the German “school” of history as essentially historicist. Though some might challenge our claim that the German Historical School actually existed and was characteristically historicist, not just Iggers but other post-war scholars like Lee and Beck clearly held this view. Also see F. Engel-Janosi, *The Growth of German Historicism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1944), which Popper reviewed for Hayek’s *Economica* in 1945.


290 Ibid., 24.

291 For Popper’s unhappiness about having defined historicism as historical inevitability, see Karl Popper, “Speech on the Theory of Knowledge and on the Philosophy of History,” (Karl-Popper-Sammlung, ?????????? nd.), 11, where he says, “I have usually called it [historical determinism] myself by a name, I regret now that I ever introduced this name, but it can’t be helped, I have called it by the name Historicism.”
confuse the unusual way he understood the term with more conventional understanding described by Beiser and others. For Popper, historicism is the view that history is governed by historical laws that make historical prediction possible. By contrast, for him, historism means what historians have traditionally meant by historicism.292

Popper’s earlier critics, such as Hans Meyerhoff, derided him for setting up and attacking a “parody of historicism” that bore little resemblance to Meinecke, Croce and Collingwood’s more established definitions of the term.293 But Alan Donogan has perceptively defended Popper, arguing that his language would be misleading only if the German word “Historismus” generally meant the English “historicism” at the time Popper was writing *The Poverty of Historicism* and *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. But the German term did not convey this meaning at that time. According to Donagan, when Popper was writing *The Poverty of Historicism* and *The Open Society and Its Enemies* in his New Zealand exile, historismus was typically translated as historism, namely the view that ideas and truth were relative to the historical contexts that produced them. Hence, Popper was perfectly entitled to deploy

292 For a helpful though sometimes awkward discussion of what Popper means by historicism vs. historism, see Wenceslao J. Gonzalez, “The Many Faces of Popper’s Methodological Approach to Prediction” in *Karl Popper: Critical Appraisals*, ed. Philip Catton and Graham Macdonald (London and New York: Routledge, 2004). According to Gonzalez: “The main features of his conception of ‘historicism’ are: (i) its specific realm is the sphere of necessity, because the human being appears to be carrying on towards the future by irresistible forces… (ii) this view possesses a clear methodological character, which highlights impersonal factors in social change, and it is connected with a non-relativistic orientation, which tends to dogmatism (what is true is the ‘law of change’); and (iii) this position does not accept the epistemological pluralism, because it assumes a theoretical framework to explain and to appraise the historical evolution of society…” (87). By contrast: “In fact, the features which he attributes to ‘historism’ are quite different from historicism: (a) historism rejects a static view of the social world and criticizes the idea of ‘human nature’ or ontological structure of the person (the human -- in the extreme version – does not have freedom: he or she is freedom); (b) this approach denies the existence of truth as an absolute value, which leads it towards a methodological relativism in the main advocates; and (c) it offers a defence of a pluralistic epistemological framework, which impedes the existence of a stable conceptual framework to appraise the contents of social sciences and increases the insistence in the importance of each historical period…” (87-8).

293 In *The Philosophy of History in Our Time*, ed. Hans Meyerhoff (New York: Doubleday, 1959), Hans Meyerhoff claims: “To have a target to shoot at, Mr. Popper has set up a false image of historicism. What he has criticized as ‘the poverty of historicism’ is a parody of historicism. It has nothing to do with the movement of historicism as defined and analyzed in the classic work of Friedrich Meinecke nor with the modern historicism of Dilthey and his successors” (299-300).
histrionicism as he did with such novelty.\textsuperscript{294} Replying to Donagan, Popper not unexpectedly approved Donagan’s defense of his terminology though he added that Donagan failed to appreciate how historicism and historism have often been conceptually intertwined.\textsuperscript{295}

Popper’s unconventional understanding of historicism notwithstanding, both \textit{The Poverty of Historicism} and \textit{The Open Society and Its Enemies} excoriated historicism on the basis of the epistemology of his earlier \textit{Logik der Forschung}. Whereas, according to Popper, \textit{The Poverty of Historicism} analyzed and criticized “anti-naturalistic” and “pro-naturalistic” varieties of historicism,\textsuperscript{296} \textit{The Open Society and Its Enemies} traced three “events,” namely Plato, Hegel and Marx, in historicism’s “pernicious influence” on philosophy and politics. Both works, moreover, condemned historicism for justifying totalitarianism. According to Popper, Hegel was especially dangerous for liberal political theory because, by reconceptualizing it through the prism of historicism, he contaminated it. Since historicism encouraged political fatalism, it tended to excuse totalitarianism’s evils. “Harsh words” needed to be spoken about counterfeit liberals, like Hegel, as well as about anti-liberals such as Plato and Marx if our “civilization is to survive.”\textsuperscript{297} These “harsh words” must be said in “memory of the countless” victims of belief in the “Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny.”\textsuperscript{298}

For Popper, historicism, especially anti-naturalistic historicism, was so politically dangerous because it was fundamentally a metaphysical superstition. Or rather, to borrow from

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\item[295] Karl Popper, “Replies to My Critics” in \textit{The Philosophy of Karl Popper}, 1173.
\item[296] For Popper, “pro-naturalistic” historicists assert that history is explainable by scientific laws and was therefore predictable. Marx exemplified “pro-naturalistic” historicism. “Anti-naturalistic” historicists hold that history is likewise predetermined and predictable though not scientifically. “Anti-naturalistic” historicists like Plato and Hegel see history as somehow metaphysically programmed to turn back endlessly on itself or teleologically to complete itself.
\item[297] Popper, \textit{The Open Society and Its Enemies}, xxxiii.
\item[298] Karl Popper [1957], \textit{The Poverty of Historicism} (London and New York: Routledge 1997) dedication. In his personal signed copy of the original edition of \textit{The Poverty of Historicism}, Popper writes under his signature: “My \textit{Poverty of Historicism} was a kind of reply to [Proudhon’s] \textit{Misère de la Philosophie}.” Popper’s personal copy can be found in Karl-Popper-Sammlung.
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Hacohen, it was contaminated metaphysics.\footnote{Hacohen writes that Popper’s “attack on Plato, Aristotle, and Hegel in *The Open Society* marked not a logical positivist seeking to eliminate metaphysics but a Kantian trying to prevent its contamination.” Hacohen, *Karl Popper: The Formative Years 1902-1945*, 209.} Being neo-Kantian, Popper was simply interested in keeping metaphysics in its post-critical place and not in banishing it as entirely meaningless, as logico-positivists sought to do. There was good metaphysics and there was bad metaphysics. Whereas the former variety inquired into the presuppositions of empirical knowledge, corrupted varieties, like historicism, over-reached by postulating grand historical laws that could not possibly be empirically confirmed or refuted. Such spoiled varieties were merely mythologies and, therefore, meaningless. And, for Popper, historical mythologies, especially grand dramas about irresistible historical forces, were politically dangerous indulgences because, as suggested above, they promoted fatalistic thinking, which, in turn, justified systematic political violence and suffering as unavoidable.

At best, in Popper’s view, historical trends allow us to make weak conditional predictions to the effect that, given continuing historical circumstances, certain historical consequences will likely follow. Historical trends don’t entail unconditional prophecies as historicists wrongly suppose. Purported historical laws cannot be tested and therefore falsified. They thus excuse political repression. Rather than trying to be “all-knowing prophets,” we should “cautiously feel the ground ahead of us, as cockroaches do.”\footnote{Karl Popper, “Freedom and Intellectual Responsibility” in *Lessons of This Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 91.}

Now Popper willingly conceded that his account of historicism was an historical exaggeration. He frankly admitted that no philosopher ever actually defended the varieties of historicism that he criticized.\footnote{Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, 3.} This remarkable concession can mean one of two things, it seems to us. Either Popper felt comfortable attributing historicism to Plato, Hegel and Marx
because he was never really interested in correctly interpreting any of them to begin with.

Rather, he regarded historicist thinking as perilous politically and felt compelled to attribute it to whichever philosophers it came closest to fitting. As a philosopher doing his bit to fight fascism, he had to put historicism into the mouths of some credible philosophic opponents. Historicist thinking was a real danger. It was out there infecting and animating public intellectual discourse and it had to be exposed and marginalized. But he was a philosopher who was used to doing battle mostly with fellow philosophers and he was good at it. Whether Hegel really said what Popper claimed he said was not as relevant as the menace of what later neo-Hegelians took him to say. Reading Hegel carefully and sensitively was secondary. As Popper admitted in the Addenda to the 1962, fourth edition of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, in interpreting Hegel, he “neither could nor wished to spend unlimited time upon deep researches into the history of a philosopher whose work I abhor.”

Alternatively, Popper’s surprising concession, that he was mostly interested in “building up a position really worth attacking” even though no one had, in fact, ever defended such a position, could have meant that he truly was interested in properly interpreting historicists. Unfortunately, correct interpretations were illusory. There were no such things as authentic and authoritative interpretations of philosophical texts. Even the best intentioned interpretations were rational constructions. Therefore, by conceding unapologetically that he was perfecting arguments that no historicist ever made in fact, Popper was simply restating, albeit rather crudely, the idea that textual interpretation was inherently unstable and conjectural. We shall return to this account of his approach to textual interpretation momentarily because we believe that it follows from his epistemological skepticism and his rejection of induction. But regardless

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303 For Popper’s admission that, in reconstructing philosophers like Plato, Hegel and Marx, he was really just interested in making them “worth attacking,” see ibid., ?????
of the sources of his method of textual interpretation, the method itself proved polemically
fecund as we shall shortly see as well.

In a 1957 review of *The Poverty of Historicism*, Pocock remarks, “It is not to fall into the
trap of asking what historicism ‘really or properly or essentially means’ to remark that there must
be something in the real world to which the model corresponds.” Indeed, Pocock wonders
rhetorically, “Who are or were the men [Popper] called historicists?” In any case, even if Popper
was beating a real philosophical horse, it was one that was one long since slain: “But what
audience does the author wish to reach that needs converting in 1957? Here the reviewer should
confess his bias. As an undergraduate in New Zealand, twelve years ago, he heard Dr Popper
lecture on historicism, and it may be that the seeds of the ideas were killed in him so thoroughly
then that he cannot appreciate the need to kill them in others today.”

More recently, Munz has defended Popper’s method of reconstructing philosophical
texts, especially texts of those he regards as dangerously wrongheaded. Nonetheless, even Munz
has conceded that Popper was not so much interested in correctly interpreting Plato, Hegel and
Marx as he was in reconstructing their theories as formidably as possible in order to strike down
these reconstructions. Popper was “not really interested in what Plato or Hegel or Marx *actually*
said but what one could make them say in making the strongest case on their behalf.” Likewise

Herbert Marcuse similarly disparaged the strangeness of Popper’s interpretive method: “What a strange method to
build up a position really worth attacking and then to attack it! Why does the critic have to construct the target of
his attack? I would have passed over the statement as a mere manner of speech if I did not believe that this method
is characteristic of much philosophical analysis. In reading Popper’s book, I often stopped and asked: against what
is he really arguing? Who has actually maintained what he is so efficiently destroying? And often I was unable to
identify the attacked theory (especially since Popper is extremely sparing with references.)” See Herbert Marcuse,
“Karl Popper and the Problem of Historical Laws” in Herbert Marcuse, *Studies in Critical Philosophy*, (London:
NLB, 1972), 197. But, to repeat, perhaps Popper was never much interested in accurately interpreting philosophical
texts because he was primarily interested in using texts to solve philosophical (and political) problems, such as the
conditions of political freedom, or because he eschewed the very possibility of the existence of correct textual
interpretations. Marcuse’s aside that Popper’s method typifies how analytically-trained philosophers go wrong
when they try their hand at intellectual history remains relevant to this day.
and more generally, Popper “was never much interested in historical ‘explanation’ as he was in historical ‘interpretation.’”

But even if the source of Popper’s interpretive methodology lay in his skepticism and dismissal of induction, the end result was much the same. If correct interpretations were illusory, then whether one was really interested or not in interpreting other philosophers accurately did not matter. If accurate interpretations were specious, then one might as well guiltlessly and shamelessly appropriate and recast past philosophers to fight fascism and demolish the concentration camp.

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305 From interview with Weinstein, May 23, 2006. More recently, Ian Jarvie has called Popper’s interpretive strategy “Popper’s Hermeneutic Rule,” which stipulates, according to Jarvie: “Always try to reformulate the position under discussion in its logically strongest form.” Accordingly, this rule “enjoins us that where an author has formulated a promising position in a way that is vulnerable to some obvious objection, the commentator should first try to improve upon it before subjecting it to criticism – not for the author’s sake but for the sake of the inquiry. Weak positions easily knocked down do not advance inquiry. We learn more from criticizing strong positions, whether they in the end succumb to criticism or not.” In effect, then, we remake our opponents not out of straw but out of steel for the sake of epistemological progress. Only successfully dismantling or refuting the latter is worth our while. See Ian Jarvie, “Popper’s Idea Types: Open and Closed, Abstract and Concrete Societies” in Popper’s Open Society After 50 Years, 77-8.
Critical Rationalism and Critical Interpretation

“Indeed, a great work of music (like a great scientific theory) is a cosmos imposed upon chaos.”

Popper sometimes claimed that the best textual interpretations were always reorganized rational reconstructions. Indeed, intellectual historians “who believe that they do not need an interpretation, and that they can ‘know’ a philosopher or his work, and take him just ‘as he was’, or his work just ‘as it was’, are mistaken. They cannot but interpret both the man and his work; but since they are not aware of the fact that they interpret (that their view is coloured by tradition, temperament, etc.), their interpretation must necessarily be naïve and uncritical.” By contrast, “critical interpretation must take the form of a rational construction, and must be systematic” by reconstructing “the philosopher’s thought as a consistent edifice.” According to Popper, as A. C. Ewing said about properly interpreting Kant, “we ought to start with the assumption that a great philosopher is not likely to be always contradicting himself, and consequently, wherever there are two interpretations, one of which will make Kant consistent and the other inconsistent, prefer the former to the latter, if reasonably possible.” In short, deliberate “systematization is a necessary test of any interpretation.”

Preferred textual interpretations, then, make sense of texts by rearticulating them systematically. They impose coherence on textual realities much like scientific hypotheses impose coherence on empirical reality (and like great music orders chaos). They are therefore

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306 Popper, *Unended Quest*, 63. Theories are like fine musical creations. Like beautiful musical achievements, “we create the world: not the real world, but our own nets in which we try to catch the real world.” (65). Also see Popper’s short essay on Kant, “Philosopher of the Enlightenment,” *The Listener* (February 18, 1954), 292, where he writes; “He [Kant] shows us not only that our location in the physical universe is irrelevant, but also that, in a sense, our universe may well be said to turn about us; for it is we who produce, at least in part, the order we find in it; it is we who create our knowledge of it. We are discoverers: and discovery is a creative art.”

tentative conjectures too. And just the way logico-positivists mistakenly and naively thought
that good science simply read inductively the natural world “out there” just “as it was,” uncritical
readers naively supposed that texts, including philosophical texts, were similarly just “out there”
waiting to be correctly read as long as we scrutinized them carefully without prejudice.

Not surprisingly, Popper also held that just as correct textual interpretations unfiltered by
bias do not exist, there is likewise “no such thing as a grammatically correct and also almost
literal translation of any interesting text.” Rather, every “good translation is an interpretation
of the original text; and I would even go so far as to say that every good translation of a
nontrivial text must be a theoretical reconstruction.” Although “most languages seem to be
intertranslatable,” they are “mostly badly intertranslatable,” which is just another way of saying
that all translations reconstruct invariably to some degree at least. A “precise translation of a
difficult text simply does not exist” because the “idea of a precise language, or precision in
language [contrary to the Vienna Circle by-and-large], seems to be altogether misconceived.” And
this idea is fundamentally misplaced because the “quest for precision is analogous to the quest
for certainty, and both should be abandoned.”

Thus, for Popper, points of view characterized textual interpretations (and translations)
just as they did historical interpretations of which they were a mode. Just as “history has no
meaning” outside of the meaning we give it, so philosophical texts mean what we impute to
them. Just as historicists fail to see that we “select and order” historical facts, naïve readers don’t

308 Also see ibid., 229.
310 Popper, Unended Quest, 21-22. Popper continues: “Every increase in clarity is of intellectual value in itself; an
increase in precision or exactness has only a pragmatic value as a means to some definite end—where the end is
usually an increase in testability or criticizability demanded by the problem situation (which for example may
demand that we distinguish between two competing theories which lead to predictions that can be distinguished only
if we increase the precision of our measurements.” (22).
see that reading is simultaneously selecting. Both naïve historicists and naïve readers fail to recognize that they interpret from a point of view. If they were not so unsophisticated, they would concede that their points of view were simply one of many possibilities and that, even if we prefer to call them theories, we should demur from assuming them to be easily testable theories. Hence, unlike our best scientific conjectures which are objective and certain insofar as they are testable and falsifiable, historical and textual interpretations are necessarily uncertain and subjective.

Furthermore, regarding historical interpretations specifically, Popper contends: “Such untestable historical theories can then rightly be charged with being circular in the sense which this charge has been unjustly brought against scientific theories. I shall call such historical theories, in contradistinction to scientific theories, ‘general interpretations.’” Moreover, Popper continues: “But we have seen that a point of view is always inevitable, and that, in history, a theory which can be tested and which is therefore of scientific character can only rarely be obtained. Thus we must not think that a general interpretation can be confirmed by its agreement often with all our records; for we must remember its circularity, as well as the fact that there will always be a number of other (and perhaps incompatible) interpretations that agree with the same

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311 Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 545-6 and 555. For Popper’s account of how the meaning of the term “interpretation” has purportedly evolved much like the meaning of the term “reading,” see Karl Popper, “On the Sources of Knowledge and Ignorance” in Karl Popper [1963], *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: Routledge, 1989), 13-14. Note especially Popper’s comment: “I have here used the word ‘reading’ as a synonym for ‘interpretation’, not only because the two meanings are so similar but also because ‘reading’ and ‘to read’ have suffered a modification analogous to that of ‘interpretation’ and ‘to interpret’; except that in the case of ‘reading’ both meanings are still in full use. In the phrase ‘I have read John’s letter’, we have the ordinary non-subjectivist meaning. But “I read this passage of John’s letter quite differently’ or perhaps ‘My reading of this passage is very different’ may illustrate a later, a subjectivistic or relativistic, meaning of the word ‘reading.’” Popper then adds: “I assert that the meaning of ‘interpret’ (though not in the sense of ‘translate’) has changed in exactly the same way, except that the original meaning – perhaps ‘reading aloud for those who cannot read themselves’ – has been practically lost. Today even the phrase ‘the judge must interpret the law’ means that he has a certain latitude in interpreting it; while in Bacon’s time it would have meant that the judge had the duty to read the law as it stood, and to expound it and to apply it in the one and only right way…. It leaves the legal interpreter no latitude; at any rate no more than would be allowed to a sworn interpreter translating a legal document.”

records, and that we can rarely obtain new data able to serve as do crucial experiments in physics.”\(^\text{313}\) But Popper also says in the same discussion that such crucial differences between science and history does not mean that we may historically “falsify anything, or take matters of [historical] truth lightly.” On the contrary, any “historical description of facts will be simply true or false, however difficult it may be to decide upon its truth of falsity.”\(^\text{314}\) Of course, how a “general [historical] interpretation” can be simultaneously “simply true or false” and yet be unfalsifiable and therefore “circular” is unclear. Agassi has insisted, however, that though, according to Popper, we cannot falsify historical interpretations, they might nevertheless be true. We just can’t confirm their approximation to truth by trying to falsify them as we can with scientific interpretations.\(^\text{315}\) As Popper observes, in science, “rigorous criticism” never generates “positive or certain knowledge,” though it “produces a gradual approximation to the truth.”\(^\text{316}\) So presumably in history, including intellectual history, criticism does not even gradually approximate truth in the sense that we can be reasonably confident that we are, in fact, approximating it. Though in science, “truth is, as a rule, hard to come by” and “we can never be absolutely certain that our theories are true,” historical truth would seem to be even harder to come by insofar as ascribing certainty to our historical claims is far more difficult still.\(^\text{317}\) And if the difficulty in approximating scientific truth “makes it the more valuable,” then presumably the far greater difficulty establishing any kind of historical truth makes it remarkably precious and important.

However, in “On the Sources of Knowledge and Ignorance,” Popper says: “There is no criterion of truth at our disposal, and this fact supports pessimism. But we do possess criteria

\(^{313}\) Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 542.

\(^{314}\) Ibid., 537-8.

\(^{315}\) From a personal discussion with the authors.


\(^{317}\) Karl Popper, “Introduction to the Course,” undated lecture on critical rationalism, *Karl-Popper-Sammlung*, ?????
which, if we are lucky, may allow us to recognize error and falsity. Clarity and distinctness are not criteria of truth, but such things as obscurity or confusion may indicate error. Similarly coherence cannot establish truth, but incoherence and inconsistency do establish falsehood. And, when they are recognized, our own errors provide the dim red lights which help us in groping our way out of the darkness of our cave.”

Now, this passage follows shortly after a passage where Popper discusses both scientific and historical assertions, claiming that both kinds of assertion are open to validation. Hence, here at least, Popper seems to hold that “obscurity or confusion” and “incoherence and inconsistency” suggest the likelihood of historical error as much as any other kind, making historical truth of a kind with scientific truth. And elsewhere, he closes the methodological gap between science and history further. For instance, in “Historical Explanation,” he says, “By proposing solutions and counter-solutions, and by critically discussing them, both historian and scientist test explanations, in order to find out which of them are the best.” Moreover, much like scientists, historian can “prove” or “justify” anything: “It is a mistaken view to believe that either science or history exists for justification. We like to have all the evidence we can; but even the best evidence will not as a rule, justify our more interesting theories. We can never build upon rock.”

In the “Preface to the First Edition” of The Open Society and Its Enemies, Popper says forthrightly that even though his study “looks back to the past, its problems are the problems of our own time…” In other words, his study has a decided point of view, namely the political problems and disasters of the 20th century. And in The Poverty of Historicism, Popper insists that in writing history, one should consciously “introduce a preconceived selective point of view

320 Popper, The Open Society and Its Enemies, xxxiii.
into one’s history; that is, to write *that history which interests us.*” As he says in *The Open Society and Its Enemies,* we “want to know how our troubles are related to the past…” We are “interested” in history because want “to learn something about our own problems.” This is why “such admittedly personal comments as can be found in this book are justified, since they are in keeping with historical method.” Moreover, this is also why history “*in the sense in which most people speak of it simply does not exist*” and why it therefore has no meaning in itself other than the meaning we give it” (Popper’s emphasis). And if history has no meaning other than that we impute to it, then, by implication, philosophical texts have no meaning other than the meanings we read into them. Philosophical texts are, after all, historical artifacts like any other.

Now if history, as well as philosophical texts, merely have the meanings we give them, then both would seem open to innumerable interpretive possibilities. And indeed Popper concedes as much where he says that there “is no history of mankind, there is only an indefinite number of histories of all kinds of aspects of human life.” For Popper, then, the interpretation of the past, including our textual past, is necessarily a political act informed by our contemporary political problems, “troubles” and requirements. If fighting fascism happens to be our most

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321 Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism,* 150. Popper emphasizes the same point summing up a few pages later that, in writing history, we must “be clear about the necessity of adopting a point of view” and that we must “state this point of view plainly, and always remain conscious that it is one among many, and that even if it should amount to a theory, it may not be testable” (152). Also see K. R. Popper, “Review of F. Engel-Janosi, *The Growth of German Historicism,*” *Economica,* 12 (1945), 260, where Popper writes that historians cannot avoid infusing their histories with prejudice, particularly when there are writing histories of historical method as in the case of Engel-Janosi’s study: “For in such a case, a historian cannot avoid taking sides since he has to adopt certain methods in his practical procedure. But as he has to take sides, it will be better if he does so explicitly by clearly stating where he stands.”

322 Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies,* 544-5. Also see “An Uncertain Truth: History,” Transcript from BBC televised discussion between Ernst Gombrich and Karl Popper, 29/12/1987, where Popper remarks, “So there is this strange aspect of history that we cannot write just history, we have to write history of something.” Later in the same discussion, Popper remarks that a “lot of work,” a “lot of thought” and a “lot of imagination” has to go into writing history and “many conjectures have to be made and if possible tested.” Hence with history, we can “get more and more, not quite successful, but more and more successful knowledge of the situation and of a different time and a different culture and a different period and a different language.” For this transcript, see Karl-Popper-Sammlung, ?????.


324 Ibid., 547.
pressing political task, then we are perfectly entitled, and even obliged, to appropriate texts as we see fit as part of our polemical “war effort.” If reconstructing Plato, Hegel and Marx, and then criticizing our reconstructions, is useful for defeating Hitler and this is all we can do from our exile, then we should not hesitate to. Textual interpretation may not be the only weapon for fighting fascism. And it need not be the most decisive weapon. But if we happen to be a philosopher as well as Jewish-born languishing against our will in the hinterlands of New Zealand while Europe seethes in anguish, and if ideas matter politically, then what we have to do is clear. If we are convinced that the “power of ideas, and especially of moral and religious ideas, is at least as important as that of physical resources,” then we are morally obliged to battle malicious ideas, especially those disguised in the garb of historicism. Consequently, Popper nearly sounds like Berlin: “For I believe in the power of ideas, including the power of false and pernicious ideas. And I believe in what I might call the war of ideas.”

Berlin, too, believed in the power of ideas and, like Popper and the others included in our study, he was a displaced Jew preoccupied with confronting totalitarianism via intellectual history. And whether or not Berlin’s belief in the power of ideas also included a theory of how we should interpret them, Popper’s conviction of their power clearly did, Munz’s claims to the contrary.

Popper modeled his theory of “critical interpretation” (and his larger theory of historical interpretation as well) on his theory of the logic of scientific discovery from his 1934 Logik der Forschung. “Critical interpretation” was simply scientific “critical rationalism” applied to

325 Popper, Conjectures and Refutations, 373. Popper further warns that the theory that truth is manifest for anyone to see breeds fanaticism and totalitarianism. If some refuse to see the self-evidently true, then they must either be deceived or wicked: “The allegedly manifest truth is therefore in constant need, not only of interpretation and affirmation, but also of re-interpretation and re-affirmation. An authority is required to pronounce upon, and lay down, almost from day to day, what is to be the manifest truth, and it may learn to do so arbitrarily and cynically. And many disappointed epistemologists will turn away from their own former optimism and erect a resplendent authoritarian theory on the basis of a pessimistic epistemology. It seems to me that the greatest epistemologist of all, Plato, exemplifies this tragic development.” (9).

326 From a personal interview with David Weinstein, Wellington, New Zealand, May 23 2006.
written texts instead of nature’s. Just as “critical rationalism” (the scientific method of “conjecture and refutation”) rejects the idea that “truth is manifest—that it is an open book, there to be read by anybody of good will” or the idea that “truth is hidden” and “discernible only by the elect,” likewise “critical interpretation” rejects the analogous notion that written texts contain stable meanings accessible to well-intentioned readers or a privileged ministry of initiates.  

Just as there is “no such thing as an unprejudiced observation” of natural phenomena because all observation is problem-guided, there is no unprejudiced textual interpretation. Textual interpretation is problem-guided observation too. All “observations [including textual ones] are theory-impregnated.” Just as we should abandon the quest for scientific certainty, we should abandon the quest for interpretative objectivity and precision. We must “always remember that it is impossible to speak in such a way that you cannot be misunderstood.”  

In his important essay, “Science: Conjectures and Refutations,” in *Conjectures and Refutations*, Popper observes that “we may hesitate to accept any statement, even the simplest observation statement; and we may point out that every statement involves interpretation in the light of theories, and that it is therefore uncertain.” Hence, there “can never be anything like a completely safe observation, free from the dangers of misinterpretation.”  

Scientific claims and theories are objectively true only insofar as they manage to withstand criticism, including

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327 Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, 374. Also see Munz, *Beyond Wittgenstein’s Poker*, 150, where Munz discusses Popper’s rejection of the Vienna Circle’s purported view that observing nature was simply reading the book of nature.

328 Popper, *Unended Quest*, 55.


330 Ibid., 29. The conclusion of Popper’s notes for his unpublished June 1, 1966 lecture at the University of Denver, reads: “Critical Rationalism: Speak clearly and simply.” See Karl Popper, “Denver June 1st, 1966,” Karl-Popper-Sammlung, ????????, 13. So while is impossible to inoculate others from misunderstanding our interpretations of nature or texts, we can minimize its prospects by expressing ourselves as clearly and as simply as possible. Again, while “clarity and distinctness” cannot “establish [theoretical] truth,” they can “indicate error.” In *A Philosopher’s Apprentice*, 118, Agassi complains that Popper frequently misunderstood unfairly his criticisms of Popper’s views and then quips ironically that “we say what our audiences hear us say, he [Popper] always insists, not what we intend them to hear.”

331 Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, note 8, 41-2.
criticism based on observation and experimentation. But observation and experimentation never justify either. Rational criticism, the “best kind of rationality I know,” does not constitute justification. Neith-

either does it lead to irrationalism and relativism. We must not “confuse relativism with the true insight that all men are fallible.” And if these considerations go for scientific interpretations of natural phenomena, then they surely go as well for other forms of interpretations, including especially historical and textual ones.

Nevertheless for Popper, even though the very best theorizing, whether scientific, sociological or historical, invariably misinterprets, it nonetheless remains somehow objective. That is, insofar as we try as hard as we can to falsify theories and fail, we may take them as objectively true and certain provisionally. True theories of any kind are simply conjectures that have thus far stood up to all attempts to falsify them. We explain our world deductively and not inductively. Pure induction is a metaphysical phantom. We never simply collect empirical data without prejudice and then generalize. We always begin with tentative generalizations or conjectures that orient where we begin looking and collecting, which makes our resulting generalizations interpretations. To look, gather, generalize and explain is always to interpret.

332 Unpublished discussion between Popper, Lakatos, Post and Watkins Karl-Popper-Sammlung, ????. 27-8. Popper also says that rational criticism “means a kind of meta-attitude, and we are actually always in the meta-language when we criticize theories.” (29.)
334 Also see Popper, Unended Quest, 161 where he says: “This [method of theorizing] is just one example of the objectivist approach, for which I have been fighting in epistemology, quantum physics, statistical mechanics, probability theory, biology, psychology, and history.” By “history,” we contend that Popper means to include intellectual history.
335 Hacohen would probably argue that we too readily conflate scientific theorizing and textual interpretation on Popper’s behalf. See, for instance, Hacohen, Karl Popper: The Formative Years 1902-1945, 487, where Hacohen writes that, for Popper, both “historical and scientific descriptions represented points of views, but scientific theories were testable and falsifiable and historical interpretations rarely so.” Presumably, then for Hacohen, Popper regarded historical descriptions and explanations as well as textual interpretations as seldom testable or falsifiable and therefore seldom objectively true. This might explain what Hacohen means when he adds: “But [for Popper and contrary to Ranke presumably] there was no history ‘as it actually happened.’ Narratives depended on perspective to provide a method for selecting data. The imperatives for good history meant selecting an interesting viewpoint and being aware of it.” But as we have seen, while Popper indeed sometimes viewed science, history and textual interpretation as substantively different, he also sometimes viewed them all as conjectural, differing only in their degree of potential clarity and coherence. Moreover, as we are about to see, in defending his controversial
Finished theories, that is unfalsified conjectures, whether scientific, sociological or even historical, constitute primarily what Popper calls “World 3.” They are “World 3’s” inhabitants, its objects. Whereas “World 1” is the world of physical objects and “World 2” is the world of our subjective experiences of “World 1” (in other words, our subjective experiences of physical objects), “World 3” consists of our statements and generalizations of “World 1” mediated through “World 2.” We experience “World 1” as “World 2” and theorize it as “World 3.” And for Popper even though the objects (theories, conjectures, ideologies, interpretations, etc.) that inhabit “World 3” are not as real as the physical entities that inhabit “World 1,” they are somehow very real nevertheless. At least “World 3” objects (our theories, etc.) are sufficiently real in that they powerfully affect what transpires in “World 1” and “World 2.” Munz captures better than anyone the relationship between all three Worlds, making clear how scientific theorizing is always imposed interpretation:

It is the hypotheses in world 3 which give our subjective feelings a local habitation and a name. Since there is no clear subjective knowledge, there can be no test of a hypotheses made in world 3. For example, if one hypothesises in world 3 that the sight of a baby produces a feeling of joy in world 2 and if there is a sight of a baby in world 1 taken in by world 2, then whatever silent and ineffable feels there are in world 2, are identified and names “joy by the hypothesis in world 3. There is no interaction, but merely an action of world 3 on world 2. There is nothing sufficiently clear in world 2 to test whether the action is correct or not for we cannot observe, refer to determine and name the feel. Therefore we can never tell whether the hypothesis that we use to “act” on the feel is true or false. Hence, we can only speak of an interpretation of the feel. The downward action is nothing more than an interpretation of the subjective feel in world 2 by interpretation of Plato as a totalitarian, Popper suggests that textual interpretation was no less conjectural than scientific interpretation.
a hypothesis in world 3. This means that the suggestion which comes from world 3 that what the sight of a baby causes in world 2 is a feeling of joy, is not a certainty, but a likely possibility we are left with because, in the absence of an alternative hypothesis from world 3, this is all we are left with…Surmise or not, in imposing the word “joy” on the subjective feeling which may well have originated by the sight of a baby, one becomes conscious of the silent, subjective feeling, i.e. of joy. In this way, the verbal interpretation of a subjective feel makes us conscious of the subjective feel, because we can now say what it is, i.e. what we are feeling. In this way, knowledge of the feel and consciousness of the feel come together and it is this knowledge which amounts to consciousness. Both knowledge and consciousness result from the verbal interpretation of the subjective feel suggested by the verbally formulated hypothesis in world 3. This highlights the crucial and decisive role of language for the production of consciousness. 336

In brief for Popper then, theories, ideologies and interpretations have real consequences, including political consequences. Ideas matter and often they matter politically for better or for worse. The ideas of Plato, Hegel and Marx mattered mostly for the worse, especially in the 20th century and therefore had to be combated vigorously and mercilessly. In Popper’s words: “I regard world 3 as being essentially the product of the human mind. It is we who create world 3 objects. That these objects have their own inherent or autonomous laws which create unintended and unforeseeable consequences is only an instance (though a very interesting one) of a more general rule, the rule that all our actions have such consequences.” Thus: “As with our children,

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336 Peter Munz, “The Phenomenon of Consciousness from a Popperian Perspective,” in Consciousness Transitions: Phylogenetic, Ontogenetic and Physiological Aspects, eds. Hans Liljenström and Peter Århem (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2008), 317. Munz’s quite rightly, and perhaps deliberately, calls his account a “Popperian Perspective” in that it exhibits Munz’s longstanding efforts to accommodate Popper and Wittgenstein having been a close student of both.
so with our theories [including our interpretations], and ultimately with all the work we do: our products become largely independent of their makers.\footnote{Popper, \textit{Unended Quest}, 217 and 229.}

But even if we think of Plato’s \textit{Republic}, Hegel’s \textit{Philosophy of Right} and Marx (and Engel’s) \textit{Communist Manifesto} as children who grew into independence, living lives differently than how their makers intended, we should be wary, as we suggested above, of reading what these children became into what their creators intended them to be even if we cannot ascertain for sure what their creator’s intentions actually were. And Popper seems not to have kept this distinction between authorial intentions and theory consequences firmly in mind when branding Plato, Hegel and Marx as wayward historicists.

\textit{Plato}

\begin{quote}
“I hate the history of philosophy even more than any other history; it is so hard to know what any particular man thought, and so worthless when you do know it.”\footnote{Henry Sidgwick, from Eleanor Mildred Sidgwick and Arthur Sidgwick [1906], \textit{Henry Sidgwick: A Memoir} (Bristol, U.K.: Thoemmes Press, 1996), 140.}
\end{quote}

Popper had been thinking about Plato ever since he began writing about “pro-naturalistic” historicism in \textit{The Poverty of Historicism}. Plato was therefore on his mind well before the German annexation of Austria in March 1938, which he claimed inspired him to begin writing \textit{The Open Society and Its Enemies} as we noted earlier. As he wrote years later: “Although much
of what is contained in this book took shape at an earlier date, the final decision to write it was made in March 1938, on the day I received news of the invasion of Austria.”

But in writing *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper says that he “stumbled quite unexpectedly, over a discovery—a historical as well as a sociological discovery” about Plato. While he “had known for a long time that there were strange similarities between the views of Plato and Hitler” and “was interested in these similarities since Plato was one of the first great historicist philosophers,” he was shocked to realize just how much Plato there was in Hitler. In investigating and “describing in detail Plato’s strange and remarkable political philosophy from this point of view I was, more and more, overwhelmed by the quite unexpected flood of evidence for what I may perhaps loosely illustrate by the absurd equation ‘Plato = Hitler.’” Popper continues:

Now Hitler was for me simply “That Bad Man”, to use Wickham Stead’s formulation—an enemy of thought, a madman. Plato, on the other hand, I respected (and I have not changed my mind since) as a most powerful thinker, as the greatest philosopher who ever lived (although this does not mean as much as most philosophers would like people to think). Thus this equation appeared to me absurd. But all my attempts to refute it led to very meager results. Suddenly it dawned upon me that I may have misjudged Hitler. Not, perhaps, his personal qualities, but the part played by him. It dawned upon me that Hitlerism might be the exponent of a much more serious movement than I ever thought before. In this case, the explanation of that absurd equation might be simply that Plato was the first response, and to give expression, to the same real social need to which Hitler later responded by cunningly exploiting it.

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And in both cases this same desperate social need was caused by the breakdown traditional social structures, which creates a “terrible shock” and considerable “unhappiness” and consequently a “strong desire for the lost unity of the closed society.” This need creates “a myth of destiny (Historicism), an emphasis on the lost tribal unity of the tribal collective (collectivism), and irrational dreams of an ultimate and unchanging state of paradisical happiness on earth (anti-rationalism, aestheticism, romanticism).” Hence, Plato’s “attempt to arrest all social change was, on the one hand, an expression of the reaction to the breakdown of the closed society, on the other hand an attempt at healing what he considered the sick social body.” And “Hitler’s mad and hysterical outburst was an appeal to a real social need—to the fear created by Social Change, to the Strain of Civilization.”

Now Popper’s interpretation of Plato, like his interpretation of Hegel and Marx as historicists as well, was and remains controversial as we have been intimating. His account of Plato immediately drew considerable critical fire for being so alien to received views of him. Most, but not all classical scholars condemned Popper for anachronistically mapping onto Socrates and Plato the modern struggle between democracy and totalitarianism. For instance, less than a year after The Open Society and Its Enemies appeared, the Platonist G. C. Field wrote an extended review in Philosophy where he condemns Popper’s interpretation of Plato as a “trial for heresy before the Inquisition with Dr. Popper as the prosecuting counsel.” Popper tries to interpret Plato in the “worst light” possible as the “dialogues are combed for individual passages or even sentences which will strengthen the case for the prosecution.” He ascribes all kinds of nefarious “hidden motives” to Plato and his insistence that Plato was some kind of historicist is

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“wholly false.” In sum, Popper “sees Plato all askew because he is always trying to squint round
the corner in order to catch a glimpse of the figure of Hitler somewhere in the background.”

The 1950 edition of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* continued to draw the same kind
of fire. Writing in the *New York Times* in 1951, Sidney Hook accused Popper reading Plato “too
literally when it serves his purposes and is too cocksure about what Plato’s ‘real’ meaning is
when the texts are ambiguous.” And Carl Friedrich took him to task for his “diatribes” and
name-calling of Plato and Hegel especially. Yet, not surprisingly, Friedrich’s assessment is not
all negative. He also praises Popper’s “determination to stick to his guns; for these guns needed
leveling then and they do so now.” His book is “thus an admirable antidote for all those who
surround these hallowed highpriests [Plato, Hegel and Marx] with the uncritical mists of
ideological incense.” And when the 1961 edition of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*

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concludes his review suggesting that the “trouble here would have to be traced back to Dr. Popper’s views on the
nature of historical knowledge” that purportedly precludes “complete knowledge of the facts of the past” and our
“complete objectivity in our approach to them.” For Popper, “we have to select, and our selection must be guided
by some interest.” Field therefore appreciated right from the outset the connection between Popper’s method of
reading philosophical texts, his skepticism about historical truth and his troubled times, which is a point we have
been at pains to emphasize. In 1947, the Cambridge Platonist R. Hackforth also reviewed *The Open Society and Its
Enemies* severely, condemning Popper of being “constitutionally incapable of approaching Plato in an impartial,
let alone sympathetic, spirit.” See, R. Hackforth, “Plato’s Political Philosophy,” *The Classical Review*, 61 (September
1947), 56. A few years later, John Plamenatz likewise doubted the motives Popper ascribed to Plato, calling
Popper’s claim that Plato was a historicist “quite misleading.” Popper’s Plato as well as his Socrates were mostly
“creatures of his imagination.” See John Plamenatz, “The Open Society and Its Enemies,” *British Journal of
Philosophy*, 3 (September 1952), 265-6. Also see “Karl Popper’s Open Society,” *The Political Science Reviewer*, 8
(1978), 28, where Dante Germino questions the motives Popper often attributes to Plato. According to Germino,
Popper accused of Plato actually “deceived himself into thinking that his motives were benevolent.” But, asks
Germino rhetorically, “how could so brilliant a man so thoroughly deceive himself about what he was doing?” But
in response to a 1947 letter from J. D. Mabbott, Popper concedes that, by his own definition of historicism, Plato
may not have been a historicist after all but that this did not undermine his verdict that Plato was a totalitarian. See
Hacohen, *Karl Popper: The Formative Years*, 407, for Popper’s concession and his exchange with Mabbott.
though “crotchety and wayward,” *The Open Society and Its Enemies* “contains many insights in social philosophy,
which testify to a humane spirit and a keen, if impatient, intelligence.”
344 C. J. Friedrich, “Review of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*,” *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly*, 31
(March 1951), 283. Here we should recall from our previous discussion of Strauss, Friedrich’s 1938 review of
Strauss’s *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* where Friedrich disparaged Strauss for failing to “take his stand”
against Hobbes’s historical relativism on account of the encouragement that such thinking has surely given to the
rise of fascism in the 1930s. Strauss should have given Hobbes an “effective pillorying” as “in these days when
whirl is king the reader is entitled to know by which stars the historian is guided as a man.” So whereas Strauss
appeared, Hans Meyerhoff continued with more of the same, labeling Popper’s account of Plato as the “most massive assault launched against Plato” among what he refers to as post-war “new criticism” of Plato. This “new Anglo-Saxon criticism…is not so much an interpretation of Plato as a commentary upon our own age.”

Even classical scholars who fled totalitarianism for reasons similar to Popper’s, criticized his reconstruction of Plato as wildly misguided. For instance in a letter to Strauss, Eric Voegelin, who otherwise agreed with Popper that philosophical ideas mattered politically, called Popper’s account of Plato and Hegel thoroughly “dilettantish,” exposing Popper as little more than “a primitive ideological brawler.”

Now not all of the many prominent early reviewers of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* disparaged Popper’s account of Plato. Some enthusiastically concurred with Popper’s account of Plato as the first philosophical totalitarian who, thanks to his undeserved reputation as a great philosopher, contributed powerfully to the rise of the 20th-century fascism. For instance in a 1946 review, Hugh Trevor-Roper whole-heartedly agrees with Popper that Plato’s historicism was the basis of his totalitarianism, wondering “if, as it appears certain PLATO was the intellectual HIMMLER of Athens (his ‘Glauconic edict’ even foretells the SS stud-farms), how is it that this fact has been so rarely [until Popper] appreciated?”

Gilbert Ryle extolled Popper failed to pillory Hobbes for his legacy to fascism, the best thing about Popper’s account of Plato and Hegel was that he did just this “stick[ing] to his guns” doggedly. Also recall that Friedrich declined Popper’s request in the early 1940s to recommend *The Open Society and Its Enemies* to Harvard University Press.

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for having finally exposed Plato, writing that “Berchtesgaden and the Kremlin fulfill the promise of the ‘Republic’ and the ‘Laws.’”  

Admiration for Popper’s interpretation of Plato endures. More recently, Hacohen has discussed at length Popper’s unconventional appropriation of Plato, noting, among other things, how Popper “made Greek intellectual and political life speak directly to the present” albeit in a “scholarly well supported” fashion. For Hacohen, Popper’s Plato was imagined but not entirely so: “Totalitarian tendencies Plato certainly had; a fascist ideologue he was not.”  

Hacohen also recognizes that Popper’s approach to textual interpretation facilitated the ease with which he could make Plato “speak directly” to us though says little about his method beyond noting that Popper believed that the best interpretations reconfigured texts systematically.  

Popper’s Plato was clearly very much the product of a particular, emotionally-charged historical “moment.” In our view, Ronald B. Levinson was mostly correct in his 1953 In Defense of Plato blaming the hysteria of WWII and its aftermath for the denunciations of Plato.

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348 Gilbert Ryle, “Critical Notice: The Open Society and Its Enemies,” Mind, N.S., 56 (April 1947), 172. In fairness to Ryle, he also says that Popper is “inclined to overstep” in suggesting that Plato’s “prescription of philosopher-kings was intended to point to Plato himself as the Fuehrer whom society could be saved; the ‘Republic’ was not only Plato’s ‘Das Kapital’, it was also his ‘Mein Kampf.’” But he quickly adds that “it would be silly to pretend that interpretation can dispense with such imputations” and that Plato’s dialogues are indeed replete with “logical failings” justifying Popper’s account. (169).

349 Hacohen, Karl Popper: The Formative Years 1902-1945, 402. Hacohen writes furthermore: “In his exile, Popper wrote to vindicate progressive dreams against fascism. Classical Athens was both a democracy and an empire. So was Britain: a liberal maritime commonwealth, fighting a continental totalitarian enemy. Sparta… was the epitome of a closed society. To Popper, it resembled Nazi Germany… The Peloponnesian War became World War II.” (415-6). Hacohen’s praise for Popper’s interpretation of Plato mirrors somewhat Agassi’s assessment that Popper’s “discussion of Plato presented in the book is marvelous; it is profound and highly scholarly and yet accessible to” today’s “ordinary reader and even in an exciting manner.” Agassi continues that he was “amazed” by the “narrowness” of favorable reception that Popper’s account of Plato received notwithstanding Russell’s laudatory review. See Agassi, A Philosopher’s Apprentice, 179.

350 Ibid., 409. Hacohen adds that Popper “was right on target” in appreciating how Plato’s political ideas had “permeated Western philosophy” largely for the worse. (425). Popper’s account of Plato remains influential in other philosophical venues as well. See, for instance, Ken Binmore’s recent Natural Justice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), viii, where he writes that “one has only to read his quotes form Plato’s Republic to recognize that Poppers’ Enemies of the Open Society is right on the ball in denying that the received opinion of Plato as the founder of rational liberalism can be squared with what Plato actually believed.” And in Just Playing in Game Theory and the Social Contract, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), ix, Binmore recalls his “relief” at once having discovered that Popper “had noticed that Plato was a fascist.”

like Popper’s and the avid reception that these accounts received at the hands of so many otherwise sober readers. As Levinson puts it at the very outset of his study: “If such detractions do not, on first hearing, cause a certain shock, the reason may be partly because the artillery of our thunderous times has put our more sensitive reaction mechanisms out of order.”

Moreover, according to Levinson, because of the virulence of the accusations leveled against Plato by the likes of Popper coupled with the fact that fascist and communist propagandists had appropriated Plato to their respective causes, Plato’s philosophy became an intellectual liability. Democrats “presently began to dissociate themselves from so dubious an ally; in such a storm it seemed a dictate of elementary prudence to lighten their vessel by casting overboard this ill-omened prophet whom in an evil hour, mistaking him for one of themselves, they had let come aboard.”

Popper, then, was not the only champion of democracy to throw Plato overboard in the 1940s and 1950s. He was not alone in seeing him as evil disguised who had fooled the ages, infecting western humanism from the very outset. The 1940s and 1950s produced other, polemically-charged rebukes of Plato. Popper’s fascist reconstruction of Plato was not isolated, which should not really be terribly surprising. Richard Crossman’s 1937 *Plato Today* is surely the most significant and remarkable account of Plato’s purported fascism next to Popper’s. Popper undoubtedly read Crossman’s book since it seems to have been available in the Canterbury College library when Popper was teaching in his New Zealand exile.

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353 Ibid., 13. Levinson also claims that Sherwood Anderson’s 1951 play about Socrates and Plato, *Barefoot in Athens*, draws heavily and favorably on Popper’s denunciation of Plato. (note 19, 24). For other favorable reviews of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* commending Popper’s account of Plato, see A. D. Lindsay’s review in *The Manchester Guardian* (5 December 1945) where Lindsay praised Popper for having exposed Plato as an inquisitor and religious persecutor. Also see Richard Robinson, “Dr. Popper’s Defense of Democracy,” *Philosophical Review* (1951) where he unreservedly agreed with Popper that Plato was an enemy of democracy.
Plato Today is a curious text very much symptomatic of the run up to world war against fascism. According to Crossman’s “Introduction” to his 1959 revised edition, his original edition was the first study “to pull Plato off his pedestal.” Notwithstanding whether Crossman’s study pulled Plato down first, Popper took his turn pulling Plato down reiterating criticisms familiar in Crossman. Much as Popper would subsequently insist, Crossman underscored the striking similarity between the decline of Plato’s Athens and the decline of European civilization after WWI. As in Plato’s Athens, our “old traditions are breaking down; art has lost touch with the life of the people, democracy is in danger.” We, too, were “standing on the edge of the abyss, and philosophy has become a matter of life and death instead of a matter for polite discussion.” Plato’s “law and order” political philosophy was a desperate “brake on the wheel” of collapse.\footnote{R. H. S. Crossman, Plato Today (London: George Allen & Unwind, 1959), 9, 17 and 155.} Also like Popper, Crossman claimed that the events of the 20th-century were forcing readers of Plato reconsider him and free themselves from his mesmerizing fame: “But because Plato was a famous philosopher, he was rarely condemned outright as a reactionary resolutely opposed to every principle of the liberal creed.”\footnote{Ibid., 93. Note that for Crossman, the “abyss” threatening the 20th-century had already arrived with WWI.} And like Popper as we shall see momentarily, Crossman saw himself reconstructing Plato systematically, making him “as formidable as possible” so that we moderns could see plainly enough the power and danger of Plato’s political ideas.\footnote{Ibid., 201. Crossman adds: “If the reader gets an uneasy feeling that he cannot controvert Plato’s arguments, I shall be well content. For in that case he will have begun to see that the real menace of Fascism is due to the scarcity of democrats with a practical and realistic creed.”}

Now Popper argued that his interpretation of Plato as a totalitarian was irrefutable. Despite diligently trying to refute his interpretation of Plato, he instead became even more convinced that Plato was a totalitarian. Popper insists: “I have tried, in other words, to apply as far as possible [to Plato] the method which I have described in my The Logic of Scientific
That is, his conjecture that Plato was a totalitarian had to be correct because he had tried his best to refute it without success. Hence, his account of Plato was accurate, or at least as accurate as any interpretation could possibly be. Scholars who disagreed, he asserted, merely speculated wildly. These critics naively “idealiz[ed]” Plato, making their readings unfounded conjectures that Popper’s withering and sustained critical fire refuted. So Popper tried hard to refute his own idiosyncratic interpretation of Plato without success though he easily managed to refute conventional interpretations of him. Both failure in the first instance and success in the latter supported his own account as far superior though it did not “prove” of “justify” it beyond irrefutably. Future Plato scholars could, in principle, succeed in refuting his reading of Plato, which, however unlikely, he would more than welcome: “It is one of my strongest beliefs that careful and critical examination and public discussion of historical interpretations as well as of hypotheses or of any opinion worth publishing is not only valuable but necessary, and should a ‘friend of Plato and of truth’ or anybody else who has read my book with reasonable care offer some real objections to my views, I shall always be eager to learn from them.” But Joseph Agassi has chided Popper’s purported love of criticism as presumptuous: “He [Popper] does not claim, then, that he is free of all prejudices; rather, he pronounces that, taking his opponents very seriously and working at it very hard and very sincerely he is best able to fight his own prejudices.” But, Agassi insists and quite rightly, “this very pronouncement is a (meta-) prejudice.” Moreover, notwithstanding Popper’s

357 Ibid., 186 and 703, n3.
358 See, for instance, ibid., 97.
359 K. R. Popper, “A Scientist Looks at History,” *Time & Tide*, 27 (2 February 1946), 107. These comments appear at the conclusion of a short letter to the editor by Popper responding to an earlier January 12, 1946 review of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* by the same name in *Time & Tide*. Also see Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 232, where Popper says: “I often tell my students that what I say about Plato is—necessarily—merely an interpretation, and that I should not be surprised if Plato (should I ever meet his shade) were to tell me, and to establish to my satisfaction, that it is a misrepresentation; but I usually add that he would have quite a task to explain away a number of things he had said.”
presumptuousness, Agassi doubts that Popper’s love of criticism was ever genuine even though he was always quick to say that “I work very hard and in response to critics and I try my best to put their criticisms in the best light as I respond to it” and that “never mind the grounds, just try to criticize my view, and if you succeed I will be grateful, as I love criticism.”

So it seems that all Popper is really saying is that his account of Plato is scientific just because it is *his* account. Any counterevidence that others might marshal to refute it would fail because Popper had already tried as hard as he could to refute it himself. Their counterevidence was therefore necessarily bogus. Scientific interpretation, then, seems just so much cover and convenient excuse to read Plato willfully and so unconventionally. But whether Popper got Plato right or wrong is secondary to the eccentricity of his reading steeped in the polemics of his exile.

**Hegel and Marx**

Popper’s account of Hegel is considerably briefer than his account of Plato. According to Hacohen, Popper wrote about Hegel in “‘scherzo-style’ as an intermezzo between Plato and Marx.”361 But Popper’s intermezzo on Hegel was critical to his explanation of the rise of totalitarianism and its debts to historicism. Hegel, a “direct follower” of Heraclitus, Plato and Aristotle, was the “source of all contemporary historicism.”362 Hence, Hegel was the “missing link” between Plato and the new tribalism of modern totalitarianism.363 He rediscovered the conceptual weaponry of authoritarianism in the “ancient war treasuries of the perennial revolt.

361 Achen, *Karl Popper: The Formative Years 1902-1945*, 428. Moreover, according to Hacohen, Popper only read selections from Hegel only and very little scholarship about him.
363 Ibid., 282.
against freedom,” refurbishing and placing them in the “hands of his modern followers.”

Hegel “killed liberalism in Germany by his theory that standards of value are merely facts – that there is no dualism of standards and facts.” He therefore grotesquely revitalized “what one usually calls positivism in ethics—that is to say the belief that only positive law is law and that there is nothing by which to judge positive law.” But “one must operate with the idea that not everything that happens in the world is good and that there are some standards outside of the facts by which we may judge and criticize them.” Liberals simply “cannot live with this identity philosophy” for it ineluctably “leads to an adulation of power, as it did in Germany; and indeed it is very much to be blamed for what happened there.”

Hegel was therefore also a historicist in the conventional meaning. Though insufferably obscure, his thinking had nevertheless wrought much political havoc. Indeed, deciphering Hegel’s nearly impenetrable thinking would not be worth the great effort were it not for its “sinister” political consequences in the 20th-century, which shows most regrettably and tragically “how easily a clown may be a maker of history.” The “Hegelian farce” had to be stopped: “We must speak—even at the price of soiling ourselves by touching this scandalous thing,” which had become responsible for so much contemporary human misery. Even fraudulent and farcical ideas could be politically formidable and hazardous. Indeed, those philosophical ideas especially, which so seductively seemed to soothe the anxieties of modernity such as Hegelian historicism, were incomparably hazardous and therefore had to be combated mercilessly.

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364 Ibid., 315. That is, almost “all the more important ideas of modern totalitarianism are directly inherited from Hegel, who collected and preserved what A. Zimmern called the ‘armoury of weapons for authoritarian movements.’” (315). But, of course, it doesn’t follow, again as we earlier suggested, that Hegel was a Nazi just because modern totalitarians inherited some of their ideas from him.
365 Popper, “Historical Explanation: An Interview,” ??????????
366 Popper, The Open Society and Its Enemies, 283-4. Hegel’s “hysterical historicism” was the “fertilizer,” which “prepared the ground” for the growth of modern totalitarianism” (311).
367 Ibid., 333.
Much like Popper’s assessment of Plato was endorsed by others, his depiction of Hegel as ridiculous as he was perilous was echoed by some including Bertrand Russell. As we have seen, Russell defended Popper’s interpretation of Plato heartily. He likewise followed Popper, dismissing Hegel as “farrago of nonsense” whose success in Germany is only “explicable by the fact that it flattered German self-esteem.” For Russell like Popper, Hegel’s “philosophy is so odd that one would not have expected him to be able to get sane men to accept it, but he did.” And Hegel succeeded not only in Germany in enchanting the sane: “When I was young, most teachers of philosophy in British and American universities were Hegelians, so that, until I read Hegel, I supposed there must be some truth in his system; I was cured, however, by discovering that everything he said on the philosophy of mathematics was plain nonsense.”  

So for Russell as for Popper, Hegel’s fascism had infected Anglo-American philosophy, making the rise of analytical philosophy as in some sense a reaction to it polemically motivated by the political events of the 20th century.

Hacohen says that, for Popper, exposing Hegel’s fraudulence along with Plato’s was a “political mission” and “testament for Western civilization.” Now Hacohen also insists that, in caricaturizing Hegel, in misrepresenting him so unfairly, Popper “betrayed” his method of critical rationalism. But this claim seems misplaced. On the contrary, how could Popper be said to betray critical rationalism at all, at least with respect to interpreting seminal texts, when properly interpreting them sanctioned reconstructing them systematically as one saw fit? Surely, the line between such simplifying reconstructions and inventing caricatures is slight.

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368 Russell, “Philosophy and Politics,” 20 and 22. Russell says too: “He [Hegel] set it [his philosophy] out with so much obscurity that people thought it must be profound. It can quite easily be expounded lucidly in words of one syllable, but then its absurdity becomes obvious.” (20).

369 Hacohen, Karl Popper: The Formative Years 1902-1945, 388.

370 Ibid., 439.
Popper was kinder to Marx although he judged Marxism the “purest, the most developed and the most dangerous form of historicism.” Popper read much more Marx than he did Hegel though he seems to have been unfamiliar with Marx’s earlier philosophical writings like *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* or “On the Jewish Question.” Nor does he seem to have followed much neo-Marxist theorizing from the 1920s and 1930s, such as Lukacs’ *History and Class Consciousness* or Korsch’s *Marxism and Philosophy*, which criticized Marxism after Marx for having become deterministic and prophetic. As Hacohen nicely puts it: “The brilliance of Popper’s critique of Marx was due less to his thorough knowledge of Marxism, more to his application of Ockham’s razor to a popular Marx.”

Popper’s “popular” Marx substituted “wishful thinking” for social science and was therefore escapist. By prophesizing the inevitable tumultuous collapse of capitalism as the unavoidable birth-pangs of socialism, Marx purportedly encouraged the very consequences he abhorred, namely working class defeatism and fascism. Radical Marxists took this perverse logic to the extreme, claiming that they had “discovered the ‘essence’ and the ‘true historical role’ of fascism.” Fascism was “the last stand of the bourgeoisie” and was therefore an “interlude necessary for [the revolution’s] speeding up.” Socialist and communists, according to Popper, consequently foolishly hesitated to fight the fascists wherever they seized power. In the end, Marxism was little more than a pathetic tragedy of “talking big and doing nothing in face of real and increasing danger to democratic institutions.” It was an impotent travesty of

372 Ibid., 441. We are mostly following Hacohen’s account of Popper’s limited familiarity with Marx and neo-Marxism.
373 Ibid., 429.
“talking [class] war and acting peace; and it taught the fascists the invaluable method of talking peace and acting war.”

Marxists also unintentionally promoted fascism’s rise by embracing what Popper labeled Marx’s “economism” (or “historism” to use the language of The Poverty of Historicism), which explained superstructural phenomena, such as ideas and culture, by reducing them to their purported underlying economic structural causes. By wrongly understanding ideas and philosophical commitments as mere epiphenomena, Marxists eviscerated them, including Marxism itself, as effective weapons for fighting fascism. Popper writes in 1940: “I think that social experience clearly shows that under certain circumstances the influence of ideas (perhaps supported by propaganda) can outweigh and supersede economic forces. Besides, granted that it is impossible fully to understand mental developments without understanding their economic background, it is at least as impossible to understand economic developments without understanding the development of, for instance, scientific and religious ideas.”

Anti-fascist ideas like Marxism, then, could be even more dangerous than proto-fascist ideologies like Platonism and Hegelianism. Marxists could sometimes be more insidious because they actually encouraged what they pretended to combat. Marxism was a fascist Trojan horse and therefore especially treacherous.

Hence, Popper felt obliged to declare

Ibid., 427.

Karl Popper, “What is Dialectic?” in Conjectures and Refutations, 332. This essay was originally given as a lecture to a philosophy seminar at Canterbury University College in 1937 shortly after Popper fled to New Zealand. It was first published in Mind, 49 (1940). Marcuse turned Popper’s anti-economism against itself, writing that Popper’s criticisms of Marxism remained purely philosophical, abstract and consequently as politically impotent as Popper accused Marxism of being. Popper’s criticisms “never reach[ed] the historical dimension in which mass violence emerges and operates” and therefore were “of little value in explaining and combating it.” See Marcuse, Studies in Critical Philosophy, 196.

Steve Whitfield has suggested to us that Popper must have had communism, and not just fascism, in his sights early on for why else would he bother to “slug it out” with Marx in The Open Society and Its Enemies. But as we have just seen, Marxism was not so much dangerous in itself as it was dangerous for playing fascism’s fool. Moreover, once fascism had been defeated in 1945, Marxism took on more prominence for Popper as the lone version of historicism surviving that still needed to be exposed and routed. But Marxism was never Popper’s foremost philosophical enemy, as he fully admits in “Prediction and Prophecy and Their Significance for Social
philosophical war against it even more than against Plato or Hegel. Fighting Marx effectively required first reformulating Marx systematically and then attacking the reformulation even if the reformulation was—as it had to be—a freewheeling interpretation. One should never hesitate “to treat one’s opponents—Marx in this case—not only fairly but generously; and one should not only overlook stupidities which are not essential to their teaching, but actually try to repair them.” And although repairing Marx “fairly” and “generously” might simplify him, such simplification also made it easier to appreciate Marx’s humanism, which Popper always conceded: “I shall feel free, not only to criticize Marxism but also to defend certain of its views; and I shall feel free to simplify its doctrines radically.”

With Marx and Hegel, then, and much as he had with Plato, Popper may have been “tilting at windmills” as Munz has suggested. That is, his interpretations of Plato, Hegel and Marx were, as Dante Germino insists, “deliberately unhistorical,” but they were not “arbitrary” as Germino also insists. Popper may not have been doing the kind of contextualizing intellectual history that we, the authors’ of this study prefer. But he was doing intellectual history, namely profoundly normative, fighting intellectual history, all-the-same. Though arguably flawed because it was so polemically motivated, this very polemical purpose made it anything but arbitrary.

Theory” soon after fascism’s 1945 defeat: “But I should be glad if you would keep in mind that even if I speak as if Marxism were my only opponent I am criticizing methods which have been considered to be valid by many philosophers, ancient and modern, whose political views were vastly different from those of Marx.” See K. R. Popper, “Proceedings of the Congress,” Library of the Xth International Congress of Philosophy (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing, 1948), 82. The 1948 lecture was subsequently revised and republished as “Prediction and Prophecy in the Social Sciences” in Patrick Gardiner, ed., Theories of History (New York: The Free Press, 1959).

378 Popper, “Prediction and Prophecy in the Social Sciences,” 82. Popper continues: “One of the points in which I feel sympathy with Marxists is their insistence that the social problems of our time are urgent, and that philosophers ought to face the issues; that we should not be content to interpret the world, but help to change it.” Here, once again, we have Popper’s conviction that philosophical ideas matter greatly politically.
379 Munz, ?????????
Ideology and Anachronism

Popper’s method of “critical interpretation” stemmed, in the end, from the confluence of his scientific methodology and his anti-historicism. For him, historicism reduced texts to mere epiphenomena of their historical contexts, which were supposedly governed by historical laws. At least, as far as Popper was concerned, Hegel and Marx’s versions of historicism reduced texts to expressions of underlying historical laws. Marx, as we saw, purportedly regarded texts as merely part of the cultural superstructure cast up by economic conditions, which were scientifically explainable.\(^{381}\) Hegel, too, in Popper’s view, tended to make truth, knowledge and therefore textual meanings relative to history’s predetermined course. Hence, historicism and historism were theoretically intertwined in Popper’s account of Hegel and Marx. For both, according to Popper, historism was effectively a mode, or particular feature, of historicism. Hence, for Popper, interpreting texts by trying to read them through the lens of their determining historical contexts was a typical historicist fallacy. Historicism devalued the autonomy of texts much the way it devalued individual or personal autonomy.\(^{382}\) Historicism therefore rendered texts hapless excuses for history’s worst and bloodiest excesses.

Unfortunately, in our view, Popper’s “critical interpretation” as a method of textual interpretation, that is, as mode of “critical rationalism,” overvalues the autonomy of texts, and, like Strauss, over-intellectualizes history. Texts floated freely and untethered above their

\(^{381}\) See Karl Keuth, *The Philosophy of Karl Popper* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 232-41 for a discussion of Popper’s assessment that Hegel and Marx reduced thought to underlying historical laws. Keuth, by the way and keeping with what we have been arguing, succinctly captures how Popper’s interpretive methodology goes awry without dismissing its value: “We do not need *The Open Society* to recognize how the works of Plato and Marx are well suited to support fascist and communist totalitarianism, respectively. It is more difficult to judge to what extent these authors intended to further totalitarian rule. But we must give Popper credit for reminding us of the suitability of their works to this purpose [my italics]” (328).

\(^{382}\) In this regard, see Karl Popper, “On Freedom” in Karl Popper, *All Life is Problem Solving* (London and New York, Routledge, 1999), 84, where he says: “I fully agree with Hugo von Hofmannsthal when he says in his *Buch der Freunde*: ‘Philosophy must be a judge of her times, things are in a bad way when she becomes an expression of the spirit of her times.’”
historical and political contexts though they often powerfully affected these contexts. Texts could mean whatever their interpreters wanted to make of them. Hence, “critical interpretation” licensed dismissing Plato, Hegel and Marx as proto-totalitarians. If, as Popper claims, we cannot avoid rationally reconstructing texts, especially political philosophical ones, and if we might as well do so “systematic[ally],” then we encourage idiosyncratic polemical readings in keeping with our favorite political preoccupations. Moreover, when those preoccupations are driven by exile and personal “war effort,” the Plato, Hegel and Marx we produce will be, not surprisingly, unconventional, if not simplistic, reifications. In short, “critical interpretation,” no less than non-critical historicist interpretation, can function apologetically. Just as much as the latter, it can acquit, forgive and explain away. It too can reduce philosophical texts into equally hapless excuses for all kinds of politics for better or for worse.

“Critical interpretation,” then, runs the risk of being critical in name only. When it becomes mere apology and political weaponry, it degenerates into ideology in the narrow and pejorative sense. While all interpretation is ideological widely construed insofar as all interpretation is a narrative or part of a narrative, aggressively-polemical, narrowly-ideological interpretation invariably simplifies, compresses and caricaturizes. It is not so much that polemical interpretation distorts or recasts while non-polemical interpretation does not. Rather, polemical interpretation tends to produce un nuanced cartoons instead of theoretically fine-grained portraits that resonant suggestively. To read Hegel as a “clown,” albeit a tremendously influential clown, is to misread him ideologically in the narrower meaning of the term.
Popper and Berlin

Popper was not the only exiled “Jewish” political philosopher from pre-WWII Europe to deploy a theory of interpretation congenial to fighting wars. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Leo Strauss, despite his seemingly very different conception of historicism and his insistence that we should understand texts the way their authors intended them to be understood, yielded an interpretative strategy that was just as context-independent, idiosyncratic and polemical as Popper’s. The liabilities of this interpretative approach are particular striking in the way that other Straussians, particularly Allan Bloom, have approached Plato. Whereas for Popper, Plato is a proto-totalitarian, for Bloom, Plato is the opposite when he is read ironically as, Bloom claims, he intended to be read. In Bloom’s view, Plato is really warning us against being seduced by communism, which despite its pretensions, is just as totalitarian as fascism. The fact that anti-communists like Popper and Bloom appropriated Plato in diametrically opposed ways suggests, though admittedly does not demonstrate, how deeply polemical their respective interpretive strategies were. That Bloom could read modern anti-totalitarianism into the same Plato that Popper read the very opposite should at least caution us that both these Plato’s are very likely oversimplified reifications that have more to do with Bloom and Popper’s respective political agendas than what Plato might possibly have intended.

We would also like to suggest that Berlin was probably inspired by Popper in attacking historicism, and, in the process, set out a method of textual interpretation congenial to reconstructing rationally political theory’s canon in Popperian fashion.  

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384 For Popper’s influence on Berlin’s criticisms of the dangers of historicism qua historical inevitability, see Isaiah Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” Four Essays on Liberty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 49, n1, where Berlin says that Popper “has exposed some of the fallacies of metaphysical ‘historicism’ with” unsurpassed “force and precision…” Also see “Isaiah Berlin to Karl Popper,” 4 November, 1957, Popper Archiv, Universität Wien,
unsympathetic understanding of Rousseau, Hegel and Green seem to have been informed by Popper’s to some extent. Like Berlin, but earlier, Popper blamed romanticism for its irrational aestheticism that intoxicated romantics to dream of heavenly cities. But such dreams invariably only succeeded in making real earthly cities a hell – a “hell which man alone prepares for his fellow-men.”

Furthermore, not unlike Berlin, Popper worried that, thanks to Plato, Hegel and Marx, the question “Who should rule?” had become a dangerously dominant concern for political theorists. Instead, again not unlike Berlin, Popper recommended that rather than asking who should rule, political philosophers would do better trying to answer questions like “how is ...power wielded?’ and ‘how much power is wielded?’”

The former question is so hazardous because it “begs for an authoritarian answer such as ‘the best’, or ‘the wisest’, or ‘the people’, or ‘the majority’. For Berlin, the positive theory of freedom, sadly enough, leads its advocates down the slippery slope of unavoidably asking this kind of unwise and perilous question.

Given Popper’s worries about political philosophers asking the wrong kind of questions that, Berlin has famously claimed, positive freedom theorists have improperly asked, we might be tempted to conclude that Popper endorsed negative freedom like Berlin. Taylor clearly thinks

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385 Popper, The Open Society and Its Enemies, 182. According to Popper, Rousseau probably “derived his pastoral romanticism and love for primitivity indirectly from Plato; for he was certainly influenced by the Italian Renaissance, which had rediscovered Plato, and especially his naturalism and his dreams of a perfect society of primitive shepherds....” Popper continues by labeling Rousseau’s political philosophy “romantic obscurantism,” adding that despite admiring Rousseau, Kant recognized “this [obscurantist] danger when he was faced with it in Herder’s ‘Ideas’....” See ibid., 703, n14. Without mentioning Rousseau or Herder specifically, Hacohen alludes to the obvious similarities between Popper and Berlin’s anti-romanticism and shared motives for it. Moreover, Hacohen also notes that besides Berlin, Raymond Aron and Jacob Talmon “echoed” Popper, arguing that “both the French Revolution, in its Jacobin phase, and Marxist socialism reflected secularized and politicized messianism, searching for salvation in this world.” Such “messianic neurosis” typically excused the very “worst repression.” See Hacohen, Karl Popper: The Formative Years 1902-1945, 508-9. Also see “Isaiah Berlin to Karl Popper,” 19 February 1952, Popper Archiv, Universitāt Wien, Box 276, 10, where Berlin informs Popper that he won’t be able to meet him in Oxford on March 7 because he will be “delivering a lecture on the Enemy—(Herder, Hegel, etc.)” that same day.

386 Popper, The Open Society and Its Enemies, 426.

387 Popper, “On the Sources of Knowledge and Ignorance,” 25. Also see Popper, The Open Society and Its Enemies, 132 and 392.
that he did. And Hacohen thinks so too because the aftermath of WWII reoriented liberal political theorists, including Popper, to take up the standard of negative freedom as an antidote to what they perceived as the totalitarian implications of positive freedom, especially its more robust varieties. But Popper never advocated negative freedom exclusively. Despite his friendship with Hayek and the received view to the contrary, Popper argued for supplementing negative freedom with robust positive freedom qua meaningful equal opportunities. In his discussion of Marx in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper praises Marx for recognizing that mere negative freedom was “formal” and therefore impoverished. Negative freedom had to be supplemented by “material” freedom in order for freedom to be meaningful. Hence, Popper concurs with Marx that “unlimited economic freedom” characteristic of “unrestrained capitalism” is “just as self-defeating as unlimited physical freedom, and economic power may be nearly as dangerous as physical violence; for those who possess a surplus of food can force those who are starving into a ‘freely’ accepted servitude, without using violence.”

In the spring of 1959, Popper and Berlin exchanged letters about Berlin’s celebrated 1958 University of Oxford Inaugural Lecture, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” which Berlin had sent Popper. After praising Berlin for exposing the political “dangers of the ideology of positive freedom” and for his forthright stand “against moral historism and historicism,” Popper proceeds to criticize Berlin’s essay on two counts. First, Popper complains, without elaborating, that

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388 See Taylor, “The Poverty of the Poverty of Historicism,” 78, where Taylor claims that Popper’s view of liberalism is an “apology for an utterly negative view of freedom.”


Berlin understands rationalism too narrowly, denying that he is a rationalist in Berlin’s overly constricted sense. And by conceiving rationalism so narrowly, Berlin, not surprisingly, hesitates to embrace it and thus risks enhancing romantic irrationalism instead, which Popper cautions Berlin is “at least as great an enemy as an uncritical rationalism.” In any case, Popper reminds Berlin that “you yourself are a perfect example of a rationalist, for ‘rationality’ means, for me, the readiness to pay attention to criticism and argument – to other people’s criticism of what one thinks and says, and to be highly critical of one’s own views and predilections.” Second and with Mill likely in mind, Popper insists that a “simple idea of positive freedom may be complementary to negative freedom,” namely the idea of spending “one’s own life as well as one can; experimenting, trying to realize in one’s own way, and with full regard to others (and their different valuations) what one values most.”

Berlin responded to Popper’s first criticism conceding that in his “zeal to refute metaphysical rationalism,” he may have needlessly “cast suspicion on reason as such.” Metaphysical rationalism, such as Rousseau’s and Hegel’s, was clearly perverse and perilous. Scientific rationalism was just as unsavory and hazardous when, as Hayek warns, we fetishize it instead. That is, “there exists a scientific obscurantism no less oppressive than that of historicism: and in our day more menacing: although the former may be a perversion of scientific method and scientific temper, as the latter is of the historical.” So just as both metaphysical and exaggerated scientific rationalism pervert reason, historicism perverts the historical, which is


392 “Isaiah Berlin to Karl Popper,” 16 March 1959, Popper Archiv, Universität Wien, Box 276, 10.
as much as to say that historicism is perverted rationalism too. What Berlin, then, calls “metaphysical” rationalism encompasses what Popper means by “anti-naturalistic” historicism whereas what Berlin calls “scientific obscurantism” incorporates Popper’s “pro-naturalistic” historicism.

Berlin says less about Popper’s second criticism, noting, not insignificantly, that the “whole of my lecture, in a sense, is a long attempt or a brief study – or prolegomena to the study – of the way in which innocent or virtuous or truly liberating ideas (… that a man who is free although he is a slave, in prison etc.) tend (not inevitably!) to become authoritarian and despotic and lead to enslavement or slaughter, when they are isolated and driven ahead by themselves.”

So Berlin indeed abandoned the “terrain” of positive freedom to the “enemy” out of “fear of the Totalitarian Menace” as critics like Charles Taylor would later complain. But similar fears never caused Popper to abandon this philosophical terrain, notwithstanding Taylor’s misconception, noted previously, that Popper advocated “an utterly negative view of freedom.”

Berlin and Popper parted company on other issues unmentioned in their letters. Most importantly for our purposes here, Berlin also seems not have agreed with Popper, at least explicitly, that ideas take their power, in part, from the fact that making them public detaches them from their maker’s intentions giving them an independent life and fate of their own. And Berlin surely would have accused Popper of overexaggerating in blaming intellectuals and their

393 Ibid., 10. Popper responded to Berlin, in turn, writing that he agreed with Berlin’s criticisms and worries about scientism: “For my own work on science… could be described as an attack on scientism where it is most necessary to attack it (and perhaps most interesting) – that is, on science itself. My main thesis can be summed up by saying: science has no authority; it can claim no authority. Those who claim authority for science, or in the name of science (the doctors, the engineers), misunderstand science. Science is no more than rational criticism…. I say all this because I want to interest you in my epistemology. It is the necessary background for any critical rationalism: for being a rationalist without claiming to know: for being interested – passionately interested – in knowledge while realizing that we won’t have any, and can’t have any, knowledge that can confer authority.” See “Karl Popper to Isaiah Berlin,” 21 March 1959, Popper Archiv, Universität Wien, Box 276, 10.
ideas for causing single-handedly the “most terrible harm for thousands of years.” Unlike Popper, Berlin surely would not have gone so far as to insist: “Mass extermination in the name of an idea, a doctrine, a theory – that is our work, our invention, the invention of intellectuals. If we would stopped stirring people up against one another – often with the best intentions – that alone would do a great deal of good.”

And just as Berlin would not have shared Popper’s conviction that intellectuals could do so much evil, he was also much less sanguine than Popper in thinking that intellectuals had the power to do quite so much good. Furthermore, Berlin would have hesitated in wanting them to embrace Popper’s modified utilitarianism since Berlin always regarded all forms of utilitarianism unsatisfying. For Popper, given the “great urgency of the hour,” philosophers were obliged to “bring rational criticism to bear on the problems that face us…” Philosophers and social scientists should assist us in anticipating the “remote consequences” of social policies so that we can “choose our actions more wisely.” Philosophers and intellectuals must be activist, albeit modest utilitarians:

And similarly, [philosophers] should consider the fact that the greatest happiness principle of the Utilitarians can easily be made an excuse for a benevolent dictatorship, and the proposal that we

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396 Popper, “Freedom and Intellectual Responsibility,” 86. This essay is a longer and later version of the essay cited in note 92. It is also more immoderate in the power and blame it attributes to intellectuals and their ideas: “But even cruelty is not altogether unknown among us intellectuals. In this too we have done our share. We need only think of the Nazi doctors who, some years before Auschwitz, were already killing off old and sick people – or of the so-called ‘final solution’ to the Jewish question.” (87). Popper also holds that intellectuals have been so dangerous, in part, because they have been so immodest: “And their lack of modesty, their presumptuousness, is perhaps the greatest obstacle to peace on earth. The greatest hope is that, although they are so arrogant, they may not be too stupid to realize it.” See Karl Popper, “Epistemology and the Problem of Peace” in Popper, All Life is Problem Solving, 44.
398 Karl Popper, “Prediction and Prophecy in the Social Sciences” in Popper, Conjectures and Refutations, 337.
399 Ibid., 343.
should replace it by a more modest and more realistic principle – the principle that the fight against avoidable misery should be a recognized aim of public policy, while the increase of happiness should be left, in the main, to private initiative.

This modified Utilitarianism could, I believe, lead much more easily to agreement on social reform. For new ways of happiness are theoretical, unreal things, about which it may be difficult to form an opinion. But misery is with us, here and now, and it will be with us for a long time to come. We all know it from experience. Let us make it our task [as philosophers] to impress on public opinion the simple thought that it is wise to combat the most urgent and real social evils one by one, here and now, instead of sacrificing generations for a distant and perhaps forever unrealizable greatest good.400

In short, according to Popper, intellectuals should stick to advocating solutions to alleviating immediate social evils. That is, they should concentrate on minimizing pain in the world, rather than more ambitiously, and counterproductively, trying to maximize happiness. Happiness is subjective and therefore unreal, whereas pain is viscerally objective and all-too-real. Hence, minimizing pain in the world piecemeal, step-by-step, is so worthy because it is so practicable, whereas trying to maximize the happiness of the greatest number is unworthy because it is so futile at best and dangerously counterproductive at worst. Popper, then, was what contemporary moral theorists refer to as a negative utilitarian.401 Negative utilitarians hold that we are only morally obligated to minimize pain in the world. We are not obligated to maximize pleasure because maximizing pleasure is simply impossible given the fact that pleasurable experiences

400 Ibid., 345-6.
401 For Popper’s account of the evolutionary and biological sources of utilitarianism, see “Knowledge and the Shaping of Reality” in Popper, In Search of a Better World, 17. Popper writes: “My hypothesis is that the original task of consciousness was to anticipate success and failure in problem-solving and to signal to the organism in the form of pleasure and pain whether it was on the right or wrong path to the solution of the problem…. Through the experience of pleasure and pain consciousness assists the organism in its voyages of discovery and in its learning processes.”
vary subjectively and endlessly from individual to individual. But we do have a pretty good sense of what causes most of the worst pain, namely poverty, disease and malnutrition. Therefore, we can do something about alleviating pain because we can, in fact, mitigate such evils.

Nevertheless, Berlin clearly followed Popper in believing that ideas were politically powerful for whatever reason. He also seems, at a minimum, to have agreed with Popper that systematic muddled thinking, even when well-meaning, made cultures susceptible to political fanaticism. Clear and precise philosophical thinking was not only essential to solving philosophical problems but also to avoiding political evils. What Munz therefore said about Popper might just as well apply to Berlin: “What is more, [Popper] attributed the advent of Nazis in Germany to the kind of muddled thinking which comes from a failure to understand the difference between knowledge and superstition. He said time and time again that in German culture there had developed a great tolerance of confused thinking because confused thoughts were given the benefit of the doubt: they might be profound.” Consequently, Popper “was convinced that in Germany there had been nurtured and treasured an intellectual culture which had made people defenceless against Nazism.” And Berlin concurred with Popper that romanticism and Hegelianism contributed—at the very least—to enfeebling liberalism at its roots. Consequently, for all these reasons, Berlin, like Popper, counseled intellectuals to wield the power of ideas responsibly and skillfully. Berlin, after all and as noted earlier, likewise wrote the history of political thought in order to fight totalitarianism.

402 Though we know of no instance of Berlin having discussed negative utilitarianism, we strongly suspect that he would have been much less critical of it than he was of utilitarianism in general. Insofar as negative utilitarianism amounted to minimizing great evils, it resembles equal opportunity liberalism, which Berlin himself championed.  
403 Popper’s famous “poker” confrontation with Wittgenstein at a meeting of the Moral Science Club at Cambridge in 1946 turned on Popper’s conviction that there are genuine philosophical problems and that they are sometimes extremely consequential.  
404 Munz, Beyond Wittgenstein’s Poker, 50.
Conclusion

Popper’s exile and ambivalent Jewish identity influenced his efforts to stem the tide of totalitarianism by means of constructing the history of political thought idiosyncratically. By debunking Plato as proto-totalitarian, Popper tarnished classical political thought for many post-WWII intellectuals. And by unfairly marginalizing Hegel as a crude historical determinist and pseudo-liberal, he appears to have influenced intellectual historians like Isaiah Berlin and Jacob Talmon (another exiled Jew) to expunge neo-Hegelians like T. H. Green, F. H. Bradley and Bernard Bosanquet from the liberal canon. As a consequence, the liberal tradition has become a compressed tale that begins with Hobbes and Locke and then leaps forward to Mill and Rawls. Many nuanced permutations of the liberal tradition, including 19th-century English “new” liberals like Green, have been accordingly discredited and forgotten. Thanks to Popper even more so than Strauss for instance, liberal intellectual history has become simplistically repackaged for facile pedagogical dissemination which, in turn, has reinforced our inclinations to interpret the liberal tradition simplistically. Happily, though, second generation, post-war liberals have begun rediscovering much of their discarded tradition. Hegel has begun making his way back into the liberal canon, and Green, Bradley and Bosanquet are being studied seriously once again.405

Popper likewise misinterpreted Marx, stripping his work of nuance and recasting him as another historicist enemy of liberal democracy. Regrettably, Popper’s Marx encouraged too many post-war English-speaking political theorists to treat Marx with less seriousness than he deserves. As with Hegel, a new generation of political theorists and historians of political thought needed to emerge free from the likes of Popper’s interpretative shadow before Marx could be taken up earnestly once more.

405 For a more in depth discussion of how the liberal tradition has become artificially compressed see A. Simhony and D. Weinstein, "Introduction: The New Liberalism and the Liberal-Communitarian Debate" in Simhony and Weinstein, eds., The New Liberalism: Reconciling Liberty and Community.
More importantly, we have argued that, generally speaking for Popper, there is no intellectual history “out there” simply awaiting sensitive readers to get it right just as there is no history in general “out there” open to all who have discerning eyes to see it. On Popper’s account, every history, whether intellectual or any other kind, is an interpretative decision for which we are responsible. Every intellectual history is a narrative or just another narrative.\footnote{Here, we should do well to heed Stanley Rosen’s 1956 response to Strauss: ???????????? See Stanley Rosen, \ldots} We cannot but help to interpret, narrate and renarrate continuously. We cannot help but being polemical in this sense. The sooner we recognize this fact, the sooner we will take responsibility for our narratives, for narratives matter. Like our children, they soon enough take on lives of their own. For Popper, they especially matter politically as they leave their authors behind. And narratives of the history of ideas mattered most of all because he regarded ideas as so politically powerful and consequential, making Popper’s own conception of history subtly and ironically historicist.\footnote{We are indebted to J. G. A. Pocock for drawing our attention to how Popper was historicist himself. For Pocock, philosophers who do intellectual history typically do history badly: “That is, they think as philosophers; they see something going on in history which they think philosophically significant, and they (1) write its history, which may be legitimate and (2) write history as the history of this philosophic event or contest. Thus history becomes the war between the Open Society and its Enemies (Popper), or positive and negative liberty (Berlin), or ancient and modern philosophy (Strauss). To the extent (and it varies) to which they see history as driven by philosophic issues, their thought becomes historicist in Popper’s sense of the term, so that it can be applied even to him.” From personal correspondence with the authors.}

Now Popper’s account of the power of ideas and the power of our narratives about ideas and their genealogy rests on his scientific methodology of unending conjecture and refutation. If even science consists of interpretative decisions, then surely intellectual history consists of them too. Different scientific interpretive decisions solve our scientific problems either better or worse. Likewise, different interpretive accounts of our intellectual history help solve our political problems better or worse. But Popper’s allegiance to the power of our intellectual narratives is as much a product, in our view, of his exile and victimization as a Jew, regardless of
how much he preferred not to be considered one. Exile and victimization caused him to internalize his Jewish identity more than he wished. In the end, Popper’s personal fate conspired with his philosophy of science to give us *The Open Society and Its Enemies* and *The Poverty of Historicism*.

In sum, we have explored how Popper’s exile motivated his peculiar brand of anti-historicist anti-totalitarianism, which, in turn, informed his equally idiosyncratic method of textual interpretation. We say “informed” deliberately because his method of textual interpretation owed much to his scientific method as well. More generally, we have also endeavored to add to our understanding of how all intellectual history is invariably a narrative practice, making it indelibly polemical. Usually, these polemics are subtle and disguised but when circumstances become sufficiently dramatic and dire, they typically show themselves more brazenly as in the case of Popper. Intellectual history in general and the history of political thought in particular are always political practices.
Leo Strauss:
The Exile of Interpretation

It is not easy to generalize about exiles, nor do they lend themselves to abstraction. Yet exile is a common experience and so searing that it should invite reflection. No experience is more fundamental, and not one has been used metaphorically more seriously.408

The Germans are unique perhaps in the ardor with which they pursue ideas and attempt to transform them into realities. Their great achievements, their catastrophic failures, their tragic political history are all impregnated with this dangerous idealism. If most of us are the victims of circumstances, it may truly be said of the Germans as a whole that they are at the mercy of ideas.409

Introduction

For so many exiled Jewish intellectuals from Germany and Austria in the 1930s, European history had gone astray in large measure because ideas had gone so terribly astray. Therefore, combating the twentieth century’s shocking crimes, repairing its disastrous drift, required fighting back with alternative ideas. And if fighting with ideas mattered so much, especially in such dark times as ours and their immediate aftermath, then texts mattered hardly less, especially political philosophical texts as well as contemporary texts devoted to their history. Political philosophy and its history, then, were profoundly significant politically for this exceptional generation of exiled intellectual historians. For many of them, especially those who were Jewish, philosophizing and its historical interpretation were political activities no less seminal than more conventional varieties of activity. From Erich Auerbach to Karl Popper, they extolled

the power of philosophical ideas and texts much like Isaiah Berlin who was an exile too but of a
different kind. And perhaps no Jewish exile of this generation extolled the power of texts with
such provocative, and yet such perplexing, insistence as Leo Strauss (1899-1973).

This chapter examines Strauss’s writings between the late 1930s and early 1950s,
including one unpublished text from a 1941 series of lectures. It draws on some later texts but
only in order to trace how earlier themes continue resonating in his more mature writings. We
wish to avoid imposing on Strauss’s oeuvre a distorting and unifying single thread that would
artificially reduce its complexity. We wish only to highlight how his method of interpreting
texts fits with his anti-historicism and how both, in turn, are informed to some extent by his anti-
totalitarianism and exile. We attempt to place Strauss’s approach to textual interpretation into
two wider and linked contexts, namely the philosophical context of his anti-historicism and its
likely political sources. We want to contextualize influences and connect themes. We are
certainly not arguing that anti-totalitarianism and exile necessarily produce anti-historicism and
reading between the lines. While exile and anti-totalitarianism likewise informed, for example,
Karl Popper and Karl Löwith’s differing versions of anti-historicism and related exegetical
strategies, other Jewish exiles were not similarly influenced and affected.

This chapter focuses particularly on Strauss’s writings on Hobbes from the 1930s before
and just after he fled Germany though it also draws his on other writings from this period. We
want especially to situate his idiosyncratic interpretation of Hobbes in the historical and
intellectual contexts from which it emerged. We also suggest that the intertwined political and
philosophical crises of post-WWI Germany from which Strauss fled not only infused his
unconventional interpretation of Hobbes but continued informing his entire idiosyncratic history
of political thought that eventually became his seminal *Natural Right and History*. As we shall
see for Strauss, the political crises of modernity, especially the rise of fascism, were to a significant extent, a philosophical crisis brought on by historicism. Strauss’s idiosyncratic history of political thought narrates this philosophical crisis as the reckless abandonment of classical natural right by the founders of liberalism, particularly Hobbes. We also explore the relationship between Strauss’s idiosyncratic account of Hobbes and his equally distinctive method of textual interpretation. Both were linked inextricably.

Because Strauss faulted Hobbes for unleashing historicist thinking dressed up as the inauguration of liberalism, we therefore devote considerable attention to Strauss’s 1936 *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* as well as discuss more briefly his earlier studies of Hobbes, which appeared in German for the first time in 2001 and only in English translation in 2011. We then examine Michael Oakeshott’s swift criticism of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* published in 1937. Oakeshott’s reception of Strauss’s Hobbes helps us better appreciate just how

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410 Making sense of Strauss’s interpretation of Hobbes requires, in addition, setting it in the context of what we shall call the German Historical School as Strauss likely understood and appropriated it in the 1920s and 1930s. Strauss’s 1941 unpublished lecture, “Historicism,” is crucial in this regard. There, Strauss claims that historicism “is the basic assumption common to present-day democracy, communism [and] fascism.” It consists primarily in the “tendency to overemphasize history to the detriment of philosophy.” It is “then that trend of human thought which tends toward the merging either of philosophy and history in general, or of philosophy intellectual history in particular.” Consequently, it “leads to a historical philosophy,” especially myopic classical scholarship. Regrettably, “it is impossible that a classical scholar, as far as he is a classical scholar, should understand ancient thought.” The “classical scholar is not an ancient thinker, he is a modern man: his modern prejudices are bound to interfere with his understanding of the ancients, if he does not methodically reflect on the modern presuppositions as such.” By reflecting on these presuppositions, one “transcends the limits of classical scholarship,” which is precisely why such intellectual work “must be entrusted to *philosophic historians*” such as Strauss presumably (italics ours). To succeed as a philosophical historian, “one merely must use one’s eyes and one’s head, and one must be animated by a serious interest in that phenomenon of the past with which one happens to deal.” That is, “one must familiarize oneself with the outlook of the author by *practicing* it; one has not understood an author of the past, as long as one does not know from intimate knowledge, how he would have reacted to our modern refutations of his doctrine.” Proper textual interpretation and the problem of historicism, then, were deeply interwoven for Strauss. One therefore cannot take adequate account of Strauss’s celebrated “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” also from 1941, without having read the lecture, “Historicism.” For Strauss’s 1941 lecture, see Leo Strauss, “Historicism,” November 26, 1941, 5, unpublished lecture, Leo Strauss Papers, Box 6, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library. For our account of the German Historical School’s legacy to Strauss’s understanding of historicism, see David Weinstein and Avihu Zakai, *Exile and Interpretation*, forthcoming. For an overview of the significance and development of historicism in German thinking about history from Goethe to Troeltsch and Meinecke, see Georg Ligges, *The German Conception of History* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1968).
much his Hobbes displaces his anxieties about the German historicist tradition on to early modern English political thought. We also discuss briefly Karl Friedrich’s 1938 review of Strauss’s book on Hobbes, which is no less revealing than Oakeshott’s remarkable review. We next briefly address the first chapter of Strauss’s 1934 *Philosophy and Law*, where Strauss settles accounts with Julius Guttmann, in order to situate more comprehensively Strauss’s unconventional Hobbes, and the havoc he purportedly initiated, within the wider context of other examples of Strauss’s historicist worries in the 1930s. Finally, we close by taking up Gadamer’s complaint that Strauss’s history of political thought is “Talmud in the wrong place.” We are less interested in the aptness of Gadamer’s characterization of Strauss’s intellectual history as wrong-headily Talmudic than with what we take Gadamer to be saying about his underlying differences with Strauss, whom he admired considerably. Again, our aim is to contextualize Strauss’s reception, but particularly the reception of his history of political thought more generally rather than just the immediate reception of his interpretation of Hobbes. Many critics of Strauss regard his history of political thought as idiosyncratic overall. We suggest that these idiosyncrasies, like his idiosyncratic Hobbes, derive, in part, from his idiosyncratic method of reading philosophical texts.

Some more committed and determined defenders of Strauss might prefer to call our approach historicist and therefore proceed to dismiss it on the grounds that historicism, as Strauss points out in *Natural Right and History* and elsewhere, is self-contradictory in that on its own terms, its truth status is compromised. Our approach is indeed historicist but only in the *limited* sense that we wish to explain some of the sources of Strauss’s method of interpreting texts or to suggest how historical circumstances and other facets of his thinking reinforced, or were congenial to, his method. If his method and anti-historicism clashed, or were in some sense
mismatched, then Strauss’s history of ideas would be less intriguing. Contextualism, in short, is not necessarily historicism.\(^{411}\)

### Crisis and the Cave of Historicism

*It is not self-forgetting and pain-loving antiquarianism nor self-forgetting and intoxicating romanticism which induces us to turn with passionate interest, with unqualified willingness to learn, toward the political thought of classical antiquity. We are impelled to do so by the crisis of our time, the crisis of the West.*\(^{412}\)

Leo Strauss’ philosophical thinking, including especially his conviction that ideas mattered politically, was powerfully informed by the dramatic events of his generation. He came of age intellectually when, as Hacohen puts it, central Europe’s Jewish intelligentsia ‘existed precariously between national integration and assimilation.’\(^{413}\) He also came of age intellectually when, if Hans Sluga is correct, German philosophers were disproportionately convinced that post-WWI Europe was in immense crisis. So many of them believed that the present was an unprecedented cataclysmic crossroads, making it especially hard for most of them to avoid political engagement or at least thinking politically. On Sluga’s account, the ‘German notion of crisis was…not an empirical idea waiting for confirmation but a regulative ideal, an *a priori* that structured the perception of the world for those who were in its grip.’ Crisis

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\(^{411}\) We make no claims, furthermore, about the truth of Strauss’s moral convictions and principles. We are not saying that all moral beliefs, including Strauss’s, are circumstantially relative. Attempting to explain why Strauss held the normative views he held no more implies anything about their truth status than trying to account for his method of interpretation proves anything about that method’s validity. Of course, there may be reasons to question that method on other grounds as we do subsequently.


determined their philosophical thinking as well as their political involvement. Crisis stalked their thinking. Heidegger and Schmitt, both of whom influenced Strauss’s thinking early on, were not aberrations. Strauss was, in many respects, the Jewish philosophical face of this crisis:

Strauss emerged as a Weimar Jewish thinker passionately engaged in the controversies that gripped his generation. And his developing intellectual personality exemplified the crisis thinking that cours ed through the interconnected realms of religion, history, art, philosophy, science, and politics. He absorbed and participated in the leading currents and countercurrents of contemporary German philosophy as he grappled with the problematic character of modern German-Jewish existence. Strauss’s published writings during Weimar have a definite polemical character directed towards, on the one hand, the uncovering of the shaky foundations and illusory goals of liberalism and, on the other, the Enlightenment faith in reason and historical progress.

For Strauss, then, the crisis of Weimar liberalism was equally the crisis of the modern galut.

Bourgeois European Jewry naively and tragically believed that liberalism had finally begun solving the Jewish question. But the Jewish question was irresolvable. Not only liberalism but socialism and Zionism would never adequately solve it. Enmity towards Jews was fundamental in as much as enmity between groups, as Schmitt insisted, was fundamental to the human condition, making it impossible not to remain Jewish. As Strauss would continue maintaining:

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416 E. Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile* (Waltham, 2006), p. 17. Franz Rosenzweig, who also influenced Strauss’s early thinking, exemplified this crisis only less acutely. Rosenzweig saw the Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, which he founded, as challenging the assimilationist complacency of Weimar’s Jewish establishment and the epoch’s reigning historicism. As we are about to see, Strauss likewise assailed historicism as liberal malaise.
‘It is impossible not to remain a Jew. It is impossible to run away from one’s origins… There is no solution to the Jewish problem. The expectation of such a solution is due to the premise that every problem can be solved.’\textsuperscript{417} Strauss indeed epitomized, as Sheppard suggests, what Steven Aschheim has called ‘German Jews beyond liberalism and Bildung.’\textsuperscript{418}

Strauss left Germany in 1932, eventually coming to the U.S. in 1937. His post-war writings, particularly \textit{Natural Right and History} (1953), continue Strauss’s preoccupation with crisis, especially with the crisis of totalitarianism and its origins. For Strauss, much like Popper, modern ‘political science failed to recognize’ and anticipate the unprecedented dangers of twentieth century totalitarianism. It was hardly ‘surprising then that many of our contemporaries, disappointed or repelled by present-day analyses of present-day tyranny, were relieved when they rediscovered the pages in which Plato and other classical thinkers seemed to have interpreted for us the horrors of the twentieth century.’\textsuperscript{419} For Strauss as well, totalitarianism was rooted, in part, in historicism, which reduced ‘our ultimate principles’ to ‘arbitrary’ and ‘blind preference,’ therefore amounting to a kind of ‘madness.’\textsuperscript{420}

\textit{Natural Right and History} is mostly polemic against the ‘poverty of historicism.’\textsuperscript{421} In Strauss’s view, modernity’s abandonment of classical Aristotelian natural right was disastrous.

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item See S. Aschheim, ‘German Jews Beyond Bildung and Liberalism’ in S. Aschheim, \textit{Culture and Catastrophe: German and Jewish Confrontations with National Socialism and Other Crises} (New York, 1996). For Sheppard’s discussion of how Strauss typified this ‘countermodel’ German Jew, see Sheppard, \textit{Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile}, p. 84. Also see Aschheim’s claim in ‘The Jewish Revival in the Weimar Republic’ in Aschheim, \textit{Culture and Catastrophe: German and Jewish Confrontations with Nationals Socialism and Other Crises}, p. 39, that Weimar countermodel Jewish intellectuals emphasized redemptive origins, focusing ‘thought on the recovery of lost meanings, on truth as hidden, part of a primal, esoteric structure waiting to be revealed.’ Strauss is famous, and as we are about to see, for such preoccupations.
\item L. Strauss, \textit{Natural Right and History} (Chicago, 1953), p. 4.
\item We allude to Popper deliberately, whose book \textit{The Poverty of Historicism} appeared in 1957. For Popper as well, modernity’s crisis was partially the poverty of historicism. However, Popper’s understanding of historicism was unconventional, which is not to say that Popper meant something entirely different than Strauss.
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for Europe because this doctrine might have inoculated thinking against social contract and utilitarian instrumentalism which, in turn, fostered moral relativism and therefore also historicism. Together, relativism and historicism unleashed political nihilism, ultimately culminating in the ‘shadow of Hitler’. By Strauss’s account, the philosophical madness of historicism in particular had begun threatening America by the war’s end. Unfortunately, it ‘would not be the first time that a nation, defeated on the battlefield and, as it were, annihilated as a political being, has deprived its conquerors of the most sublime fruit of victory by imposing on them the yoke of its own thought.’ Even post-war liberals, like Isaiah Berlin, who ought to have known better, unwittingly donned this yoke according to Strauss. Berlin had particularly and inexcusably taken up historicism’s companion yoke of relativism. Berlin’s value pluralism celebrated the crisis of liberal modernity, which was ‘due to the fact that liberalism has abandoned its absolutist basis and is trying to become entirely relativistic.’ Although liberalism had once been far more ‘certain of its purpose,’ although it formerly championed wholeheartedly its own particular version of moral truth, albeit a misbegotten version, liberalism had more recently lost its way entirely. And having become so tentative and unsure of itself, having so completely lost its bearings, liberalism has degenerated into the most dangerous kind of ideology for having become so explosive and unstable all in the name of toleration. Liberalism began by abandoning natural duty for natural rights, nature for man, only to end up reducing tolerance to a fetish thus unleashing the most vulgar political fantasies. For Strauss, we have all become historicists, including especially liberals, which is particularly tragic. Where

422 Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 2.
424 But according to Nathan Tarcov, Strauss was not so much interested in undercutting the foundations of fascism by exposing its hidden roots in liberalism as he was to ‘find a theoretical solution to the problem posed by its having already been undercut.’ See N. Tarcov, ‘Philosophy and History: John Gunnell and Leo Strauss on Tradition and Interpretation’ in *Tradition, Interpretation and Science*, edited by J. Nelson (Albany, 1986), p. 75.
have those liberals gone ‘who dare appeal to the natural rights of man?’ These liberals, at least, possessed conviction and certitude, making their disappearance the opening of the floodgates to our moral disorientation.

By replacing our natural duties with the purported ‘rights of man,’ liberalism devalued true happiness all the while pretending to promote it unreservedly. Everyone’s right to pursue happiness as he or she saw fit destroyed the chances of some exceptional individuals ever actually achieving it. Once we start with rights, we will sooner or later end with historicism. And once we become historicists, we just as surely become moral relativists much to our peril.

Now some have criticized Strauss’s narrative of modernity’s crisis as simplistic though that is not our primary concern here. We are just as concerned with his narrative’s relationship to his approach to textual interpretation and his fate as an exile. We are just as interested in how our purported crisis, which drove Strauss into exile, was equally a crisis of interpretation in the history of ideas for him.

For Strauss, as we have been suggesting, modern totalitarianism was political nihilism, which was, in turn, rooted in historicism. And historicism was diametrically opposed to...

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425 L. Strauss, ‘Historicism,’ November 26, 1941, p. 5, unpublished lecture, Leo Strauss Papers, Box 6, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library. This lecture was delivered to the 1941 fall General Seminar, The New School of Social Research, where Strauss was a faculty member between 1938 and 1948. Strauss also wrote ‘Persecution and the Art of Writing’ the same year.

426 See Strauss, The City and Man, p. 33, where Strauss takes aim at what we have since come to associate with Rawlsian liberalism: ‘From this it was inferred in modern times that since virtue cannot be brought about by coercion, the promotion of virtue cannot be the purpose of the state; not because virtue is unimportant but because it is lofty and sublime, the state must be indifferent to virtue and vice as such, as distinguished from transgressions of the state’s laws which have no other function than the protection of the life, liberty, and property of each citizen.’

427 Mark Lilla has written that Strauss’s influential 1953 Natural Right and History ‘offers students unfamiliar with any other account of philosophy’s history an epic, just-so version of it, tracing our intellectual decline from the golden age of Athens to the modern age of iron.’ See M. Lilla, ‘The Closing of the Straussian Mind,’ New York Review of Books (November 4, 2004), p. 56.

428 Strauss, The City and Man, pp. 1 and 9-10. At least radical historicism thoroughly relativizes morality and promotes nihilism. Hegelian historicism, by contrast, is less insidious in so far as it absolutizes history. Indeed, Strauss’s underlying differences with Alexandre Kojève turn on Kojève’s Hegelianism. For Strauss, Kojève rightly recognizes the importance of universal, objective normative standards. However, he wrongly regards emerging historical consciousness as sufficient to the task. See especially the Strauss-Kojève debate and correspondence in Strauss, On Tyranny.
classical natural right. Indeed, ‘Natural Right and the Historical Approach,’ the first chapter of *Natural Right and History*, contrasts classical natural right, favored by Strauss, with historicism, which he finds so egregious and dangerously perverse. For Strauss, the poverty of historicism was its rejection of classical natural right. Historicism renders us ‘homeless’ by dismissing ‘universal principles in favor of historical principles.’ Historicism makes moral principles, like all ideas in general, relative to the episodic flux of history. It reduces morality to an ever-changing epiphenomenon carried along by predictable historical currents. Historicism ‘thus shows that no political philosophy can reasonably claim to be valid beyond the historical situation to which it is essentially related.’ Moreover, it mistakenly assumes, without demonstrating, that the ‘restoration of earlier [political philosophical] teachings are impossible.’ This is the ‘Weltanschauung…of what Plato called the cave’ and ‘[w]e shall call this view “historicism.”’

Intellectual history, then, when done properly according to Strauss, was a critical weapon for combating modernity’s drift, its historicism and nihilism. The West was in crisis, requiring that we return to the ‘political thought of classical antiquity.’ We need to recollect and reaffirm classical natural right theory in order to avoid repeating either Germany’s Nazi debacle or

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429 Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 16.
430 L. Strauss, ‘Political Philosophy and History’ in L. Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy and Other Studies* (Chicago, 1988), p. 63. But by making this claim, historicism is ‘no less dogmatic’ than non-historicist political philosophy. It merely replaces ‘one kind of finality by another kind of finality, by the final conviction that all human answers are essentially and radically “historical.”’ (pp. 71-2). This essay, originally published in 1946 in *Iyyun: Hebrew Philosophical Quarterly*, constitutes Strauss’ most concise and sustained published account of historicism and its shortcomings.
431 Ibid., p. 60.
432 Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 12. Daniel Tanguay suggests that, for Strauss, historicism was not Plato’s cave but a second cave that modern philosophers have created beneath Plato’s. See Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, (New Haven, 2007), pp. 44-5. Also see Strauss’ 1931 ‘Review of Julius Ebbinghaus, *On the Progress of Metaphysics*’ in *Leo Strauss: the Early Writings 1921-1932*, edited by M. Zank (Albany, 2002), p. 215, where Strauss says that ‘today we find ourselves in a second, much deeper cave than the lucky ignorant persons Socrates dealt with; we need history first of all in order to ascend to the cave from which Socrates can lead us to light; we need a propaedeutic, which the Greeks did not need, namely, learning through reading.’ So, if historicism is this second cave, then reading the right books in the right way can help us to escape it and make our way back to Socrates.
following the Soviet Union into an alternative totalitarian abyss. Ironically, according to Strauss, the West’s crisis was fortunately and finally motivating us to understand classical political thought ‘in an untraditional or fresh manner’ unfiltered by the distorting lenses of modern political theorizing. Our very crisis not only makes classical political philosophy a renewed imperative for us but also compels us to try to understand it ‘on its own terms.’ Our crisis begs us to reclaim the teachings of the classical political philosophers as they meant them to be understood.

Understanding Plato and Aristotle as they intended themselves to be understood would help us see that our crisis was rooted in modernity’s wayward philosophizing. Our predicament was not wholly unique, our problems were really perennial problems and trying to solve them required not so much innovation as return. Combating historicism and its attendant political perils required first and foremost explaining both its falsity and its genesis. Destroying it entailed explaining it. And explaining it required taking classical political philosophy at long last very seriously once again. To fight was to explain and to explain was to interpret properly.

According to Strauss, Plato and Aristotle meant their teachings to speak to the ages. They saw themselves as simply speaking the truth and not merely the truth for their times. Just because a political philosophy emerged long ago does not exclude the prospect that it may, after all, be the truth. A political philosophy does not become false for us, or outmoded, simply because it happened to be expounded for the first time by Plato or Aristotle. The history of a doctrine ‘proves nothing, so to say, because the relation between a doctrine and the time of its emergence is essentially ambiguous; the time at which a doctrine emerged, may have been

433 Strauss, ‘Political Philosophy and History,’ p. 64.
favourable to the discovery of a truth, and it may have been unfavourable.\textsuperscript{434} For our part, then, we must be prepared to learn something ‘from’ Plato and Aristotle and not merely ‘about’ them. ‘To understand a serious teaching [such as theirs], we must be seriously interested in it, we must take it seriously, \textit{i.e.}, we must be willing to consider the possibility that it is simply true.\textsuperscript{435} And only be seriously considering their teachings as indeed true might we begin redeeming ourselves.

In any case, and crucially, even if we concede that the ‘political teaching’ of classical political philosophers was historically conditioned, we should not at all conclude that their ‘political philosophy proper’ was historically conditioned (our italics).\textsuperscript{436} The ‘political teaching’ of political philosophy is not necessarily ‘political philosophy proper.’ Political philosophers often cast their philosophy ‘proper’ in ‘teaching.’ They often adapted it to their historical situation. They wrote cryptically: ‘They did not limit themselves to expounding what they considered the political truth. They combined with that exposition an exposition of what they considered desirable or feasible in the circumstances, or intelligible on the basis of generally received opinions; they communicated their views in a manner which was not purely “philosophical,” but at the same time “civil.”’\textsuperscript{437} To communicate political philosophy ‘civil[ly]’ was nothing less than to communicate it esoterically. Unfortunately, superficial modern readers have conflated deliberate ‘civil’ adaptation of the truth for the truth itself, fueling historicist

\textsuperscript{434} Strauss, ‘Historicism,’ p. 18. Also see 4, where Strauss says that, contrary to historicist thinking, there is a ‘fundamental difference between the philosophic question of the validity of knowledge and science, and the historical question of the \textit{origin} of knowledge and science, and on the superior dignity and importance of the philosophic question.’ Confusing validity with origin commits, according to Strauss, the ‘historicist fallacy.’ The historicist fallacy, then, amounts to a kind of categorical mistake not unlike violating Hume’s Law or committing G. E. Moore’s naturalistic fallacy. But Hume and Moore were preoccupied with the origin vs. the validity of moral knowledge much like Weber rather than knowledge in general. In Chapter II of \textit{Natural Right and History}, Strauss severely criticizes Weber for separating fact from value, which suggests that, for Strauss, while conflating the validity vs. origin of knowledge in general was necessarily wrongheaded, conflating the validity vs. origin of moral knowledge specifically was not.

\textsuperscript{435} Ibid., p. 68.

\textsuperscript{436} Ibid., p. 64.

\textsuperscript{437} Ibid., p. 63.
fancies that there was not such thing as truth itself but merely historically conditioned truths. Historicism, in short, is the fruit of reading superficially or exoterically only.

“Natural” Understanding

There is no inquiry into the history of philosophy that is not at the same time a philosophical inquiry.438

Now Strauss founded a distinct school of textual interpretation explicitly opposed to the method of historically reconstructing texts (such as that favored by, for example, J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner). Where Pocock and Skinner insist that political philosophical texts can only be understood by situating them fully in their historical contexts, Strauss and his students insist that canonical texts possess enduring, often hidden meanings that transcend contexts and are best accessed by inquiring into their ‘esoteric teaching.’ For Strauss, reading esoterically is a method of non-historicist ‘natural understanding.’ We ‘cannot overcome modernity with modern means.’ We can hope to save ourselves only by ‘the way of thought of natural understanding.’439 Natural understanding interprets ‘thinkers of the past exactly as they understood themselves (our italics).’440 It enables us to understand them as they meant themselves to be understood. In the case of classical political philosophy, natural understanding strips from classical texts the accretions of misinterpretation that historicist understanding has

438 L. Strauss [1935], Philosophy and Law (Albany, 1995), p. 41. In other words, true philosophy begins with genuine history of philosophy or what Strauss elsewhere refers to, as we shall shortly see, as ‘philosophic history.’  
imposed upon them. The ‘goal of the intellectual historian is to understand the thought of the past “as it really has been,” that is, to understand it as exactly as possible as it was actually understood by its authors (our italics).’

Understanding the past as it really was requires not only abandoning historicist assumptions about truth’s relativity but also abandoning earlier Enlightenment assumptions about progress towards truth. Historicism is the Enlightenment’s bastard child of disappointment. Even prior to this disappointment, exact interpretation had become impossible:

The position which preceded historicism, was the belief in progress: the belief in the superiority, say, of the late 18th century to any earlier age in all important respects. The belief in progress stands midway between the non-historical view of the philosophic tradition and historicism. Belief in progress agrees with the philosophic tradition in so far as both admit that there are universally valid standards of truth and justice, standards which do not require any historical justification….It is evident that our understanding of the past, and of each individual period of the past, will tend to be the more adequate, the more we are interested in the past; but one cannot be seriously interested, passionately interested in the past if one knows beforehand that the present, the modern period, is superior in the most important respects, to the past. Historians who started from this assumption, felt no necessity to understand the past by itself; they understood it as a preparation of the present only.

Natural understanding rejects the assumptions of the Enlightenment and its subsequent discontent. It enables us to reappreciate and properly understand again, after a lapse of nearly two thousand years, fundamental philosophical problems which have never really changed:

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442 Strauss, ‘Historicism,’ pp. 6-7.
‘Studying the thinkers of the past becomes essential for men living in an age of intellectual
decline because it is the only practical way in which they can recover a proper understanding of
fundamental problems….Historicism sanctions the loss, or the oblivion, of the natural horizon of
human thought by denying the permanence of fundamental problems.’\textsuperscript{443} Historicism prevents
us from understanding the great thinkers of the past as they intended themselves to be
understood, namely as advocating timeless universal problems if not truths.

Strauss’s insistence that we read classical philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle \textit{exactly}
as they understood themselves, if we are to avoid repeating the worst of the twentieth century,
means reading ‘objective[ly].’ And reading ‘objective[ly]’ means somehow escaping the
debilitating and distorting hegemony of modern social science, which has so regrettably
corrupted every intellectual enterprise, including the enterprise of interpreting philosophical
texts. Reading ‘objective[ly]’ is like objectively understanding foreign cultures: “Objectivity”
can be expected only if one attempts to understand the various cultures or peoples exactly as they
understand or understood themselves. Men of ages and climates other than our own did not
understand themselves in terms of cultures because they were not concerned with cultures in the
present-day meaning of the term.\textsuperscript{444} Reading ‘objective[ly]’ entails not parochially putting
one’s values into the mouths of differently situated authors all the while pretending to read them
with unbiased ‘undogmatic openness.’ It means, in short, not reading with the non-judgmental
‘permissive egalitarianism’ so typical of liberal ‘open soci[ies].’\textsuperscript{445}

Regarding ‘natural understanding’ in his study of Xenophon, ‘On Tyranny,’ Strauss avers
further:

\textsuperscript{444} Strauss, ‘Jerusalem and Athens’ in \textit{Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity}, p. 46.
145-53.
In accordance with this principle [of natural understanding], I have tried to understand Xenophon’s thought as exactly as I could. I have not tried to relate his thought to his ‘historical situation’ because this is not the natural way of reading the work of a wise man; and, in addition, Xenophon never indicated that he wanted to be understood that way. I assumed that Xenophon, being an able writer, gave us to the best of his powers the information required to understanding his work. I have relied therefore as much as possible on what he himself says, directly or indirectly, and as little as possible on extraneous information, to say nothing of modern hypotheses.\footnote{Strauss, \textit{On Tyranny}, p. 25. Also see the same page where Strauss says: ‘The goal of the historian of thought [himself] is to understand the thought of the past “as it really has been,” i.e., to understand it as exactly as possible as it was actually understood by its authors. But the historicist approaches the thought of the past on the basis of the historicist assumption which was wholly alien to the thought of the past. He is therefore compelled to attempt to understand the thought of the past better than it understood itself before he has understood it exactly as it understood itself.’}

Of course, just because Xenophon never explicitly stated that he wanted to be understood historically or, for that matter, never stated how he wanted to be understood at all, is not a reason for us not to try to understand him historically. And this goes for Strauss as well. Just because Strauss rejected contextual interpretation, and just because he sometimes seems to have seen himself as writing to the ages unencumbered by his own particular historical and political context, we should not hesitate to read him contextually. Moreover, in claiming that he has tried to read Xenophon merely according to ‘what he himself says,’ Strauss begs the question of how to correctly interpret him. Strauss is merely insisting that he has read what Xenophon says by reading what he says.

For Strauss, then, ‘Historical understanding [as opposed to ‘natural understanding’] lost its liberating force by becoming historicism, which is \textit{nothing} other than the petrified and self-
complacent form of the self-criticism of the modern mind. Historicism is little more than ‘fashionable…intellectual laziness,’ which is as ‘lamentable’ as it is ‘ridiculous.’ By becoming so ‘petrified and self-complacent,’ modern intellectuals have disarmed themselves from being able to effectively contest moral relativism and nihilism, which can so easily give way to tolerating intolerance and therefore to fascism. Modern intellectuals, in short, must reject historicism in favor of seeking truth by listening for it in classical thinking and thus ‘becoming deaf to loudspeakers.’

Yet, seeking truth and finding it for Strauss, if it can be indeed be done at all, requires reading Plato, Aristotle and others with true ‘exactness.’ But modern historicism has rendered exact reading specious by making the meaning of texts relative to their historical contexts and therefore making them necessarily inaccessible to us and all subsequent generations of readers.

So historicism is both politically eviscerating and politically dangerous and makes it nearly impossible to read in a way that might help rescue us from these very dangers. Our historicist Weltanschauung handicaps ‘exact’ interpretation, especially of great books. Reading certain old books exactly, a forgotten habit and art, is more critical than ever before ‘as a desperate remedy for a desperate situation.’ Reading old books as their authors intended them to be read re-familiarizes us, after centuries of indifference, to their conviction that ‘true teaching’ exists, that philosophic truth is as possible as it is necessary for our survival. We must study canonical old books carefully again and again searching for their life-saving ‘hidden treasures.’

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450 Strauss [1941], ‘Persecution and the Art of Writing’ in Persecution and the Art of Writing, p. 29.
must understand him as writing the truth for posterity: ‘But the books of men like the mature
Spinoza, which are meant as possessions for all times, are primarily addressed to posterity.’
Hence, in reading Spinoza as trying to write the truth, however benign it may or may not be, we
learn to disabuse ourselves of our wayward and hazardous historicist fantasies that truth, and the
texts that express it, are invariably historically relative.

Ironically, even historicist readings of great philosophers may nevertheless compel historicists to forsake historicism:

The historian who started out with the conviction that true understanding of human
thought is understanding of every teaching in terms of its particular time or as an
expression of its particular time, necessarily familiarizes himself with the view constantly
urged upon him by his subject matter, that his initial conviction is unsound. More than
that: he is brought to realize that one cannot understand the thought of the past as long as
one is guided by that initial conviction. The self-destruction of historicism is not
altogether an unforeseen result.

Dogged historicism, then, may yet auspiciously devour itself. If we, plagued as we are by
historicist thinking, ‘want to know what non-historical philosophy really means, we have to go
back to the past.’ Historicism might nevertheless take us there inadvertently. It might just make us covet non-historical philosophy simply by exposing it to us on its own terms. And once we then really ‘want to get hold of an unambiguous non-historical philosophic position, we have to go back’ more earnestly than ever ‘to ancient and medieval philosophy.’ Moreover, and perhaps even more importantly, we have to take up ancient and medieval philosophy ‘if we want

453 Strauss, ‘How to Study Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise,’ p. 160.
454 Ibid., p. 158.
to elaborate the philosophic question as to what approach -- a non-historical approach or a historical approach -- is the right philosophic approach.\textsuperscript{456}

\textbf{Reading “Exactly”}

In ihrem Kern ist die Geschichte nicht eine technische, sondern eine hermeneutische Wissenschaft.\textsuperscript{457}

Now Strauss recognized early on in his 1941 ‘Persecution and the Art of Writing’ that historicists (meaning most contemporary intellectual historians) would likely respond that ‘exact’ interpretation is, in the end, little more than ‘arbitrary guesswork’ insofar as it lacks objective criteria.\textsuperscript{458} Strauss therefore lists at least seven criteria, which can purportedly guide us in interpreting exactly rather than willfully and arbitrarily. These criteria include, for instance, the principle that reading ‘between the lines is strictly prohibited in all cases where it would be less exact than not doing so (our italics).’ But, of course, this principle risks begging the question of the meaning of reading exactly. In order to read exactly, avoid reading inexacty. These criteria include as well the principle that one ‘is not entitled to delete a passage, nor to emend its text, before one has fully considered all reasonable possibilities of understanding the passage as it stands—one of these possibilities being that the passage may be ironic’ and the

\textsuperscript{456} Ibid., p. 13.
\textsuperscript{457} G. Špet, \textit{Die Geschichte als Problem der Logik} (1916), p. ?
\textsuperscript{458} Strauss, ‘Persecution and the Art of Writing,’ p. 27. Also see p. 32.
principle that the ‘real opinion of an author is not necessarily identical with that which he expresses in the largest number of passages.’

In ‘Historicism’, written the same year as ‘Persecution and the Art of Writing’, Strauss provides additional criteria for reading exactly such as the principle that each ‘author of the past must be interpreted, as much as possible, by himself: no term of any consequence must be used in the interpretation of an author which cannot be literally translated in the language of the author, and which has not been used by the author himself or which was not in fairly common use in his time.’ Strauss includes too, the principle that ‘one must familiarize oneself with the outlook of the author by practicing it; one has not understood an author of the past, as long as one does not know from intimate knowledge, how he would have reacted to our modern refutations of his doctrine.’

Notwithstanding the ambiguities of these criteria, exact reading is otherwise attentive, careful reading that consists ‘chiefly in listening’ to what great books, especially those of Plato and Aristotle, have always said. Listening attentively and ‘docily’ requires not becoming

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459 Ibid., p. 30. But see Strauss, ‘Historicism,’ p. 9, where he concedes that many modern historians endorse these principles of interpretation though they ‘rarely live up to them, owing to the weakness of the flesh.’ The only study ‘which comes nearest to the goal of historical exactness’ is ‘J. Klein’s analysis of Greek logistics and the genesis of modern algebra.’ Strauss is referring to J. Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra* (Cambridge, MA, 1968).

460 Strauss, ‘Historicism,’ pp. 8 and 10. How we could possibly know how an author ‘would have reacted’ is puzzling. Also see ‘How to Study Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise,’ p. 177, for more criteria for reading exactly including the principle that whenever a great philosopher like Spinoza contradicts himself, prefer the ‘statement contradicting the vulgar’ commonly-accepted view. Strauss also claims that exactly interpreting a text is different from explaining it. Explaining texts includes judging them though, together, both interpreting and explaining constitute ‘understanding’ texts. See especially pp. 143 and 147. In *Truth and Method* (New York, 1975), pp. 488-9, Gadamer explicitly criticizes Strauss’ claim about what authorial contradictions reveal about the author’s real, hidden intentions. For Gadamer, ‘it is by no means clear that, when we find contradictory statements in a writer, it is correct to take the hidden meaning—as Strauss thinks—for the true one… Contradictions are an excellent criterion of truth but, unfortunately, they are not an unambiguous criterion when we are dealing with hermeneutics.’ Gadamer continues: ‘Does an author really know so exactly and in every sentence what he means?…If the alternative suggested by Strauss is true, namely that a philosophical author has either an unambiguous meaning or is confused, then there is, I fear, in many controversial points of interpretation only one hermeneutical consequence: we must consider that there is confusion’ (our italics).

textual ‘impresarios and lion-tamers’ although we can’t help but ‘judge’ and ‘transform’ even the greatest of texts.\textsuperscript{462} Textual impresarios and lion-tamers wrong-headedly \textit{rewrite} texts as they read them while attentive listeners mostly just interpret them skillfully. Attentive readers ponder over texts, especially classical texts, “‘day and night’ for a long time.”\textsuperscript{463} But they eschew classical scholarship: ‘For it is impossible that a classical scholar, as far as he is a classical scholar, should understand ancient thought. The classical scholar is not an ancient thinker, he is a modern man: his modern prejudices are bound to interfere with his understanding of the ancients, \textit{if he} does not methodically reflect on the modern presuppositions as such. Such a reflection transcends the limits of classical scholarship, and must be entrusted to philosophic historians’ [like Strauss] (our italics).\textsuperscript{464}

In other words, before we can take up thinking like the ancients again, we need to forsake classical scholarship and practice the therapeutic of philosophical history instead. For Strauss, Nietzsche was the first true philosophical historian worthy of our emulation. Schmitt, too, knew that proper philosophizing required starting out with authentic philosophical history. He knew that in order to philosophize about liberalism critically, to expose its ‘nauseating’ meaninglessness, we had to go back to Hobbes but only as philosophical historians. Schmitt ‘goes back against liberalism to its originator, Hobbes, in order to strike the root of liberalism in

\textsuperscript{462} Ibid., pp. 7-8. Also see Strauss, \textit{On Tyranny}, p. 27, where Strauss worries that the dangers of textual lion-taming or ‘arbitrary interpretation might well seem to be overwhelming’ but nevertheless insists that the ‘danger can be overcome only if the greatest possible attention is paid to every detail, and especially to the unthematic details, and if the function of Socratic rhetoric is never lost sight of.’ We will return momentarily to this danger.

\textsuperscript{463} L. Strauss, \textit{Thoughts on Machiavelli} (Chicago, 1978), p. 174. See J. Cropsey, ‘Leo Strauss,’ \textit{International Encyclopedia for the Social Sciences}, appendix vol. (1979), p. 750, where Cropsey insists that Strauss ‘employed and taught what came to be called “careful reading,” but he did not use or impart a “method,” for by the nature of the case there cannot be one; since reticent writing that could be made explicit through the application of rules would be a mere cipher and the interpretation of philosophic texts would be a form of cryptography.’

\textsuperscript{464} Strauss, ‘Historicism,’ p. 15.
Hobbes’s explicit negation of the state of nature.⁴⁶⁵ We have to follow Schmitt in going back to Hobbes in order to gain the ‘horizon beyond liberalism’ from which liberalism emerged. We have to read Hobbes with exacting care so that we can recover his horizon, which we must if we are to expose liberalism’s inadequacies. But unlike Schmitt, exposing liberalism by going back to Hobbes and his horizon did not entail embracing and celebrating the state of nature as authentically political but, rather, seeking political authenticity elsewhere, namely in Plato and Aristotle. Whereas Schmitt rejoiced in what Hobbes sought to flee, Strauss wanted to flee too but backwards towards classical philosophy and not forwards into liberalism. In order, then, to reappropriate the ancients as best we can, we had to pass through the portal of Hobbes very warily, which Strauss began early on in 1936 with The Political Philosophy of Hobbes.

Interpreting Hobbes in the 1930s

Leo Strauss always regarded Hobbes as a canonical thinker. Hobbes’s philosophical legacy was scarcely less important than Plato’s for Strauss though he judged the former’s legacy as regrettable overall. Prior to writing *Natural Right and History*, Strauss viewed Hobbes as the first serious threat to classical natural right, as an unprecedented turning-point that facilitated the emergence of modernity’s many, destabilizing philosophical conceits. Thanks to Hobbes, moral thinking had become just politics, or political consensus, in disguise instead of politics being the realization and application of independently justified moral principles. That is, moral thinking had become, thanks to Hobbes, little more than rational prudence, little more than the cautious but ceaseless re-negotiation of the rules that we have prescribed for ourselves in our efforts to get along as best we can.

Strauss’s fascination with Hobbes began well before he fled Germany in 1932 and culminated with *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* a few years later while in exile in England. There, Strauss insists that Hobbes’s “epoch-making significance” stemmed from his comprehensive and utter rejection of the “whole tradition founded by Plato and Aristotle.” As a result, “there is no possible doubt that Hobbes, and no other, is the father of modern political

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466 Strauss left Germany for Paris in 1932, eventually arriving in Cambridge in 1935, where he completed his book on Hobbes in German. The German manuscript was quickly translated into English by Elsa Sinclair and Ernest Barker read the entire English translation before it was published. Strauss also befriended R. H. Tawney, who also probably read much, if not all, of the English version before it appeared. Jerry Muller has recently suggested that Strauss’s interest in Hobbes’s amoral realism stemmed from his political Zionism of the 1920s. According to Muller, Strauss endorsed Pinsker and Herzl’s lack of faith in the potential of liberal assimilationism to resolve the Jewish question, which, in turn, prompted him to take up the power politics of Hobbes, Schmitt and Nietzsche. But Muller also suggests that Strauss’s political realism originated in his initial interest in the anti-religious origins of modern thought in Hobbes among others. So here instead, Strauss’s interest in Hobbes initiated his political realism rather than his political realism having initiated his interest in Hobbes. Notwithstanding what came first (fascination with Hobbes or Zionist realism), Muller undervalues Strauss’s historicist anxieties as central to his critique of liberal universalism. See Jerry Muller, “Leo Strauss: The Political Philosopher as a Young Zionist,” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture and Society*, n.s. 17 (Fall 2010), especially 100-5.
philosophy” (our italics). By *Natural Right and History*, however, Strauss no longer claims that Hobbes founded modern political philosophy single-handedly. Rather, although Hobbes may have indeed regarded himself as founding modern political philosophy, Machiavelli was really the “greater Columbus, who had discovered the continent on which Hobbes could erect his structure.” And by the 1963 “Preface to the American Edition,” of *Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Strauss concedes that he erred in earlier claiming that Hobbes originated modern political philosophizing. Machiavelli, instead “deserves this honor.”

Notwithstanding whether Hobbes or Machiavelli invented modern political philosophy single-handedly, Strauss never changed his view that the birth modern political philosophy soon led inescapably to liberalism and all for the worse both morally and politically. This goes if one thinks, as some scholars do, that Strauss condemned modernity for exposing sordid truths best kept suppressed, including especially the truth that morality was wholly relative. And it also goes if one thinks alternatively, as other scholars maintain, that he bemoaned modernity for substituting, in the place of historically-transcending truths discovered long ago by Plato and Aristotle, dangerously-distorting historicist errors parading as enlightenment and emancipation. Regardless whether Strauss regretted modernity for its destabilizing truthfulness or for its equally destabilizing errors, liberalism after Hobbes cleverly and disarmingly disguised these dangers. Liberalism, for Strauss, has since lodged so deeply and eradicably in our philosophical marrow that we are understandably so shocked and perplexed by the 20th century’s horrors.

Having embraced liberalism simply insured that we would continue more lost than ever in

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467 Leo Strauss [1936], *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 156. Strauss continues “For it is he who, with a clarity never previously and never subsequently attained, made the ‘right of nature’, i.e. the justified claims (of the individual) the basis of political philosophy, without any inconsistent borrowing from natural or divine law.”


469 Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, xv. Strauss adds that he had previously concluded that Hobbes founded modern political philosophy simply because Hobbes asserted that he had broken radically with all earlier political philosophizing. In short, Strauss took Hobbes at his word that his thinking was so revolutionary.
As noted, Hobbes and liberalism were on Strauss’s mind early on. His 1930 first book on Spinoza also discussed Hobbes in some detail. There Strauss insists that Hobbes’s thinking was far more radical, and therefore revolutionary in its philosophical impact, than Spinoza’s. According to Strauss, Hobbes’s philosophy was the “classic form in which the positivist mind comes to understand itself.”

Hobbes, like Spinoza, sought to explain religion scientifically or anthropologically but did so far more successfully. For Hobbes, on Strauss’s account, religion was fanciful, undisciplined thinking or the “unmethodological seeking after causes.” Hobbes’s superior anthropological explanation of religion simultaneously led him to discover the origins of morality in our overriding and visceral fear of violent death. Hobbes concluded that humans invented morality. Morality was little more than an artificial system of conventions for promoting cooperation and securing social peace. Just as physics “set out to serve man’s dominion of things, anthropology “serves peace.” Whereas physics explains physical nature allowing us to manipulate and master it, anthropology explains human nature allowing us to control it by fabricating fundamental, purportedly inviolable laws, which we sanctify under the

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471 Strauss, Spinoza’s Critique of Religion, 86.

472 Ibid., 90.
The \textit{Leviathan}, then on Strauss’s account, is essentially a manual justifying the basic moral rules we draft for ourselves in order to coordinate social interaction with minimum violence and threats of violence. It explains human morality naturalistically much as Hume followed by 20\textsuperscript{th} century emotivism subsequently tried to do. It explains why humans were compelled to invent morality, why we needed to prescribe fundamental moral principles for ourselves and sanctify them as inviolable even though moral truth was, objectively-speaking, a fiction. Morality, on Strauss’s rendering of Hobbes, was an enterprise or “art of mutual accommodation” as Oakeshott would later say of Hobbes.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 234.}

Now if moral truth for Hobbes was a fictitious ruse for keeping social order by channeling and manipulating our overwhelming fear of death, then we can appreciate why Strauss became so preoccupied with Hobbes so early especially insofar as he held that Hobbes introduced this idea into the western philosophical canon. Strauss’s studies of Hobbes were clearly motivated by his anxieties about the development of historicism especially its radical reformulation at the hands of the German Historical School. Strauss was already agonizing about German historicism when he took up worrying and writing about Hobbes.\footnote{Michael Oakeshott, “The Moral Life in the Writings of Thomas Hobbes” in \textit{Hobbes on Civil Association} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 77.}

Strauss’s interpretation, in \textit{Spinoza’s Critique of Religion}, of Hobbes’s theory of natural law as really just artifice and convention, is indeed warranted by what Hobbes often says in the \textit{Leviathan}. There Hobbes refers repeatedly to natural law as fundamental “convenient articles of

\footnote{Also see Adi Armon, “Just before the ‘Straussians’: The Development of Leo Strauss’s Political Thought from the Weimar Republic to America,” \textit{New German Critique}, 37 (Fall, 2010), 179, where he suggests that, “the preoccupation with the fear of death was an integral part of German existentialism, which took root in the Weimar Republic and immensely influenced the crystallization of Strauss’s political philosophy and his interest in Hobbes’s thought.”}
peace which men may be drawn to agreement.” As “dictates of reason, “the laws of nature are” but conclusions or theorems concerning what conduceth to” our “conservation and defense.” They are “not properly laws” but really only “qualities” that men approve and implement because they “dispose” them “to peace and obedience.” Moral philosophy, also sometimes known as the “science of virtue and vice,” is therefore “nothing else, but the science of what is good and evil, in the conversation, and society of mankind.”

By his later The Political Philosophy of Hobbes, Strauss continues insisting that Hobbes revolutionized moral thinking by arguing so doggedly, forthrightly and unapologetically that morality was hardly more than a strategic artifice concocted by humans for escaping the acute diffidence and chronic widespread violence of the state of nature. Hobbes was so revolutionary because he said up front without hesitation what no one before dared admit even though some might have thought such heretical thoughts secretly to themselves or even share them with others behind the safety of tightly closed doors. However, Strauss had by his book on Hobbes revised his account of Hobbes’s motivations for introducing such an original and radical theory of natural law. In the “Preface,” Strauss says that careful readers of Hobbes’s political philosophy are invariably struck by numerous contradictions that can be explained away only by attending to his “fundamental view of human nature,” grounded in a “specific” moral attitude, which

477 Ibid., 174.
478 Ibid., 104. Hobbes also claims that the laws of nature are “immutable and eternal,” meaning that though they are conventional, they are nevertheless ubiquitous everywhere and always. They are universally applicable though fundamentally contingent conditions of peaceful cooperation. For Hobbes’s description of the nineteen basic laws of nature, see Leviathan, Chapters XIV-XV. For Hobbes’s distinction between natural and civil law in the Leviathan, see Chapter XXVI “Of Civil Laws.” See especially 186 where Hobbes succinctly contrasts natural with civil or positive law. Whereas natural laws “have been laws from all eternity” and are also called “moral laws,” civil laws are “those which have not been from eternity; but have been made laws by the will of those that have had the sovereign power over others; and are either written, or made known to men, by some other argument of the will of their legislator.” (186). See as well 190 where Hobbes says that crime and punishment are to civil law what sin is to natural law though crime is always also a sin. See too 83 and 94 where Hobbes remarks that where there is no commonwealth or sovereignty prescribing and enforcing civil law, there is no justice or injustice including no “mine and thine.” It does not follow, however, that civil law is neither good nor bad. Good civil law is “needful” the way “hedges are set not to Stopp travellers, but to keep them on their way.” (227).
constitutes the underlying “real basis” unifying his thinking. Establishing “this fact is the necessary condition” for “any coherent” interpretation of Hobbes’s political philosophy.479 So for Strauss, by then, “any” interpretation of Hobbes that fails to unify his thinking by driving out all its basic contradictions is erroneous. Rendering Hobbes’s thinking “coherent,” or systematic, is a criterion for interpreting him accurately or “exactly” to utilize terminology Strauss would deploy in subsequent writings about interpreting historical philosophical texts properly.

Now on Strauss’s account of Hobbes, the underlying “moral attitude” unifying Hobbes’s thinking is vanity or, in other words, the pleasure humans derive from triumphing over others and forcing them to recognize their inferiority. Hobbes’s account of vanity is “intended as a moral judgment” rather than a social scientific explanation (our italics). Hobbes’s political philosophy “rests not on the illusion of an amoral morality, but on a new morality, or, to speak according to Hobbes’s intention, on a new grounding of the one eternal morality” (our italics).480 Immoral vanity, then more than anything, leads to war of everyone against everyone.481

But fortunately for us, despite our inherent evilness, we are naturally reasonable as well, which makes us sufficiently prudent enabling us to invent moral rules to channel and contain our evilness. Hence, we may characterize Hobbes’s morals as thoroughly and unreservedly “utilitarian” in the sense that morals are “based on the fear of violent death, on a passion which is itself not prudent, but which makes man prudent.”482

So for Strauss, Hobbes’s moral philosophy is fundamentally utilitarian. Only after he “vitalized” utilitarian morality “which underlay philosophy’s turn to history” by his new moral attitude, did utilitarianism finally “gain the fire and passion which gave it victory in

480 Ibid., 14-15.
481 Ibid., 13. Hence the “struggle for pre-eminence, about ‘trifles’ has become a life-and-death struggle.” (21).
482 Ibid., 116.
And utilitarianism’s victory, once it was somehow taken up by the German Historical School, eventually culminated in Nietzsche. Hobbes, moreover turned not just to utilitarianism but history as well because classical political philosophy and its subsequent medieval permutations failed by being unrealistically unscientific and therefore impractical. This failure was remedied by the new political philosophy invented by Hobbes, “whose boast it is, that it, in contrast to classical political philosophy, teaches an applicable morality.” Furthermore, by turning to history, by making order so prudential and a product of “human volition alone,” Hobbes made political philosophy historical. In sum and thanks to Hobbes, political philosophy became pedestrian, instrumental and just “cave” science to borrow Plato’s famous metaphor so much favored by Strauss.

Political philosophy abandoned concern for moral truth, preferring to speculate about all manner of historical contingencies, which the German Historical School ultimately transformed into historicism, into a pseudo-scientific, even more disorienting cave within the cave.

As we suggested previously, Strauss had become preoccupied with Hobbes’s revolutionary impact, including his purported invention of modern utilitarianism, by the early 1930s. In his 1933-34 “Hobbes’s Critique of Religion: A Contribution to Understanding the Enlightenment,” Strauss calls Hobbes’s critique of religion “a post-Christian modification of Epicureanism,” implying that Hobbes’s utilitarianism was really more refurbished rediscovery than invention. Hobbes’s unprecedented critique of religion was grounded in his underlying

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483 Ibid., 108. Also see Strauss, Nature Right and History, 169, where Strauss says that Hobbes created “political hedonism, a doctrine which has revolutionized human life everywhere on a scale never yet approached by any other teaching.”

484 See Strauss, Nature Right and History, note 4, 134 where Strauss recommends: “For the development [of utilitarianism] after Hobbes, I would refer the reader particularly to Locke’s Essay on Human Understanding (Book II, ch. 20, § 6) and Nietzsche’s Will zur Macht (aphorisms 693ff).” So for Strauss, the main figures in the history of utilitarianism are Hobbes, Locke and Nietzsche. Helvétius, Beccaria, Bentham, Mill and Sidgwick are ignored entirely, revealing once again just how idiosyncratic Strauss’s history of political thought could be. Nietzsche, of course, had nothing good to say about the English utilitarian tradition.

485 Ibid., 98-9.
Epicurean “outlook,” consisting of the “will to free man from the fear, determined by nature, of the divine and of death, so that on the basis of a prudent calculation of the chances for pleasure and pain that present themselves to man, based on a careful elimination or avoidance of everything troublesome, disturbing, and painful, one might lead a thoroughly happy life.”

Even in his 1931 “Some Notes on the Political Science of Hobbes,” his earliest writing on Hobbes, Strauss was already pointedly insisting that Hobbes founded not only modern political philosophy but liberalism as well. Hobbes’s “absolutism is in the end nothing but militant liberalism in statu nascendi [in the state of being born], i.e., in its most radical form. Hobbes was therefore “the founder of liberalism; and hence whoever wishes to engage in either a radical justification or a radical critique of liberalism must return to Hobbes.” And yet though Hobbes founded liberalism, he was “not yet a liberal,” which is why studying Hobbes “can open up possibilities of which [contemporary] liberalism is less aware than was Hobbes or of which it is no longer aware at all and which could have significance even if…liberalism has really failed conclusively.”

So Hobbes is remarkably relevant for us in the first half of the 20th century. We have much of importance to learn “from Hobbes as a teacher and not merely about him as an object” of mere scholarly attention. Learning “from” Hobbes requires that we, under no circumstances “interject into Hobbes’s teaching opinions that prevail or threaten to prevail today.” Such “modification of the ‘historical fact’ would from the outset deprive the study of Hobbes’s


487 Leo Strauss, “Some Notes on the Political Science of Hobbes,” in Hobbes’s Critique of Religion and Related Writings, 122-3. This essay was intended to be a review of Z. Lubieński’s The Foundation of Hobbes’s Ethical-Political System (Munich: Reinhardt, 1932). Strauss also suggests that one must go back to Hobbes if one wants to understand the foundations of socialism as well. (135).
politics of any possible use that such a study might have, precisely for the clarification of today’s political opinions.” It is wasted “effort to open up these old books” like those of Hobbes only to mirror back to ourselves our contemporary opinions.\(^{488}\)

But learning “from” Hobbes as opposed to learning merely “about” him means “stud[ying]” him as opposed to just “read[ing]” him: “Everyone who has read Hobbes praises the rigor, consistency, and intrepidity of his thought; and everyone who studies him is always surprised by the numerous contradictions that one finds in his writings.” Consequently, and anticipating what he says in The Political Philosophy of Hobbes as we have seen, one “requires a rule of interpretation that would allow the interpreter to decide with the greatest possible certainty, in the frequent cases of contradictory statements by the philosopher, which of the mutually contradictory propositions expresses the philosopher’s true view.”\(^{489}\) And one discovers which contradictory proposition conveys Hobbes’s genuine position by “reconstruct[ing]…the unity of Hobbes’s politics, which the latter glimpsed but never reached.”\(^{490}\)

So, in sum, we should “study” Hobbes and rather than just “read” him in order to learn something relevant in helping us confront the political tribulations of our century. We do this by reading Hobbes as a coherent whole. We “reconstruct” the underlying unity of his thinking by reading between the surface contradictions in his text wherever we happen to encounter them. We have to read him esoterically, in other words, if we want him to assist us meaningfully. Not

\(^{488}\) Ibid., 123.
\(^{489}\) Ibid., 124.
\(^{490}\) Ibid., 125. In “Hobbes’s Critique of Religion,” Strauss claims that Hobbes recommended applying something like this same principle to interpreting Scripture. For Hobbes, according to Strauss, whenever “there is an (apparent) contradiction within Scripture… both, or at least one, of the texts contradicting each other must be interpreted in such a way that the contradictions, or rather the appearance of the contradiction, vanishes.” The interpreter “must direct his focus, to the leading intention of Scripture as a whole, and he must unambiguously account for this intention out of the clear passages;…” (37). See, too, Strauss’s Rockefeller Fellowship application proposal, Leo Strauss Papers, Box 3, Folder 8, where he insists: “Es kommt zunächst darauf an, sich eines Kanons zu versichern, der dem Interpreten gestattet, im Fall eines Widerspruchs zwischen Hobbes’schen Sätzen mit moralischer Gewissheit zu entscheiden, welcher der einander widersprechenden Sätze die eigentliche Meinung des Hobbes zum Ausdruck bringt.”
only, then, was Strauss preoccupied with esoteric writing and reading from his earliest studies of Hobbes, his motives from the outset were clearly polemical in part.

Michael Oakeshott immediately responded to Strauss’s *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* with his 1937 “Dr. Leo Strauss on Hobbes.” Oakeshott’s criticism of Strauss’s interpretation of Hobbes is replete with irony, politely understated and yet severe. From the outset, Oakeshott feigns praise for Strauss’s study as “the most original work on Hobbes which has appeared for many years.” His account of Hobbes “has the rare quality of presenting an original thesis and supporting it with an apparently conclusive argument, and at the same time of provoking thought and criticism; and even in those parts where it appears more ingenious than sound, its ingenuity is stimulating and never misleading.” Oakeshott then proceeds to fault Strauss’s Hobbes on two related grounds. First, Oakeshott rejects Strauss’s claim that a moral attitude underlay Hobbes’s writings from the beginning to the end and that Hobbes purportedly covered it up “by a ‘form of proof borrowed from mathematics, and a psychology borrowed from natural science’ which dominates and (we are now urged to believe) perverts his later writings.” Strauss’s “inference that because *De Cive* was composed before *De Corpore* or *De Homine* its doctrines are necessarily independent of the doctrines of the later works has frequently been made by interpreters of Hobbes, but there is not much to be said in its favour, and if no other evidence were available it could not be counted conclusive.” As far as Oakeshott is concerned, then, Strauss simply makes far too much out of far too little textual evidence in order to impute far more coherence to Hobbes’s corpus than is warranted. A few pages later, Oakeshott continues:

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492 Ibid, 133.
493 Ibid., 139.
It is, really one thing to prove (as Dr. Strauss proves) that there is marked change and development towards a more and more “scientific” theory in the *Elements of Law, De Cive*, and *Leviathan*, but it is quite another to infer from this development the existence of an “original” theory altogether “non-scientific” and it is another still to infer that this “original” theory was never really abandoned. It is indeed certain that, in his latest writings, Hobbes did abandon it—Dr. Strauss himself admits as much; and it is a lapse from the scrupulous attention that Dr. Strauss usually pays to the smallest movement in Hobbes’s intellectual history, to suppose that this abandonment was unintentional, and not the real Hobbes.\(^{494}\)

Second, and more importantly for our purposes, Oakeshott insists that Strauss over exaggerates Hobbes’s *originality* in arguing that “Hobbes’s political philosophy not only involves a break with past tradition [traditional natural law], but contains the seed of all later moral and political thought.” Contrary to what Strauss claims, “natural law theory did not die at once; even otherwise ‘modern’ thinkers such as Locke have it embedded in their theories, and it did not die without resurrection.” Indeed, it “never died at all.” Hence, it is an “exaggeration to speak of Hobbes as ‘the founder of modern political philosophy.’”\(^{495}\)

Oakeshott continues with more of the same in his “Introduction” to his 1946 post-war edition of the *Leviathan*. With Strauss surely in mind, Oakeshott asserts emphatically that “the greatness of Hobbes is not that he began a new tradition in this respect but that he constructed a political philosophy that reflected the changes in the European intellectual consciousness which had been pioneered chiefly by the theologians of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.” Hobbes’s *Leviathan* “like any masterpiece, is an end and a beginning; it is the flowering of the past and the

\(^{494}\) Ibid., 141.

\(^{495}\) Ibid., 147-8.
Moreover, according to Oakeshott, it is a “false reading of his intention and his achievement which finds in his civil philosophy the beginning of sociology or a science of politics, the beginning of that movement of thought that came to regard the methods of physical science as the proper models” for political understanding. And if Hobbes never intended to found, nor achieved in founding, modern sociology, then he never intended to found, or achieved in founding, modern historicism as well.

Now Oakeshott’s dissatisfaction with Strauss’s Hobbes undoubtedly stems, in large part, from his deep sensitivity to the obstacles confounding all interpretations of Hobbes. Oakeshott readily concedes that his own interpretation of the Leviathan is a reconstruction as any interpretation of it always has to be: “Any account worth giving of the argument of the Leviathan

496 Michael Oakeshott, “Introduction,” Leviathan, liii. Moreover, Strauss and others have failed to “consider his [Hobbes] civil philosophy in the context of the history of political philosophy, which has obscured the fact that Hobbes is not an outcast but, in purpose though not in doctrine, is an ally of Plato, Augustine and Aquinas.” (li). Furthermore, “The Leviathan is a masterpiece, and we must understand it according to our means. If our poverty is great, but not ruinous, we may read it not looking beyond its two covers, but intent to draw from it nothing that is not there. This will be a notable achievement, if somewhat narrow. The reward will be the appreciation of a dialectical triumph with all the internal movement and liveliness of such a triumph. But the Leviathan is more than a tour de force. And something of its larger character will be perceived if we read it with the other works of Hobbes open beside it. Or again, at greater expense of learning, we may consider it in its tradition, and doing so will find fresh meaning in the world of ideas it opens to us. But finally, we may discover in it the true character of a masterpiece—the still centre of a whirlpool of ideas which has drawn into itself numberless currents of thought, contemporary and historic, and by its centripetal force has shaped and compressed them into a momentary significance before they are flung off again into the future.” (xii–iii). Or in Quentin Skinner’s later terminology, we might say that Hobbes “picks up and deploys” distinctive terminology already in play. See Quentin Skinner, “Hobbes on Persons, Authors and Representatives” in The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes’s Leviathan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 159. Though, in this case, Skinner is thinking mostly of Hobbes’s deployment of the vocabulary of “authorizing” sovereignty widespread among parliamentary and radical writers of the 1640s, the same probably holds for most of what Strauss, as noted above, calls Hobbes’s supposedly “shocking” ideas. For differing accounts of the reception and notoriety of the Leviathan in Hobbes’s lifetime, see G. A. J. Rogers, “Hobbes and his Contemporaries” and Jon Parkin, “The Reception of Hobbes’s Leviathan” both in The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes’s Leviathan. But see Strauss, “Hobbes’s Critique of Religion,” 24–5, where Strauss qualifies somewhat his claim that Hobbes founded modern political philosophy: “Admittedly, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century the prevailing Hobbes’s research could show more and more that important elements of the Hobbesian teaching are attested in the earlier literature,….even if this or that feature of Hobbesian politics was already to be found in the earlier literature, Hobbes gave them a unity that they did not have by themselves but that they could gain solely on the basis of an analysis undertaken from an altogether original point of view.” So Hobbes’s originality lay in the way he unified, focused and articulated the political philosophical literature of his historical context.

497 Oakeshott, “Introduction,” xxiii. Though Oakeshott has Mill’s assessment of Hobbes in Mill’s Autobiography specifically in mind here, he probably had Strauss in his sights as well. Despite his continuing displeasure with Strauss’s Hobbes, Oakeshott recommends Strauss’s study among four others in the very brief bibliography appended to the end of his “Introductory.”
must be an interpretation; and this account, because it is an interpretation, is not a substitute for the text.”

For Oakeshott, then, interpreting Hobbes always reconstructs him and this is particularly true of 20th century accounts of him, which unavoidably construe him through the conceptual distinctions and presuppositions of contemporary moral theorizing. Oakeshott says:

Under the influence of distinctions we are now accustomed to make in discussing questions of moral theory, modern critics of Hobbes have often made the mistake of looking for an order and coherence (our italics) in his thoughts on these questions which is foreign to the ideas of any seventeenth-century writer. Setting out with false expectations, we have been exasperated by the ambiguity with which Hobbes uses certain important words (such as, obligation, power, duty, forbid, command), and have gone on, in an attempt to understand his theory better than he understood it himself, to interpret it by extracting from his writings at least some consistent doctrine.

Not long after Oakeshott’s review of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* appeared, Carl Friedrich published a shorter but no less critically suggestive review, “Thomas Hobbes: Myth Builder of the Modern World,” in the *Journal of Social Philosophy* in April, 1938. Friedrich begins by endorsing what he takes to be Strauss’s principle of interpretation that great philosophers like Hobbes never mistakenly contradict themselves. Whenever they make contradictory arguments, they are instructing readers to read more carefully and thoughtfully. They are intentionally signalling the existence of hidden deeper messages that surface only when

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498 Ibid., xxx. Oakeshott adds regarding his interpretation of the *Leviathan* that “the implicit comment involved in selection, emphasis, the alteration of the language and the departure from the order of ideas in the text, cannot be avoided.” (xxx) Also see Oakeshott’s remark regarding the interpretation of scripture: “An interpretation is a matter of authority; for, whatever part reasoning may play in the process of interpretation, what determines everything is the decision; whose reasoning shall interpret?”

499 Ibid., lviii.
we ask ourselves how such a capable philosophical mind could engage in such sloppy thinking. After all, in short, what constitutes philosophical greatness is, in part, theoretical consistency!

The last paragraph of Friedrich’s review is far more revealing. Friedrich concludes ruefully that Strauss is a "historical relativist" because, in times so foreboding as the late 1930s, Strauss refuses to "take his stand" against Hobbes. Strauss's moral silence about Hobbes, his reluctance to condemn him, suggests that he is most likely a Hobbesian himself. In other words, Strauss is a historicist.

Friedrich’s review, then, along with Oakeshott’s review from a year earlier, show how Strauss’s reading of Hobbes struck some of its important initial readers in the 1930s. Oakeshott’s review, written by such a formidable and careful English commentator on Hobbes, reveals particularly well the foreignness that Strauss’s reading had for him.

Tom Sorell has recently observed that two types of misunderstanding typically characterize 20th century Hobbes scholarship, the most troubling of which consists in reading back contemporary “antitranscendentalist” motives into Hobbes’s contractarianism. Moral rightness is purportedly what rational agents would agree to in fair circumstances, making


\[\text{Friedrich continues: “For irrespective of the historical importance of Hobbes,---and there can be little question about Dr. Strauss’ opinion on this score,---or even because of his vast influence up on the modern mind he should be ‘shown up’, as the American slang puts it. Irving Babbitt’s work on Rousseau would not have gained the far-reaching influence it did without the bitter hostility with which Babbitt pursued Rousseau and Rousseau-ism in all its manifestations. An effective pillorying of Hobbes is equally urgent as a cure for the modern mind….It is the present reviewer’s hope…that Strauss will rise above the task of mere commentator for which his able scholarship certainly qualifies him, and assume the role of philosopher in his own right. For in these days when whirl is king the reader is entitled to know by which stars the historian is guided as a man.” (256-7). Friedrich, it should be recalled, was born and educated in Germany prior to taking up a position at Harvard University where he taught for over forty years. Among other topics, he wrote several important early studies of totalitarianism.}\]

\[\text{Friedrich does not equate the invention of historical relativism with Hobbesianism as Strauss does as we have been at pains to show. Rather, Friedrich seems to see Hobbesianism as a form of moral absolutism incompatible with historical relativism and historicism. For Friedrich, Strauss is either a Hobbesian-inspired authoritarian or a moral relativist. He should declare which of the two he is. Friedrich’s Hobbes is the received Hobbes, highlighting once more just how idiosyncratic Strauss’s interpretation of Hobbes is.}\]
morality wholly conventional. Sorell singles out J. L. Mackie’s *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* for exemplifying this kind of misappropriation of Hobbes. Sorell also faults contemporary analytical social contract theorists such as David Gauthier even when they “go off in a direction that they admit Hobbes might not have wanted to go.”

Strauss, as we have seen, discovers in Hobbes the founding of morals by convention or liberalism in other words. And for Strauss, the invention of liberalism was no less than the inauguration of historicism. But whether Strauss assigned these inventions to Hobbes more than he discovered them in him is surely plausible enough and probably likely. Moreover, whatever Hobbes purportedly invented and unleashed was certainly inchoately ubiquitous when he was writing in any event.

**The Poison Pill of Hobbes**

Even if Hobbes more than merely reflected or articulated what was already philosophically underway in 17th century England, he could not have intended to invent the later view that morality was merely conventional artifice, let alone liberalism, historicism, nihilism and the German Historical School as well, though he may have had something to do with causing, or facilitating, the advent of all five. To cause a philosophical turn is not the same as intending to cause it. And precious little in philosophy is single-handedly caused in any case.

Thinking otherwise is anachronistic and therefore does not constitute intellectual history. We concur with J. B. Schneewind that historians of philosophy should avoid as much as possible interpreting philosophers by trying to measure the bequest of their philosophic achievements.

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504 Ibid., note 7, 152.
505 Ibid., 146.
We may have good reasons describing the impact earlier philosophers had on later philosophers or their legacy to subsequent, philosophical problem solving. For instance, to stick with English philosophers particularly one dear to Schneewind, we may agree that Henry Sidgwick contributed decisively to the emergence of 20th century analytical moral and political philosophy. We might even call his accomplishments philosophical progress. But Sidgwick never intended many of the arguments that philosophers, who were greatly influenced by him like G. E. Moore, would later make. So we ought not to interpret Sidgwick as if these more refined arguments characterized his thinking. Likewise, we should not characterize Hobbes’s thinking according to the philosophical results he produced on the philosophical thinking of others afterwards.506

Notwithstanding the truth of Strauss’s account of Hobbes including Hobbes’s purported and intended revolution in moral reasoning, Strauss’s Hobbes remains nonetheless fascinating simply because it is his Hobbes written from exile in England in the 1930s. Strauss’s Hobbes is an idiosyncratic Hobbes begun in Germany at a particularly stressful historical moment and finished in exile in England. It is a very particular reception of Hobbes that reads Strauss’s anxieties about German historicism into a quintessential 17th century English materialist for whom the historicist concerns of what later became the German Historical School were necessarily remote. And Oakeshott’s speedy critical response to Strauss’s Hobbes effectively exposes these concerns as philosophical baggage that Strauss would have been better to have left

506 See J. B. Schneewind, Essays on the History of Moral Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), especially “Part III: On the Historiography of Moral Philosophy.” T. H. Irwin has recently criticized Schneewind for imposing on historians of philosophy a “restriction that other historians do not accept.” If, according to Irwin, “we say that the attitude of Britain and the USA to the Peace of Versailles aided the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany, we are not saying that anyone in Britain and the USA intended to aid the rise of the Nazi Party; but what we say may still be true of worth discussing, and we would not be surprised to see such a statement in a history of the 1920s.” See T. H. Irwin, “Review of J. B. Schneewind, Essays in the History of Moral Philosophy, Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews, Online, 2010-07-30. Irwin’s analogy fails, though, because Schneewind is not claiming that writing histories of philosophical influence are illegitimate. He is only insisting that such histories must not be confused with intellectual histories about the meaning of individual philosophical texts. Both exercises are histories but histories of very different kinds. Strauss’s Hobbes, then, is legitimate intellectual history but it is not an interpretation of Hobbes.
behind in Germany. For Oakeshott, Strauss reconstructs Hobbes outside his unique historical circumstances dominated by the English Civil War, inserting into his thinking motives that could not have been there and overloading his philosophy with conceptual distinctions characteristic of Weimar historiography. Oakeshott’s encounter with Strauss’s Hobbes, then, is as much a product of the 1930s as Strauss’s Hobbes. We can no more understand Oakeshott’s rejection of Strauss’s Hobbes outside Oakeshott’s historical and political context as we can make sense of Strauss’s appropriation of Hobbes outside Strauss’s distinctive context however much these contexts were simultaneously shaped by events in Europe in the 1930s.

Whether or not Hobbes was the philosophical “poison pill” of modernity that Strauss claims he was is less intriguing than Strauss’s preoccupation in the 1930s with discovering such a pill in the first place. Even after Strauss subsequently substituted Machiavelli for Hobbes as the original “poison pill” that eventually destroyed classical natural law, Strauss’s conviction that such poisoning had occurred at all and so precipitously is remarkable enough to say the least. The issue is not so much that Strauss replaced one philosophical culprit with another but rather that he was convinced that such a brazen philosophical crime had occurred in the first place. Why did modernity and its most notorious political misdeeds need to be explained so dramatically as the fault of one philosopher or another? Moreover, why should we bother, or need, to explain it so dramatically and tragically at all?

507 We ought not to forget that Carl Schmitt, like Strauss, thought that Hobbes had done something so drastically and remarkably inopportune. For a succinct statement of Strauss’s later, revised view that Machiavelli, and not Hobbes, was the more original innovator and culprit, see Leo Strauss, “Niccolo Machiavelli” in History of Political Philosophy, eds. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987). There, Strauss writes that Machiavelli “decisively prepared” the “revolution affected by Hobbes.” (298). Also see again notes 5 and 6 above. But whether preparing a revolution, intentionally or not, makes Machiavelli more culpable than Hobbes is surely questionable. Strauss also claims that Machiavelli recognized that all religions, including Christianity, are human inventions. While Machiavelli was neither the first nor the last to make such claims, his “manner of setting it forth is very ingenious.” He was the first to show how religion was such an “indispensable” convention in establishing political stability. (314).
In “German Nihilism” (1941), Strauss insists that while English philosophical thinking (presumably Hobbes first-and-foremost) invented modernity, German philosophical thinking (presumably the German Historical School) made modernity far worse and then proceeded to reject all that they had exacerbated only to corner themselves in the blind alley of nihilism and radical moral relativism. German nihilism, then, was simultaneously the rejection and yet the hapless frightening culmination of modernity. Hence, we can better understand why Strauss claimed in his earlier criticism of Schmitt that Schmitt, despite all his apparent radicalism, never escaped liberalism’s orbit. Perhaps the same goes for Heidegger and even Hitler too.

Now however much Strauss may have viewed Heidegger as the German heir of Hobbes, Strauss was always more interested than Heidegger and his followers in stabilizing modernity, or at least salvaging it as much as possible, by appealing backwards to pre-modern thinking. Maimonides was an option in the 1930s. Classical natural right became more enticing after WWII. Armon, then, correctly suggests that while Strauss was “influenced by Nietzsche and Heidegger in their efforts to uproot modern thought,” he feared where this uprooting might lead. Plunging forward heedlessly was recklessly irresponsible. A better alternative was reconsidering the moderating virtues of classical philosophy, which, when done with sufficiently sensitive interpretative skill, might help inoculate us from historicism’s disorienting malaise. And this holds for however much Strauss may have been a historicist himself in complex disguise.

508 “German Nihilism” was given as a seminar lecture at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1941 and appeared in English for the first time in Interpretation, 26 (1999).
509 Armon, “Just Before the ‘Straussians: The Development of Leo Strauss’s Political Thought From the Weimar Republic to America,” 188-9. Armon also highlights the links that Strauss would later make between Nietzsche, Heidegger and fascism, especially in his 1956 “Existentialism.”
510 At the very beginning of Natural Right and History, Strauss famously argued that America after the war might be able to prevent historicism from infecting thinking there if only Americans would take their founding ideology of natural rights more seriously. Though far less promising than classical natural right, the Declaration of Independence was at least a stabilizing myth even if it was a liberal myth.
In our view, because Germany in the 1930s was fast becoming so barbaric forcing intellectuals like Strauss to flee primarily owing to their Jewishness, philosophizing acquired universal political relevance and urgency. For victimized philosophers like Strauss, indifference was an impossible luxury that invariably transformed political philosophy and its history into polemical weaponry however subtle, refined or crude. An enormous, unprecedented crime was underway and it needed not only to be stopped but all its historical sources exposed, all its perpetrators identified no matter who they turned out to be. If the founders of modern political philosophy had something to do with the crime, then we needed to say so courageously and bluntly or, at least, say so courageously and bluntly in privileged and restricted colloquy with those fellow historians of political thought who were capable of stomaching such scandalous bad news. And this goes all-the-more so if these criminals founded liberalism, making liberalism, too, complicit in modernity’s crime.

**Atheism With a “Good Conscience”**

In the first sentence from Chapter 1, surely the most important, of *Philosophy and Law*. Strauss says that there “is no inquiry into the history of philosophy that is not at the same time a philosophical inquiry.” Since this first chapter of *Philosophy and Law* is nominally an assessment of Julius Guttmann’s 1933 *Die Philosophie des Judentums*, Strauss immediately proceeds to praise Guttmann for satisfying the “longstanding need in scholarship for a handbook of the history of the philosophy of Judaism resting throughout on the most thorough knowledge both of the sources and of previous studies of them…” But Strauss then adds that Guttmann’s “project is the historical exposition of the philosophical problem that most engages his interest,
viz. the problem of the ‘methodological value of religion.’” In other words, while Guttmann seems to provide nothing more than a useful history of Jewish philosophy, in fact and far more significantly whether Guttmann realizes it or not, he has instead provided the history of a philosophical problem. And that problem, more fundamentally, is the inconvenient and imperative philosophical problem of whether religion has any value whatsoever.

This philosophical problem is nothing less than the vexing worry of the German Historical School that comes to a head in Troeltsch. That is, it is the philosophical problem of historicism, which began by placing the value of religious truth and religious morality in question only to end up placing the value of all values in question. Whether he recognized what he was doing or not, and he probably did not, Guttmann was a German Historical School fellow-traveler who did his part to devalue the values of Judaism and thus all values. He therefore contributed, albeit innocently, to the political consequences of historicist philosophizing. By turning Judaism and its revelatory message into objects of sociological study and explanation, he relativized both. What Hobbes initiated and Weber and Troeltsch made worse, Guttmann exacerbated and as a Jew no less.

More specifically, according to Strauss, in treating Judaism scientifically, Guttmann was led, naturally, to treat Maimonides scientifically which, in turn, led him to view Maimonides philosophizing as inferior to modern Enlightenment philosophizing. Thanks in no small part to misguided efforts like Guttmann’s, modern philosophers have consequently forgotten just how much proper philosophizing needs revelation to authorize philosophy’s importance and obligate us to engage in it. As Strauss says: “There can be an interest in the revelation only if there is a

need for the revelation. The philosopher needs the revelation if he knows that his capacity for knowledge is in principle inadequate to know the truth."

So philosophers need revelation but not just for one reason alone. They need revelation otherwise we cannot know truth including moral truth first and foremost. Without revelation’s immediate insight, without its indubitable assurance, we are all-too-liable to follow Spinoza and Hobbes and, if we happen to be modern Germans, to be drawn in especially by the German Historical School. Philosophers, and citizens too, also need revelation to stabilize politics thus preventing society from degenerating into chaos and then some kind of political fanaticism as salvation. And, of course, philosophers require political stability particularly if they are to enjoy the opportunity to philosophize safely. Without sufficient opportunity to philosophize undisturbed, without political stability and without revelation to back these up, we would not be genuinely free to philosophize. And without the freedom to philosophize, we surely could not be obliged to philosophize, making philosophizing irrelevant and therefore insignificant. Guttmann, then, is not so innocent. *Die Philosophie des Judentums* is disguised historicism.

Now, insofar as Guttmann forgets how much philosophizing needs revelation, he nevertheless concedes its usefulness but of a “merely popular pedagogical” kind. Guttmann and the methodological tradition that he has inherited marginalize revelation into a supplementary and supporting role that simply reinforces truths that philosophizing otherwise is fully capable of supposedly discovering on its own. But no sooner does philosophy fail to discover these truths, as it must, then historicist thinking starts captivating us. And as soon as historicist thinking convinces us that no amount of philosophical exertion and erudition can deliver truth, combined with having made ourselves impervious to revelation, we naturally

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512 Ibid., 64.
513 Ibid., 72.
enough expose ourselves to nihilism’s siren and its manifold irresponsible political enticements.

In sum, in keeping with the German Historical School, Guttmann has forgotten, if he ever adequately knew, that the “philosopher is dependent on revelation as surely as he is human being, for as a human being he is a political being and thus is in need of a law, and as a rational man he must be primarily concerned with living under a rational law, that is, a law directed to the perfection proper to man.”

Strauss’s “quarrel” with Guttmann is significant for what concerns us primarily. Lest we forget, Philosophy and Law originally appeared in German as Philosophie und Gesetz in 1935 or just one year before Strauss published The Political Philosophy of Hobbes. In effect, the former is a product of the intellectual milieu he left behind in Germany and the latter is significantly, though not entirely, a product of the intellectual milieu he began discovering and adopted in exile. But a common powerful thread of anxiety runs through both, namely the “sophistry” that modernity has wrought in the guise of enlightened “civilization.” As it has turned out, “civilization” has proven to be an inevitable disappointment that could not but degenerate into the disenchantment of historicism:

Renouncing the impossible direct refutation of [religious] orthodoxy, it [the Enlightenment] devoted itself to its own proper work, the civilization of the world and of man. And if this work had prospered, then perhaps there would have been no need for

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514 Ibid., 71. Strauss continues: “But the philosopher cannot give this law either to himself or to others, for while he can indeed, qua, philosopher, know the principles of a law in general and the principles of the rational law in particular, he can never divine the concrete individual ordinances of the ideal law, whose precise stipulation is the only (our italics) way the law can become effectual, or simply, can become—law.” Here, then in addition, political stability requires revelation to specify how moral principles should be applied to fit changing circumstances otherwise we risk jeopardizing the social cooperation we crave. Perhaps such specificity helps ward off doubts and relativistic thinking. In the previous paragraph, Strauss distinguishes between “human” law whose task is to secure social peace and “divine” law whose end is the perfection of the intellect. But we should not take this particular distinction to imply that Strauss thinks that divine law is unnecessary to social stability. We should add here that by Natural Right and History, Strauss seems to have become more sanguine about what philosophy is capable of discovering on its own or at least what it once managed to discover on its own with Plato and Aristotle.

further proof of the justice of the Enlightenment’s victory over orthodoxy, indeed as long as it did seem to prosper, it was believed that no further proof was needed. But doubts about the success of civilization soon become doubts about the possibility of civilization. Finally the belief is perishing that man can, by pushing back the “limits of Nature” further and further, advance to ever greater “freedom,” that he can “subjugate” nature, “prescribe his own laws” for her, “generate” her by dint of pure thought [Strauss is surely thinking of Kant]. What is left, in the end, of the success of the Enlightenment? What finally proves to be the foundation and the vindication of success?\[516\]

Nothing is left of the Enlightenment’s success but only the detritus of historicism. Nothing is left after Kant but Nietzsche as Hobbes’s remainder. We now reject religion not because its ideas are “terrifying” but because we have become convinced, thanks to Nietzsche, that they are “comforting” delusions concocted “in order to escape the terror and the hopelessness of life, which cannot be eradicated by any progress of civilization, in order to make life…easier.”\[517\]

Having worked ourselves into this predicament and realization, our only option was to follow Nietzsche in cultivating a “new kind of fortitude” that refuses to flee from life’s horrors: “This new fortitude, being the willingness to look man’s forsakenness in its face, being the courage to welcome the terrible truth, being toughness against the inclination of man to deceive himself about his situation, is probity.” This is “atheism with a good conscience.”\[518\] In other words, this is defiant and shameless historicism.

In 1935, Strauss had more than enough grounds to begin feeling despondent about civilization’s prospects and the “new kind of fortitude” that Germans had acquired. Near the end

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516 Strauss, Philosophy and Law, 32.
517 Ibid., 36-7. As we have seen, Strauss was saying much the same about Hobbes in the 1930s, which helps us see how he managed to get from Hobbes to Nietzsche via utilitarianism.
518 Ibid., 37.
of the “Introduction” to *Philosophy and Law*, Strauss laments that the “present situation, appears to be insoluble for the Jew who cannot be orthodox and who must consider purely political Zionism, the only ‘solution of the Jewish problem’ possible on the basis of atheism, as a resolution that is indeed highly honorable but not, in earnest and in the long run, adequate.”

But maybe all is not lost. Strauss therefore concludes that we should at least give Maimonides and the medieval Enlightenment a chance to help see us through much like he later looked to classical natural right for possible assistance.

### “Platonic” Liberalism

As we have suggested, Strauss judged modernity to be in deep crisis, which a return to classical political philosophy might at least arrest. But classical political philosophy had to be read esoterically, in other words exactly, scrubbed clean of modernity’s historicist accretions. Ironically, then for Strauss, understanding classical political philosophers as they understood themselves required not so much reading them in historical context but rather primarily reading them esoterically out of historical context. Fetishizing historically contextualized interpretation was a historicist misadventure, making, in effect, the Cambridge School’s strategy of reading symptomatic of modernity’s waywardness.

Now Nathan Tarcov has insisted, uniquely among contemporary Straussians, that Strauss was not insensitive to historical context. On the contrary, Strauss was not a pure textualist but, instead, admitted that understanding philosophical texts required putting them in the context of

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519 Ibid., 38.
520 Strauss writes “we shall attempt in what follows to point out the leading idea of the medieval Enlightenment that has become lost to the modern Enlightenment and its heirs, and through an understanding of which many modern certainties and doubts lose their force: the idea of Law.” (39).
their contemporary philosophical texts, including those which never achieved canonical status. Nevertheless, ‘Strauss, as opposed to the contextualists, insists that extraneous information, while indispensable, must be strictly subordinate to a framework supplied by the author, and “can never be permitted to supply the clue to his teaching except after it has been proved beyond any reasonable doubt that it is impossible to make head and tail of his teaching as he presented it.”’

Tarcov mostly appeals to Strauss’s more well-known writings like *Persecution and the Art of Writing* though his less known ‘On Collingwood’s Philosophy of History’ offers the most compelling evidence for Tarcov’s account. In the latter, Strauss faults Collingwood’s historiography on several grounds but, Collingwood goes wrong, as far as Strauss is concerned, mostly for failing to take the thought of the past seriously. That is, Collingwood failed to grant that the thought of the past, say Plato’s theory of the good, might indeed be true. And granting this possibility requires ‘historical objectivity,’ namely understanding texts the way political historians ought to understand political struggles which consists in ‘understanding a given situation and given ends as they were understood by those who acted in the situation.’ One must not ‘use’ canonical texts as ‘quarry’ for erecting one’s own theoretical edifices. One must avoid ‘tortur[ing]’ classical texts for the sake of answering modern questions. Before ‘one can use or criticize a statement, one must understand the statement, i.e., one must understand it as its author consciously meant it.’ Most importantly:

By the very fact that he [the interpreter] seriously attempts to understand the thought of the past, he leaves the present. He embarks on a journey whose end is hidden from him.

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521 N. Tarcov, ‘Philosophy and History: Tradition and Interpretation in the Work of Leo Strauss,’ *Polity*, 16 (1983), p. 13. Furthermore and contrary to what we (and Cropsey) argue, Tarcov insists that Strauss offers very precise reading rules, which nonetheless should not be applied mechanically. (p. 18).
523 Ibid., pp. 580-1.
He is not likely to return to the shores of his time as exactly the same man who departed from them. His criticism may very well amount to a criticism of present day thought from the point of view of the thought of the past.\textsuperscript{524}

Strauss, of course, was very much interested in criticizing and repairing his ‘present day.’ He was so keen to return to the ‘shores of his time’ a different man because only different men could hope to reverse or temper modernity’s very worst excesses. We can learn things of ‘utmost importance from the thought of the past which we cannot learn from our contemporaries.’ Studying past thinkers as they understood themselves, that is studying them ‘objectively,’ has, to recall a previous quotation, become ‘essential for men living in an age of intellectual decline because it is the only practicable way in which they can recover a proper understanding of the fundamental problems’ (our italics).\textsuperscript{525} And recovering this proper understanding is the first step in coming to terms with our time’s crises and their philosophical sources.

Tarcov’s defense of Strauss’s contextualism aside, one might insist that Strauss’s method of reading esoterically is subtly though profoundly contextualist insofar as reading between the lines asks readers to interpret every worthy philosophical text as an artfully crafted, subversive engagement with its surrounding political context. ‘Political philosoph[izing] proper’ requires camouflaging intended meanings in ‘political teaching.’ And ‘political teaching,’ in order to camouflage effectively, needs to blend in well with its particular contextual background.

Wearing jungle camouflage in the desert invites destruction the way sporting inappropriate

\textsuperscript{524} Ibid., p. 583.
\textsuperscript{525} Ibid., p. 585. Strauss continues: ‘Given such conditions, history has the further task of explaining why the proper understanding of the fundamental problems has become lost in such a manner that the loss presents itself at the outset as a progress. If it is true that loss of understanding of the fundamental problems culminates in the historicization of philosophy or in historicism, the second function of history consists in making intelligible the modern notion of “History” through the understanding of its genesis.’
‘political teaching’ exposes philosophy to persecution. Good philosophizing can no more afford ignoring how best to hide itself in sundry political contexts than warriors can afford making mistakes about the best camouflage for the battlefield circumstances they find themselves in. Hence, reading perceptively means knowing how to see through the various modes of ‘political teaching,’ which are differently adapted to their changing political circumstances. One has to be a sensitive contextualist, perhaps even more sensitive than contextualists like Skinner. One just can’t start reading between the lines without appreciating how truly skilled philosophers adjust their lines to their diverse contexts. Unless one sees how different kinds of lines work against different backgrounds, one will fail to see the line for the mere ‘political teaching’ it is and consequently never penetrate through to the underlying ‘political philosophizing proper.’

If good philosophizing always requires camouflaged writing, then sensitive reading requires artfully detecting how different modes of camouflaged writing work in often very different contexts. But once the camouflage has been exposed and peeled back, we still have the underlying text to deal with. And how are we going to make sense of it? Presumably context won’t help but will only confuse and mislead us, leaving us with the untethered text to speak for itself or speak to us directly. Here we are left confronting the text head-on and the purportedly intractable philosophical problems which Strauss insists never change. Esoteric reading is fundamentally historically non-contextual.

Now Strauss seems to have viewed his own teaching and writing as recovery primarily. He was neither a philosopher nor a classical scholar. The latter were historicists in disguise who simply contributed to the conditions making the former nowadays impossible. Rather, he saw himself as a ‘philosophic historian,’ as a therapist who might help make philosophy possible again: ‘By understanding the pre-modern past, we familiarize ourselves with an essentially non-
historical approach. By assimilating ourselves to that non-historical approach, we are learning gradually, slowly, not without pains, to look at things with the eyes of non-historical human beings, with eyes of natural human beings.\textsuperscript{526}

But however he saw himself and despite occasionally sounding more like a contextualist than a stubborn uncompromising textualist, Strauss remains essentially committed to reading between the lines, diligently preoccupied with discovering hidden meanings that only the most sensitive readers might hope to expose. In the end, Strauss is always more the detective solving puzzling, elaborately-planned, textual crimes and much less the kind of reader for whom every text is always pregnant with contextually-informed possibilities and unsolvable nuances.\textsuperscript{527}

Subsequent Straussians, Tarcov notwithstanding, have followed Strauss defending esoteric interpretation and simultaneously producing controversial interpretations of canonical texts. Allan Bloom’s provocative ‘Interpretative Essay’ in his edition of Plato’s \textit{The Republic} is typical. According to Bloom, following Strauss nearly word-for-word, \textit{The Republic} is really, when sensitively read between the lines, the ‘greatest critique of [totalitarian] political idealism written.’\textsuperscript{528} Plato purportedly wrote \textit{The Republic} ironically, never for a minute believing that a just city was remotely possible let alone desirable.\textsuperscript{529} Bloom’s anti-communist Plato thus seems a Cold War rational reconstruction with Bloom having projected his political and ideological context into Plato’s intentions. Instead of reading Plato for help in negotiating our contemporary crisis, Bloom reads Plato as if he had been directly writing to this very crisis.

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526 Strauss, ‘Historicism,’ p. 11.
527 We borrow the detective and textual crime-solving metaphor from Kojève. See Kojève, ‘Tryanny and Wisdom,’ p. 136.
528 A. Bloom, ‘Interpretative Essay,’ \textit{The Republic} (New York, 1968), p. 410. As Strauss puts it in \textit{The City and Man}, p. 127: ‘Or to state this [account] in a manner which is perhaps more easily intelligible today, the \textit{Republic} conveys the broadest and deepest analysis of political idealism ever made.’
529 See, too, Strauss, \textit{The City and Man}, pp. 52-3 where Strauss says: ‘We may conclude that the Platonic dialogue says different things to different people—not accidentally, as every writing does, but that it is so contrived as to say different things to different people, or that it is radically ironical.’
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For Bloom, as for Strauss, historicism and cultural relativism have made the reading of seminal political philosophical texts politically ‘particularly needful.’ And like Strauss, Bloom insists: ‘We must turn to the greats of the tradition; but in a fresh spirit, as though they were unknown to us, almost as though they were prophets bringing news of unknown worlds and to whom we must listen with self-abandon instead of forcing them to pass before our inquisition. Above all, we must put our questions aside and try to find out what were their questions.’ We must study great texts with genuine openness, and not closed historicist openness, which denies the possibility that past texts spoke the truth. We must try to understand great texts as their authors intended them to be understood, ‘accepting the possibility that they may have fulfilled their intention and attained the truth.’ Nothing more is required than ‘deideoligization and the love of truth.’ There are ‘no universally applicable rules of interpretation’ but instead each great political philosopher ‘must be understood from within’ and ‘worn like a pair of glasses through which we see the world.’ For instance, we should read Machiavelli’s The Prince as ‘though it were written by a contemporary’ and as if he was urgently trying to communicate with us ‘about something of common concern.’

More recently, Steven Smith has followed Bloom’s account of Plato’s intentions in the name of Strauss. Contrary to the purportedly ‘standard’ interpretation of Plato as a fascist enemy of liberalism popularized by Popper after WWII, Strauss defends a more nuanced and compelling account that Smith labels ‘Platonic Liberalism.’ Contrary to Popper’s ‘“Plato as Fascist” trope,’ Strauss introduced ‘a new Plato, less monolithic, less absolutist, and less

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531 Ibid., p. 123.
532 Ibid., p. 127.
533 Ibid., p. 131.
534 Ibid., p. 128.
dogmatic than the totalitarian virtueocrat he has been made out to be by many of his enemies and even a few of his friends.’ By reminding us of the ‘always partial and incomplete nature of knowledge, Strauss returned to Plato and classical philosophy as a possible resource for rather than an enemy of political liberalism.’ But reading Plato as a liberal, whether or not Strauss actually did anything of the kind, Smith imposes on Plato his own liberal ‘trope’ in place of Popper’s purported fascist ‘trope.’ Plato could no more have been a liberal than a fascist, making Smith’s Plato, no less than Bloom’s, a robust reconstruction.

Bloom’s interpretation of Plato’s *The Republic* has not gone uncontested. For instance, George Klosko concludes that Bloom’s interpretation, like Strauss,’ is ‘highly improbable.’ Both Bloom and Strauss indulge ‘in a certain way of analyzing’ Plato that is wholly unwarranted not only by the textual evidence but also by external contextual evidence. Both ‘use Plato’s doubts as a license to pyramid their readings of isolated details into elaborate interpretive edifices.’ But worse yet, it is not enough to remind us, as Bloom especially does, that Plato’s recommendations like community of family and property are obviously absurd. It ‘must be shown that Plato believed that they would not work.’ We can’t ‘take it for granted that Plato was aware of their absurdity.’ Thus, Plato ‘could have been serious about them,’ making the received account of Plato preferable.

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No one has attacked Straussian methods, if not exactly Strauss’ method in particular, of interpreting texts more vigorously and sarcastically than Pocock. For Pocock, Strauss’ method places his readings ‘beyond the reach…of criticism,’ depriving his controversial interpretations of ‘critical checks’ and transforming him into an exegetical ‘magician.’ We are consequently ‘compelled to rely on Strauss’s capacity for cryptographic exegesis to establish the existence of the hidden language’ of meaning between the lines.

Strauss concedes occasionally that esoteric reading is not unlike the ‘deciphering of cuneiform texts,’ which he also concedes might well produce uncertain interpretations. But, he asks rhetorically, do alternative reading strategies produce certainty either? Referring to Kojève’s comparison of his method to that of a detective, Strauss says modestly that he would be happy enough if his method merely caused interpreters to suspect crimes whereas previously the were all-to-willing to concede ‘perfect innocence.’ At a minimum, reading esoterically ‘will force historians sooner or later to abandon the complacency with which they claim to know what the great thinkers thought, to admit that the thought of the past is much more enigmatic than it is generally held to be, and to begin to wonder whether the historical truth is not as difficult to

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538 Ibid., 388. Pocock concludes later: ‘For the discovery of implications, intended and unintended, a great deal; for a cryptographic interpretation of philosophy between the Renaissance and the French Revolution, something but not very much; for an exegesis which imputes esoteric and reverses overt meanings, subject to no limits but its own ingenuity, nothing whatever.’ (p. 399). Pocock may be conflating Strauss’ approach to interpretation with the versions of his followers like Mansfield and Bloom. But Pocock is thinking mostly of Bloom where he writes that Straussians write ‘myths,’ which at their best are fascinating ‘insights into and symbols of aspects of reality.’ But, at a minimum, they ought to admit that this is what they are doing. When they don’t, imposing their myths ‘upon the historiography of the actual,’ their myths turn into ‘monsters.’ Pocock continues that none of these monsters are ever the ‘work of a historian; all were the work of social philosophers of one kind and another, who thought that they knew enough history for their purposes.’ See J.G.A. Pocock, ‘Political Ideas as Historical Events: Political Philosophers as Historical Actors’ in Political Theory and Political Education, edited by M. Richter (Princeton, 1980), pp. 142 and 145. Plainly, for Pocock, Bloom is far too much social philosopher and ideologue and not enough intellectual historian. Also, see Shadia Drury’s recent and sometimes equally sarcastic review of Smith’s Reading Leo Strauss in Political Theory, 35 (2007).
access as the philosophic truth. But if esoteric interpretation merely amounts to reading vigilantly, then Strauss’s adversaries fret unnecessarily perhaps.

**Philosophical History, Exegetical Magic and the Continuing Crisis of Modernity**

Gadamer has reproached Straussian, and Strauss implicitly, for seldom providing credible evidence of any kind for what he regards as their often improbable interpretations. For Gadamer, their readings are “Talmud in the wrong place.” Now Gadamer’s differences with Strauss and Straussians are clearly informed, more generally, by the historicist legacy of the German Historical School on his thinking. More specifically, his dissatisfaction with Straussian hermeneutics is just as surely interwoven with his early critical debts to the problemgeschichtliche Methode of studying the history of philosophy. This historically-oriented method, associated with Marburg neo-Kantians like Hermann Cohen and Ernst Cassirer, who was Strauss’s 1921 dissertation supervisor, traced the origins and transformation of philosophical

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539 See Strauss, ‘On a Forgotten Kind of Writing,’ What is Political Philosophy and Other Studies, pp. 231-2.
540 “Gadamer on Strauss: An Interview,” Interpretation, 12 (1984), 8. Gadamer says as well that he disagreed with Strauss primarily over Strauss’s conviction that careful reading of classical texts can somehow recapture their original meanings. One “cannot speak the language of another epoch.” (3). Also see Strauss’s February 26, 1961 letter to Gadamer where Strauss rejects what he takes to be Gadamer’s insistence that the best readers invariably “prod[e]” rather than simply “reprod[e]” philosophical texts. And see Strauss’s May 14, 1961 letter to Gadamer where he objects: “Still I cannot accept a theory of hermeneutics which does not bring out more emphatically than yours the essentially ministerial element of interpretation proper which is concerned with understanding the thought of someone else as he meant it.” Here, we need to underscore how, for Strauss, “exact” reading demands that we just listen to texts and avoid becoming textual “impresarios and lion-tamers.” See Leo Strauss, “What Is Liberal Education?” in Liberalism Ancient and Modern (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 7. The letters between Strauss and Gadamer can be found translated into English in “Correspondence between Leo Strauss and Hans-Georg Gadamer Concerning Warheit and Methode,” Independent Journal of Philosophy (1978), 6 and 11. Richard Bernstein’s summary of the “core” of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics succinctly captures Gadamer’s differences with Strauss: “The idea that a historical text or a work of art can ‘speak’ to us, can pose a ‘question’ to us, can make a ‘claim to truth’ upon us is a crucial presupposition for Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. And yet, we must pause and insist that ‘strictly speaking,’ a text, work of art, or tradition does not literally speak to us. Unlike a living conversation, we are not confronting a dialogical partner who can speak for herself. Rather it is we as interpreters that speak on behalf of a mute text. It is we who interpret a text as posing a question to us. Unlike a real-life dialogue, the dialogue with texts is a ‘one-sided’ monological dialogue in which we are both questioning a text and answering for it.” See Richard J. Bernstein, “The Constellation of Hermeneutics, Critical Theory and Deconstruction” in The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer, 278.
problems as opposed to assuming that perennial philosophical problems passed along between
generations. While we should be wary of subscribing the latter method to Strauss, his mature
approach to textual interpretation would seem rooted in it insofar as Strauss subscribed to the
persistence of enduring philosophical problems, which seminal philosophical texts invariably
addressed. What made philosophical texts seminal, in part, was their engagement with these
problems.\footnote{In this regard, see especially Zank, \textit{Leo Strauss: the Early Writings 1921-1932}, n. 5, 59-60. In his 1924
“Cohen’s Analysis of Spinoza’s Bible Science,” Strauss contrasts his “historical-critical” method of reading to
Cohen’s more traditional “historiographic” method, which takes each word of Spinoza ‘seriously and weighs it
carefully’ while simultaneously focusing on the personal circumstances of Spinoza’s life including his
excommunication from Amsterdam’s Jewish community. Contrary to Cohen, we should neither take everything that
Spinoza writes with equal significance nor should we read the tribulations of his life into his texts. Doing the latter
presumably reintroduces historicism. See Zank, \textit{Leo Strauss: The Early Writings 1921-1932}, 140. Also see Leora
Batnitsky, \textit{Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of Revelation} (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 2006), 95-99, for Strauss’s differences with Cohen on how to interpret texts properly.}

Though some might take Gadamer’s characterization of Straussian (and Strauss) for
reading Talmudically as an ignorant slur, we take Gadamer’s underlying point to be that their
interpretations are typically contextually insensitive.\footnote{Also see Rosen, \textit{Hermeneutics as Politics}, 117-8, where he says: “It was often said of Strauss that he wrote like a
Talmudist. But this is after all not quite right. Unlike the Talmudist, Strauss gave the appearance, both personally
and in print, of great frankness—not always, to be sure, but often enough to mislead.” Rosen continues that, “his
public defense of the classics, his notorious ‘conservatism,’ his quasi-Nietzschean critique of modernity, and his
apparent revelations of secret teachings were the expression of a political program.” Like Kojève, he “practiced the
rhetoric of political propaganda.” (118).} That is, as Klosko has said more bluntly,
they indulge in “arbitrary guesswork” in the guise of purporting to be “chiefly” just attentively
“listening.” Or as George Sabine, once worried, “exact” interpretation turns out to be mostly an
“invitation to perverse ingenuity.”\footnote{George Sabine, “Review of \textit{Persecution and the Art of Writing},” \textit{Ethics}, 63 (1953), 220. And see Robert Pippin,
“The Unavailability of the Ordinary: Strauss and the Philosophical Fate of Modernity,” \textit{Political Theory}, 31 (2003),
350. Pippin is a far more sympathetic reader of Strauss. Yet Pippin faults Strauss for not seeing that if we, as
moderns, are “screened” (corrupted) from experiencing political life as the ancient Greeks did, then we are just as
“screened” from “any deep understanding of the[ir] texts that manifest and analyze such experience.”} But maybe Straussian read no less carelessly than their
adversaries. Maybe they just read differently or, as George Kateb has recently suggested, with “uncanny” and insightful impersonation.\(^\text{544}\)

Gadamer’s criticism that Straussians continue to follow Strauss in wrong-headily displacing Talmudic exegesis into reading philosophy aside, Straussianism itself now operates within the confines of its own distinctive horizon, which is no longer identical to Strauss’s. No less than Strauss’s idiosyncratic interpretation of Hobbes reflects the political and philosophical climate from which it emerged, so too Straussianism and its reception after Strauss reflect a very different political and philosophical context. This post WWII context, which remains our context after all, is no longer preoccupied with fascism nor with its historicist roots in the German Historical School. We remain fascinated by Nietzsche and Heidegger for sure and even with the historical and intellectual circumstances that motivated their thinking. But we do not, and cannot, take them up as Strauss did weighed down as he was by his baggage of Weimar anxieties. And this goes for how we also take up Hobbes and the invention of liberalism compared to Strauss. Strauss’s Hobbes, and much else he saw in the liberal philosophical tradition, is an inter-war German interpretation through-and-through. Why else should Strauss seem so out of step to contemporary Anglo-American historians of 17\(^{th}\) century, English political thought? How else should we explain why, in part, Oakeshott was so quick to reply so pointedly to Strauss?

\(^{544}\) See George Kateb’s review of Smith’s book on Strauss plus of two other recent studies of him by Thomas Pangle and by Catherine and Michael Zuckert in Perspectives on Politics, 5 (2007), 359. Kateb also says, not unlike Gadamer, that the “biggest obstacle standing in the way of non-Straussians who wish to approach the work of Leo Strauss and render justice to his quite remarkable achievement is comprised of his followers and disciples…” (355).
Notwithstanding whether or not Strauss’s method of “exact” reading is truly any less disingenuous than any rival hermeneutical method, and notwithstanding whether Strauss’s “exact” reading of Hobbes is more reconstruction than merely sensitive “listening,” we want to insist that reading “exactly” requires, or assumes, that texts be importantly autonomous. They cannot be mere epiphenomena wholly reducible to underlying historical currents of one kind or another. Texts do not just passively echo or signal real history. They are independent variables in their own right. Indeed, they have to be if one is committed to fighting fascism philosophically as Strauss seems to have been in part. If, as Strauss believes, abandoning classical natural right is the underlying source of all our political misfortunes, including the Holocaust, if we can hope to save ourselves from more of the same only by reclaiming classical natural right, and we can only reclaim it by reading exactly and assiduously between the lines, then great texts have to be autonomous. They have to overreach their times including desperate ones such as our own, which is what their authors, whether Plato, Aristotle or Maimonides, intended. They have to speak directly to us if they are to save us. And if they are to speak to us, then historicism must be false. If the greatest philosophers cannot liberate their thinking from the context of their times, if their philosophizing is historically wholly embedded and determined, then they purportedly have little to say that might be relevant for us to hear. Their claims might be engaging curiosities but nevertheless beside the point today. And if historicism is false, then esotericism is unavoidable insofar as writing against the grain of one’s times requires original thinking that is often risky. Being risky, it must be expressed cautiously if not esoterically. Esotericism, “necessarily follows from the original meaning of philosophy [as truth-seeking deliverance], provided that it is assumed that opinion is the element of society; but
historicism is incompatible with philosophy in the original meaning of the word, and historicism cannot be ignored today.”

John Gunnell is therefore absolutely correct in depicting Strauss as severely intellectualizing our contemporary crisis. For Strauss, in Gunnell’s view, politics had not only “betrayed” intellectuals but intellectuals had also “betrayed” politics. Strauss’s “purposes were far from merely scholarly, and many of his arguments can only be understood as rhetorical moves that are at least in purpose ‘political,’ and not simply a form of symbolic action.” Strauss that is, much like other Jewish refugee scholars from the 1930s such Erich Auerbach, Hans Baron and Karl Popper, believed in the political power of ideas both for having led modernity so drastically astray and for potentially inoculating us from its cruelest intemperances. Strauss was a warrior fighting the worst of modernity in the name of political sobriety first of all and, even more importantly, in the name of the independence of philosophy. The history of political thought, anti-historicism, esoteric interpretation, the autonomy of texts, exile and fighting fascism were profoundly interwoven for Strauss.

In a complicated essay, “The History of Philosophy and the Intention of the Philosopher,” Heinrich Meier claims that, for Strauss, historicism “had to be placed in question for the sake of philosophy…” Historicism, in other words, relegates philosophy permanently to the deepest

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546 John Gunnell, “Political Theory and Politics: The Case of Leo Strauss,” *Political Theory*, 13 (1985), 344-6. Or as Gunnell has put the same point more generally, “there is an important distinction between those whose project is figuring out the meaning of a text and those (among whom I count Strauss, Arendt, Voegelin, Adorno and Horkheimer, etc.) who are writing history as a drama to evoke either a critical or positive view of the present and who cast authors and texts as actors in their drama” (our italics). From personal correspondence with authors, January 18, 2012.

recesses of the cave, making escape from the cave impossible thus prompting chilling political consequences. If philosophers are completely and forever historically embedded, then they would not be able write esoterically against the grain of their respective historical contexts; against the presuppositions darkening the cave in their times. Their thinking would remain ineluctably relative and therefore uncritical. They would not be able to speak the truth, hiding it between the lines, whatever their strongest intentions for no truth would exist for us to speak about at all. Hence, ancient philosophers wouldn’t be capable of assisting us today however hard we might try to recover their life-saving wisdom. They would have nothing worth saying to us and we would be unable to hear it in any case. Their irrelevance would insure modernity’s worsening doom.

Strauss's anti-contextualist method of interpreting political philosophy, then in part, stemmed from his anti-historicism. At least, his anti-contextualist method presupposed rejecting historicism. Historicism reduced texts to mere epiphenomena of their historical contexts so that reading texts in their historical contexts was a typical historicist fallacy. Historicism devalued individual autonomy much the way Cambridge School interpretation of texts purportedly devalues the autonomy of texts. And devaluing the autonomy of texts simultaneously devalued the canon as a vehicle for life-saving, transhistorical truths. Moreover, Strauss’ anti-historicism was, in turn, very much a product of his troubled times and the German tradition of historical thinking that he associated with them.

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548 Meier’s account of Strauss’s rejection of historicism because it makes philosophical thinking uncritical is an established refrain in German philosophizing that continues to divide it. For instance, the core disagreement between Habermas and Gadamer turned on this same issue with Habermas essentially accusing Gadamer’s philosophical method of being uncritical, non-foundational and therefore conservatively apologetic. For an insightful assessment of the debate between Habermas and Gadamer, see Martin Jay, “Should Intellectual History Take a Linguistic Turn? Reflection on the Habermas Gadamer Debate” in Modern European Intellectual History, eds. Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1982).
Even if we read Strauss as covertly Nietzschean, even if we read him as believing that classical political philosophers knew to be reticent about truth because it was so unsalutary and dangerous, historicism would still have to be false and philosophical texts autonomous. At least, radical historicism would have to be false. Radical historicism would still have to be misguided however much Strauss may have believed, as some have recently maintained, that morality and the revealed law were really just highly useful fictions for suppressing our nastiest instincts. If, for instance, Machiavelli’s crime (mimicked and perfected by Hobbes and then transformed into a hegemonic paradigm by the German Historical School) was that he let the cat “out of the bag,” to borrow from Stanley Rosen, by daring to speak openly and truthfully about the fictitious nature of morality when classical philosophers knew better by keeping quiet, Machiavelli would have been speaking against the grain of his times, making the truth that he discovered wholly independent and The Prince historically exceptional. And the same goes for Hobbes’s Leviathan of course. Irresponsible philosophic boldness and exotericism as much as conscientious self-censorship and esotericism presupposes textual independence and therefore radical historicism’s spuriousness. Strauss may have appealed to classical natural right not so much because he believed it true and it therefore might rescue us accordingly but because classical natural right, though a lie, was a useful and therefore noble prophylactic capable of deflecting our inherent depravity and therefore shielding us from repeating his generation’s horrors. Even if this is the real Strauss, ideas and the texts which conveyed them were still necessarily potent and not mere reflections of their times. Philosophical lying was politically responsible because it was so

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549 See Gunnell, “Political Theory and Politics: The Case of Leo Strauss,” 359, where he says that, for Strauss, philosophy “must aid in maintaining the legitimating values of political order that, like the authority of OZ, must remain sacred to be effective.” Also see Shadia Drury, “The Esoteric Philosophy of Leo Strauss,” Political Theory, 13 (1985), 331. But if Strauss thought that political philosophers should keep themselves hidden behind the curtain like OZ’s wizard, why was he such an “atheist blabbermouth” (at least with his students) as Pippin puts it? See Robert Pippin, “The Modern World of Leo Strauss,” Political Theory, 20 (August, 1992), note 6, 467.
politically consequential and it was so politically consequential because philosophical texts were not mere historical epiphenomena.\(^{550}\)

In sum, then, whether we read Strauss as defending some form of universal moral truth or as believing the very opposite that truth was a useful fantasy, philosophical texts remain necessarily robust independent variables for him. In his 1942 lecture, “What Can We Learn From Political Theory,” Strauss insists more diffidently and certainly less chillingly that the “foremost duty of political philosophy today seems to be to counteract” the menace of “modern utopianism.” It teaches us “not to expect too much from the future” and by “making our hopes modest, it protects us against despondency,” making us “immune to the smugness of the philistine” as well as to the “dreams of the visionary.”\(^{551}\) Political philosophy, that is, and contrary to the misguided ambitions of political theory, is not action guiding. It cannot solve our perennial political problems though it can reiterate them. At its best, political philosophy counteracts our basest Philistine or other utopian fevers. But like all medicines and therapies, it must be administered with “discretion” especially in our perilous times “for in our time, we are confronted not merely with the Philistines of old who identify the good with the old or the actual, but with the Philistines of progress who identify the good with the new and the future.”\(^{552}\) Even as just therapy against excess, political philosophy clearly matters greatly and often fatefully. Political philosophy and the history of political philosophy were politically consequential.

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\(^{550}\) One might insist that neither Machiavelli nor Hobbes were miraculously speaking the hard truth of historicism against the grain of their times but rather that their times were already sufficiently historicist, making their philosophical historicism less dramatic and unprecedented. Hence, we need not assume that at least some texts had to be autonomous for Strauss.


\(^{552}\) Ibid., 521-2.
Conclusion

Bernard Williams has suggested that most history of philosophy, including especially the history of political philosophy, is a “funny kind of philosophy” and particularly when it is practiced analytically. Whenever analytical philosophers try their hand at the history of philosophy, they typically project their own peculiar philosophical concerns on to very different concerns animating their predecessors. They commonly introduce idiosyncratic “archaizing elements” much “in the style of Stravinsky’s Pulcinella.” But for all that, according to Williams, their idiosyncratic histories of philosophy are not necessarily illegitimate. Strauss’s history of political philosophy is controversial because it is idiosyncratic too but its idiosyncrasies are very different and are motivated by very different concerns including particularly his unease about historicism.

For Strauss and those he has inspired, the history of political thought, properly executed, has political consequences and often enough acute political consequences. Political evil has become so imperviously banal and so ubiquitous and so stubborn, making reading for the truth with appropriate exacting care so difficult as well as so morally obligatory regardless of whether what we discover in them is life-saving or dishearteningly life-threatening. Texts and their ideas matter. Certain venerable texts matter greatly even if they do no more than deflect the unsophisticated from the siren song of historicism and its political exuberances. And contemporary studies in political philosophy’s history matter too even if, following Rosen’s account of Strauss’s history of political thought, they do no more than merely remind us that speaking the truth too openly, as Hobbes (as well as Machiavelli before him and Nietzsche after him) did, is politically hazardous. That is, venerable texts can deliver us from the political

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consequences of our philosophical errors, or, as some might have it, redirect us away from perilous truths that had best been left undiscovered or kept in the “bag.”

For other exiles besides Strauss who fled Europe in the 1930s because they were Jewish like Jacob Talmon, Hans Baron, Karl Popper, Karl Löwith and Isaiah Berlin, ideas and their texts were also extremely potent for better or worse. But their post-war drama is no longer our drama, their crisis is no longer our own. This is not to say that intellectual history hardly matters. Interpreting philosophical texts and writing historical narratives about them surely helps some few of us navigate our contemporary crises by fortifying our collective identities. And, notwithstanding whether navigating this crisis required retreating from Heidegger into neo-Kantian cosmopolitanism following Popper or engaging Heidegger head on following Strauss, the history of political thought may well be occasionally politically consequential. But, in our view, intellectual historians, of whatever stripe whether neo-Kantian or Heideggerian, who convince themselves that what they are doing is so vital to our well-being, if not our survival, presumptuously overstate.

In any case, we have insisted that one cannot possibly make sense of Strauss’s anti-historicism without setting it in the context of the German Historical School as Strauss seems to have understood and appropriated it, which, he held, turned Hobbes and Machiavelli’s invention of historicism into the destruction of classical natural right thus opening up the floodgates to liberal relativism and ultimately fascism. Strauss’s Hobbes, then, is not so much displaced Talmud as it is Weimar Germany displaced onto the English Civil War. It is Nietzsche, Heidegger and Schmitt projected backwards onto a foreign intellectual landscape darkening and reworking this landscape beyond anything that Hobbes would have or could have recognized. Though provocative and ingenious without question, we should not confuse such dramatically
beguiling history of political thought for more pedestrian, less ambitious varieties which are content merely to bring our intellectual past forward as well as possible instead of uncritically re-imagining it through our anxieties about the plentitude of philosophical and assorted ideological demons stalking our necessarily much altered present.
Erich Auerbach and the Crisis of German Philology: An Apology for the Western Judaeo-Christian Humanist Tradition in an Age of Peril, Tyranny, and Barbarism

ABSTRACT

Erich Auerbach and the Crisis of German Philology analyzes the philologist’s works and life of the mind in the wide ideological, philological, and historical context of his time. Auerbach’s struggle as a humanist philologist is examined against the völkisch, chauvinist, racist, and anti-Semitic premises of Aryan philology, which eliminated the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, from German culture in particular and Western culture and civilization in general. He constructed his apology for, or justification of, the Western Judaeo-Christian humanist tradition at its gravest existential moment.

In this broad context, Auerbach’s goal in writing two of his most famous and celebrated works, “Figura” and Mimesis, was not merely philological and literary but polemical. These works equally reject Aryan philology and Nazi historiography, which were based on racism, chauvinism, and the mythologies of Blood, Volk, and Soil, or the Community of Blood and Fate of the German people, glorifying the concept of culture and rejecting the concept of European civilization. Immediately following the 1933 Nazi Revolution, Auerbach began defending, first, the Old Testament from elimination by Aryan philology and, second, Western humanist culture and civilization against Nazi tyranny and barbarism.

Begun in 1933, “Figura” provides an apology for the Old Testament’s validity and credibility. It draws on the Christian figural interpretation of history to prove that the Old Testament is inseparable from the New Testament and inextricably linked to Western culture and civilization as a whole, contrary to the racist and anti-Semitic claims of Aryan philology and Nazi historiography.

In 1942, the most crucial year of World War II, which witnessed the battles of Stalingrad and El Alamein, Auerbach started writing Mimesis, which constitutes a grand apology for, or defense and justification of, the Western Judaeo-Christian humanist tradition. Like Saint Augustine and Blaise Pascal, to name only two famous apologists, he wrote his defense at the moment of greatest challenge. Other German-speaking Jewish exiles began writing their grand humanist defenses of Western civilization that year—Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s Dialectic of Enlightenment and Hans Baron’s The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance—and Thomas Mann conceived his novel Dr. Faustus, eliding the legendary necromancer—here, a composer, or Germany—who makes a bargain for power with Satan. The year signified a great epistemological watershed in the intellectual history of the West.

Spurned by the Nazis as a Jew, an unworthy human being of inferior race, Auerbach exacted perfect revenge. He rescued the Western humanist tradition, based on Judaeo-Christian heritage and the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, in works that have resonated with and illuminated readers ever since. This legacy is his contribution to the Kulturkampf against Aryan philology and Nazi barbarism.
Preface

Philology itself, the branch of literary studies that most loudly cultivates distance from ideology and engagement with the most arcane details, might instead be an authentically – and repeatedly, in one strong voice after another – political activity.


The concern of that humanism [historicist humanism”] was not only the overt discovery of materials and the development of methods of research, but beyond that their penetration and evaluation so that an inner history of mankind – which thereby created a conception of man unified in his multiplicity – could be written. Ever since Vico and Herder this humanism has been the true purpose of philology: because of this purpose philology became the dominant branch of the humanities.

The inner history of the last thousand years is the history of mankind achieving self-expression: this is what philology, a historicist discipline, treats. This history contains the records of man’s mighty adventurous advance to a consciousness of his human condition and to the realization of his given potential.

Auerbach, “Philology and Weltliteratur” (1952)

This study analyzes Auerbach’s life and mind in the wide ideological, philological, and historical context of his time, especially the rise of Aryan philology and its eventual triumph with the Nazi Revolution in Germany of 1933. It deals specifically with his struggle against the premises of Aryan philology, which eliminated the Old Testament from German culture in particular and Western culture and civilization in general, and later with his apology for, or defense and justification of, Western Judaeo-Christian humanist tradition at its gravest existential moment. His ultimate goal was to counter the overt racist tendencies and völkish ideology in Germany, or the belief in the Community of Blood and Fate of the German people, which sharply distinguished between culture and civilization and glorified *Volk* over European civilization.

Auerbach began his struggle against Aryan philology in Germany in 1933 in his famous essay “Figura,” which he published in exile in Istanbul in 1938. “Figura” is traditionally regarded as a brilliant philological and literary study, but it should be seen, above all, as an *apology* for the Old Testament’s validity and credibility. Auerbach made clear that, in contrast to the premises of
Aryan philology and Nazi historiography, Western culture and civilization are based upon the figural interpretation of history, which establishes an intrinsic, inextricable connection between the Old and the New Testaments. Figural interpretation, he wrote, “wished to preserve the full historicity of the Scriptures along with the deeper meaning.” As figural interpretation “asserted both the historical reality of the Old and the New Testaments and also their providential connectedness,” it fully supports the credibility and validity of the Old Testament and its authority against the premises of Aryan philology. Far more than a mere philological study, “Figura” was a mission of grand proportions. It seeks to define figura and its humanist ramifications as deployed by Saint Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, and Dante. In Auerbach’s hands, figura, which was born “in the nexus of Judaism and Christianity,” embodies “one of the conditions of the literary project of the West.” Philology becomes an integral and formidable ideological tool, and figural interpretation is transformed into a powerful weapon against Aryan philology and Nazi historiography. With Auerbach, ideology becomes an essential, inseparable part of philology.

Beginning in 1942, the most crucial year of World War II, which witnessed the battles of Stalingrad, Midway, and El Alamein, Auerbach started writing *Mimesis* in exile in Istanbul. It constitutes a grand apology for Western Judaeo-Christian humanist tradition as it confronted erasure. Like Augustine and Pascal, to name only two other famous apologists, Auerbach wrote in defense of Western Judaeo-Christian humanist civilization at the time of its greatest existential challenge. Like “Figura,” *Mimesis* was not only a philological, literary study, which inaugurated, among other things, the field of comparative literature; this celebrated work was based on the idea that the Old Testament, not the classical Greek culture of myths, legends and heroes, recently revived by Nazi culture, is the source of history and, hence, the representation of reality
in Western culture. In contrast to the received view that *Mimesis*’s literary space extends from Homer to Virginia Woolf, Auerbach sets the history of European literature “from Genesis all the way to Virginia Woolf,” clearly revealing his main aim: to confront Aryan philology and Nazi historiography with evidence that the Old Testament, not classical Greek myths, legends, and heroes, is the origin of Western culture’s representation of reality. In other words, Scripture leads “from distant legend and its figural interpretation into everyday contemporary reality,” while the premises of Aryan philology and culture lead from legend to flight from reality—*Schwarmerei*.

Both “Figura” and *Mimesis* begin with the Jewish Bible. For Auerbach, the credibility and validity of the Old Testament was fully asserted and its authority fully assured in the content, form, fabric, and structure of Western humanist civilization. However, while “Figura” is directed against the specific crisis of German philology, *Mimesis* was constructed against the grave threat to Western European humanist civilization as a whole in face of Nazi barbarism. Legends, myths, and the culture of heroes had become a crucial part of the Nazi worldview and Aryan ideology, and building myths and heroes was an integral part their cultural drive. Against the flight from reason inherent in Nazi racist and anti-Semitic ideologies, *Mimesis* stresses the rationalist, realist, and humanist view of history, a teleological, progressive view in which the rationalist and democratic representation of reality advances in a unique grand drama. It was written, in Auerbach’s words, to “those whose love for our western [humanist] history has serenely preserved” them during the horrors of World War II, yet early twentieth-century works by Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, and James Joyce reflect a decline in the growth and progress of humanist, rationalist, and democratic representation of reality, substantiating, for Auerbach, Oswald Spengler’s claims in *The Decline of the West*. Rejecting his previous adherence to Vico
and Hegel’s belief in teleological, historical progress, Auerbach found at the end of *Mimesis* that modern literature led to dissolution.

The decline of the West, then, was inextricably connected to the dissolution of reality in its literature and culture. Auerbach’s growing pessimism is more than understandable; many years of hard life in exile and constant struggle against Nazism and Aryan philology left their indelible marks. Indeed, while Auerbach strongly defended the humanist Western Judaeo-Christian tradition, the main and underlining thesis of *Mimesis*, he could not ignore the terrible impact of two bestial World Wars on Western history and culture.

**Philology and Humanism**

[The Nazi’s] furious onslaught aimed at eliminating any trace of ‘Jewishness,’ any sign of ‘Jewish spirit,’ any remnant of Jewish presence (real or imaginary) from politics, society, culture, and history.


Auerbach’s writing is, first and foremost, that of an historian and critic of culture in the tradition of Jakob Burckhardt and German *Kulturgeschichte*: beneath the surface of scholarly detachment and aristocratic urbanity there is a pathos, an urgency of involvement born of a passionate commitment to the variety of attitudes and the shared values and assumptions of Western civilization.

Arthur R. Evans, “Erich Auerbach as European Critic” (1971)

The idea that Auerbach is simply a neutral observer, purely committed to his extreme historical relativism, is not correct.

In the introduction to his *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages* (1958), Auerbach described the close, inextricable connection in his thought between philology and ideology, illuminating his unique approach to the field of “philology and literary expression,” and its intrinsic relationship to “the inward and outward crises of Europe” of
his times. His works, Auerbach wrote, entitled him to an important place among other
“European philologists” and noted three contemporary scholars who “were without equal in any
other field of philology or in any other country” whose “breadth of vision justifies us in calling”
them “European philologists. I am thinking, first and foremost, of Karl Vossler, Ernst Robert
Curtius and Leo Spitzer.” Karl Vossler (1872-1949) was a German linguist and scholar, a
leading Romanist, known for his interest in Italian thought, and a follower of the Italian critic
and idealist philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866-1952). Ernst Robert Curtius (1886-1956) was a
German literary scholar, philologist, and Romance language literary critic. Leo Spitzer (1887-
1960) was an Austrian Romanist and Hispanist, an influential and prolific literary critic known
for his emphasis on stylistics [Stilistik].555 His own work, Auerbach continued, sprang “from the
same presuppositions as theirs”; namely, “embracing Europe as a whole.” However, in contrast,
he claimed that the source of his work was unique: “My work, however, shows a much clearer
awareness of the European crisis” (p. 6; emphasis added).

Many studies have dealt with Auerbach’s response to the crisis of his time in Germany, but
rarely, if at all, do they clearly state and explain against what and whom he fought. One scholar,
for example, argues that Auerbach’s goal was “salvaging” “some vestiges of Western tradition or
precious survival of the past.”556 Another claimed that in writing Mimesis, he “was not only
merely practicing his profession despite adversity: he was performing an act of cultural, even
civilizational, survival of the highest importance” or offering “a massive reaffirmation of the

554 “Introduction: Purpose and Method,” in Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and the Middle
LLP are to this edition.
555 According to René Wellek, these “four prominent German specialists in Romance literature” were influenced by
Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) and Benedetto Croce (1866-1952). See A History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950;
92. Among them, Wellek argues, Auerbach “seems to be the most widely read” (p. 92).
Western cultural tradition." The same author declares that *Mimesis* is “an alternative history for Europe.”

We hold that Auerbach’s philological, historical, and philosophical enterprise in “Figura” and *Mimesis* was directed against a very specific, well-defined crisis in Germany and the Europe of his time. Above, he refers not only to general political and social crises, but to a specific crisis in his own discipline; namely, the development of Aryan philology and its triumph in the Third Reich following the Nazi Revolution of 1933. Aryan philology was based on racism, anti-Semitism, narrow nationalism, and sheer chauvinism. It strove to eliminate the Old Testament from the Christian canon and, hence, the very fabric of European culture and civilization. Our goals are to show and to analyze the extent to which Aryan philology and Nazi historiography influenced Auerbach’s philological humanist enterprise in “Figura,” and, later, how the horrifying spread of Nazi barbarism throughout Europe contributed to the making of *Mimesis*, rightly considered Auerbach’s *magnum opus* and *opus famosum*. In both works, Auerbach followed Augustine’s famous saying: “*nonnulla enim pars inventionis est nosse quid quaeras*” (a considerable part of discovery is to know what you are looking for) (*LLP*, 24). These works should be regarded as a fierce response to the premises of Arian philology and Nazi historiography.

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560 The German humanistic and philological crisis of the early twenty century was inextricably connected to the crisis of historicism. According to Michael Holquist, “the crisis of historicism was in effect a crisis in belief. The long three stage descent from A. belief in an absolute god, through, B. a succeeding belief in the absolute of reason, to C. the 19th century loss of faith in any absolute after the Romantic appropriation of Kantian epistemology led to a re-formulation of subjectivity” (letter to the author, 29 July 2011); see also Holquist, “The Place of Philology in an Age of World Literature,” *Neohelicon* 38 (2011), pp. 267-87.
Based on *Blut und Boden*, the major slogan of Nazi racial ideology, which grounded ethnicity in a toxic mythology of blood, folk, and homeland (*Heimat*), Aryan philology was uniquely German, racist, chauvinist, and anti-humanistic. It strove to fashion new Aryan origins for the German people, to shape a new Germanic or Nordic Christianity, to reject and eliminate the Old Testament from the Christian canon, and to construct new origins, aims, and goals for Germany in particular and Western civilization in general. Much of Auerbach’s work, but most specifically “Figura” and *Mimesis*, were directed against the racist, chauvinist, and anti-Semitic premises of Aryan philosophy.\(^{561}\)

During the Weimar Republic, “Philology had become a metaphor for numbing, drudgery, authoritarian discipline.”\(^{562}\) In contrast, Auerbach’s philological humanism is not based on racism, nationalism, chauvinism, and Aryanism but seeks to locate a broad narrative of Western civilization, not of a specific “race” or ethnic group, rooted in the Judaeo-Christian humanist tradition. This struggle of “historicist humanism” (PW, 4) stood against Aryan philology’s decanonization of the Old Testament and Nazi barbarism. Auerbach, an avid student of the Italian political philosopher, historian, and jurist Giovanni Battista (Giambattista) Vico (1668-1744), knew too much about the “barbarian turn” in history. According to Vico, the third age of history, the age of fully developed reason, is presented “only as potentiality; for Vico the third age is only a stage, doomed to degenerate and relapse into barbarism” (*LLP*, 16). Auerbach fully understood the rise and triumph of Nazi barbarism. Indeed, his first paper on Vico dates from

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\(^{561}\) According to William Calin, Auerbach’s struggle was not only against Aryan philology. Since Johann Gottfried von Herder, “the German intellectuals have had a wish-fulfillment passion for everything Greek, with the culmination in Heidegger’s notion that there are only two truly philosophical languages: Greek and German. Hitler took the trouble to have his picture taken next to (or in front of) the Acropolis. As I see it, this German model was directed not only against the Jewish Old Testament; it also pushed aside the Latin/Roman and, consequently, repudiated the French and Italian traditions.” This observation may also help to explain “why Auerbach centered on French and, to a lesser extent, Italian” (letter to the author, 11 July 2011).

1922, and one of the things that attracted him to the Italian philosopher was that there is “no Volksgeist in Vico, no interest in the particular conditions of nations, no patriotism, no egotism, no romantic folklore, no domestic feeling of closeness, no idyllic joy in the beautiful and noble in man.”

In this broad historical, philological, and humanist context, Auerbach’s “Figura” can be described as an apology for the Old Testament and *Mimesis* as an apology for Western Judaeo-Christian humanist tradition, not in terms of regret, remorse, or sorrow, but rather as a strong defense or justification. Augustine wrote his *City of God* as a defense of, and apology for, the Christian faith in the early fourth century, a time of great crisis when the Christians and Christianity were blamed for the Fall of Rome. Pascal wrote his *Pensées* during the seventeenth century as an apology for, or a defense of, the Christian religion against the rise of the modern mechanical philosophy of nature, especially as articulated by René Descartes. These apologies were written by authors who claimed to know and strove to show the truth in its full range of colors to a world that denied and denounced it. As Wellek wrote, what Auerbach produced “was oriented toward truth” or, to use Auerbach’s own words, toward “an absolute claim to historical truth” (*M*, 14).

Auerbach was no stranger to the apologetic genre in Western history and literature, and he was more than familiar with the thought and lives of Augustine and Pascal, having discussed them throughout his works. He is clearly closer to Augustine because they both drew similar

563 Wellek, *German, Russian, and Eastern European Criticism*, p. 130.
conclusions from their personal and civilizational ordeals. Augustine termed his world *Terrara aliana*; exile led to alienation. Auerbach saw “the spirit (Geist)” as “*Paupertas* and *terra aliena*” (PW, 17).\(^{567}\) echoing Augustine’s remarks to his fellow Christians in Carthage: “Citizens of Jerusalem … you do not belong here [earth], you belong somewhere else”;\(^{568}\) their existential state in the world is that of “resident stranger” or “resident aliens.”

Auerbach’s apologetic moment, his turn to reveal, explore, and defend the Judaeo-Christian humanist tradition and, *ipso facto*, the Jewish foundation of Western culture and literature, coincided with the 1933 Nazi Revolution, as can be clearly discerned from his list of publications.\(^{570}\) Before he published “Figura” in 1938, all of his works concentrated mostly on Italian and French literature. However, in exile during the 1930s and 1940s, he made a major turn to the apologetic, exploring and justifying the credibility and authority of the biblical foundations of Western civilization. This major turning point—*Ansatzpunkt*,\(^ {571}\) or a point of great epistemological departure—led him to concentrate on the question of realism and the representation of reality, history, and truth in Western literature. The cause of this major transformation we may rightly ascribe to the triumph of Nazism and Aryan philology after 1933; until “Figura” and *Mimesis*, Auerbach had not dealt with Jewish thought and life. Evidently, he had something to prove that was so important, he changed the course, themes, and goals of his works and studies.

\(^{567}\) Auerbach, “Philology and Weltliteratur” (1952), *Centennial Review* 13 (Winter 1969), pp. 1-17. All references in the text to *PW* are to this edition.


\(^{570}\) See “Bibliography of the Writings of Erich Auerbach,” in *Literary Language*, pp. 395-405. According to Jan M. Ziolkowski in the Foreword, this book “could be presented more aptly as the centerpiece—the five central centuries—that is missing from the arguments that Auerbach advanced in *Mimesis* about the evolution of reality” (p. xi).

\(^{571}\) Auerbach borrowed the crucial concept of *Ansatzpunkt* from Wilhelm Dilthey, *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung: Lessing, Goethe, Novalis, Holderlin* ([1914]; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968).
In what follows, our goal is not to provide a detailed analysis of the ideological sources of Auerbach’s philological philosophy, which has been accomplished elsewhere. Likewise, I am not concerned with the impact of Jewishness on Auerbach’s works, an important subject receiving more and more attention in recent years. Our aim is more modest: to reveal the formation and the content and form of Auerbach’s “Figura” and Mimesis in light of his life and times; more specifically, his struggle against Aryan philology and Nazi barbarism’s attack on Western civilization in World War II. Our goal, in other words, is to illuminate the space of experience and horizon of expectation behind the composition of both “Figura” and Mimesis. As David Damrosch wrote about Mimesis, but it applies to “Figura” as well, Auerbach “knew too much about his own time, and that knowledge, so often repressed, continually returned to shift the course of his argument away from the free play of the material in itself.” In this context, “Figura” and Mimesis reveal an important ideological-philological mission: a grand, overarching

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teleology of literary history, or literary historiography, based on an “ethical dimension in which humanistic values and a sense of the tragic coexist.”

Our goal more specifically is to understand the making of “Figura” and *Mimesis* in light of the many crises in Auerbach’s life and his exile in Istanbul. Auerbach wrote about Dante that “his unfortunate situation was one of his main reasons for framing his work,” and that with the writing of the *Comedy*, “he overcame the crisis and it vastly enriched his personal experience” (*D*, 75, 83). The same may be said about Auerbach; exile led to a mission, resulting in the writing of “Figura” and *Mimesis*. Indeed, “*Mimesis* was intended to be something more than a contribution to literary criticism,” or, as Auerbach admitted, “*Mimesis* is quite consciously a book that a particular person, in a particular situation, wrote at the beginning of the 1940s” (*M*, 574). Both in form and content, it is an essential part of a singular historical moment, when Auerbach strove to provide an answer to the problems of his times. Hence, it demands historization and contextualization, for as Auerbach argued, “[w]e are constantly endeavoring to give meaning and order to our lives in the past, the present, and the future, to our surroundings, the world in which we live” (*M*, 549). This task was all the more urgent, given the major historical upheavals through which Auerbach lived. *Mimesis* may be seen as not only a literary odyssey, but Auerbach’s private, long, eventful odyssey over the troubled seas of his times. As he wrote, crisis *demands interpretation*: “The need to constitute authentic texts manifests itself typically when a society becomes conscious of having achieved a high level of civilization, and

575 Kevin Brownlee, “The Ideology of Periodization: *Mimesis* 10 and the Late Medieval Aesthetic,” in *Literary History and the Challenge of Philology*, p. 158; emphasis added.
desires to preserve from the ravages of time the works that constituted its spiritual patrimony.”

Within this broad historical, philological, and ideological context, I argue that “Figura” should not be regarded as a simple “technical essay”, and *Mimesis* should not be understood as a mere “calm affirmation of the unity and dignity of European literature in all its multiplicity and dynamism,” as one scholar suggested. Rather, both works are *unambiguous signs* of Auerbach’s *Kulturkampf* against the premises of Aryan philology and the spread of Nazi barbarism in Europe. Each is an apology written for a specific crisis Auerbach faced in his life, or as he wrote in his typical reserved tone, “My own experience, and by that I mean not merely my scientific experience, *is responsible for the choice of problems, the starting points, the reasoning and the intention expressed in my writing*” (*LLP*, 30; emphasis added).

In what follows, I wish to unveil and explain Auerbach’s “choice of problems” and the “starting points” he constructed in “Figura” and *Mimesis* as well as “the reasoning and the intention” behind them in light of his experiences in Weimar, Nazi Germany, and exile. Like his friend Walter Benjamin’s vision of the “Angel of History,” Auerbach saw “one single catastrophe” in history that kept “piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurl[ing] it in front of his feet.” As the historian Eric Hobsbawm wrote, Auerbach was living in the “Age of Catastrophe,” or *historia calamitatum*: the “decades from the outbreak of the First World War to the aftermath of the Second,” when European civilization “stumble[d] from one calamity to

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another. And there were even times when even intelligent conservatives would not take bets on its survival.\textsuperscript{582} “Figura” and \textit{Mimesis} were constructed during the “Age of Catastrophe” to preserve European Judaeo-Christian humanist tradition in an age of peril, tyranny, and barbarism.

**Philology and History**

[T]he romantics introduced the conception of natural and organic evolution into history itself; they developed an evolutionary conservatism, based on the traditions of the folk genius, directed as much against rationalistic forms of absolutism as against rationalistic tendencies toward revolutionary progress. Their organic conservatism resulted from their prevailing interest in the individual roots and forms of the folk genius, in folklore, national traditions, and the national individuality in general. Although this interest was extended to foreign national forms in the literary and scientific activities of the romantics, it led many of them, especially in Germany, to an extremely nationalistic attitude toward their own fatherland, which they considered as the synthesis and supreme realization of folk genius.

\begin{quote}
Auerbach, “Vico and Aesthetic Historism” (1949)

The ancient barbarism which has been held down for centuries … is waking again with a warlike delight in its own strength. This barbarism is what I call strong Race … the eternal warlike in the type of the beast of prey – Man. The only form-giving power is the warlike ‘Prussian’ spirit; not only in Germany the legions of Caesar march again.

\begin{quote}
Arthur Spengler, \textit{The Duties of German Youth} (1924)
\end{quote}

[Auerbach’s] historicism seeks to generate by purely scholarly means testimony to oppose the forces of uniformity and intolerance.

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}
\end{quote}

As with other German-speaking Jewish intellectual exiles, such as Hans Baron, Karl Popper, and Leo Strauss, the crisis of Aryan philology led Auerbach to innovative interpretations and, later, in exile, to head-on confrontation with the crisis of Western civilization as a whole. As he admitted: “At an early date, and from then on with increasing urgency, I ceased to look upon the

European possibilities of Romance philology as mere possibilities and came to regard them as a task specific to our time – a task which could not have been envisaged yesterday and will no longer be conceivable tomorrow” (LLP, 6; emphasis added). Further, he believed that in the wake of two world wars, “European civilization is approaching the terms of its existence,” and that “its history as a distinct entity” seemed “to be at an end” (LLP, 5-6). This sense of impending crisis was one of the main reasons that in Mimesis, he strove to provide, in part, an apology for Western culture, or to give “a coherent picture of European civilization as it is mirrored in its exemplary literary masterpiece.”

Auerbach’s “Figura” and Mimesis cannot be properly explained and analyzed without exploring his exile. “Modern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees,” Said wrote, and Adorno: “the only home truly available to exiles, though fragile and vulnerable, is in writing.” In exile, writing against the premises of Aryan philology and Nazi barbarism, Auerbach found his true home. This romance philologist, who commanded two literatures – French and Italian – and the Dante scholar who went to exile in Istanbul in 1936, became a literary historian and, some say, founded the field of comparative literature. Exile led to interpretation as a confrontation with Aryan philology and Nazi völkisch historiography.

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Crisis greatly contributed to Auerbach’s historization of philology, historicist philology, or “historical philology.” As he wrote: “The science which seeks, by interpreting documents, to determine what they held to be true is called philology. Thus philology is enlarged to mean what in Germany is called Geistesgeschichte, to include all historical disciplines, including the history of law and economic history” (LLP, 15). Further, his “philological philosophy or philosophical philology” is “concerned with only one thing – mankind” (LLP, 16). Auerbach “exercised his philology” for the “sake of humanism”; his work revealed “a strong humanist avowal that literature has an ethical potential to modify the reader.” In this way, he differed from contemporary philologist Leo Spitzer. For Spitzer, “philology” is “the love of the word;” his literary and cultural analysis was based “mainly upon the word or cluster of related words,” or explications de texte. Spitzer’s work took place in “the enchanted garden of literary history,” and he “never published a book of literary history but, instead, collections of discrete critical and linguistic essays.” He did not share Auerbach’s preoccupation with history or his historization of philology but was “interested primarily in the use of language by an individual

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587 According to Auerbach’s historicist philology, historical philology, or aesthetic historicism, “epochs and societies are not to be judged in terms of a pattern concept of what is desirable absolutely speaking but rather in every case in terms of their own premises” or in terms of “the vital unity of individual epochs.” See Mimesis, pp. 443-44). On Auerbach historicist philology, see Charles Breslin, “Philosophy or Philology: Auerbach and Aesthetic Historicism,” Journal of the History of Ideas, 22 (July-September 1961), pp. 369-81.

588 Auerbach, quoted in Evans, “Erich Auerbach as European Critic,” p. 194.


writer, seeking the clue to the writer’s personality in his deviation from the norm.”

Auerbach’s philological approach, in contrast, saw “language as a key to the character of a particular society,” and close readings of texts “almost always have a general significance, which goes beyond the text itself and reveals something about the writer, the period in which he wrote, the development of his mode of thought, an artistic form, or a way of life.” Against Spitzer’s narrow linguistic and stylistic approach, Auerbach was engaged “in a process too multidimensional to be called a philological or interpretive circle.” If Spitzer’s philological system was based on “passing from observed detail to hypothesis and back to details” and “viewed philology in general as being an exceptionally broad and important approach to human culture,” Auerbach’s historicist humanist philology does not see individual texts in isolation; they “form part of a narrative history of one aspect of western literature.”

Expressing the inextricable relationship between philology and history was Auerbach’s ultimate goal: “Turning a point of momentous cultural change upon a pivot of syntax (along with its meaning, of course) was an art he had fashioned for himself out of the welter of philological precisionism and Hegelian flight of visionary grandiosity.” His “initial concern . . . as a literary scholar is to read literary documents in terms of the historical conditions that they immediately reflect and express, to read them, that is, in the light of their positive moments and stages.” In “Figura,” he developed “the great insight of his life”; namely, figural interpretation, the view “that all interpretation of Christian literature, as well as exact exegesis, depended on an assumed

594 Calin, Twentieth-Century Humanist Critics, p. 52. Note that in 1918, Spitzer wrote Anti-Chamberlain against H. Stewart Chamberlain’s racist works. He remarked that his response was “the purely scholarly protest of an academic specialist” and needed as an antidote to “the toxins of race hatred.” See Hartman, Scholar’s Tale, p. 182.
598 Ziołkowski, “Foreword,” pp. xii, xv.
600 Breslin, “Philosophy or Philology,” p. 380.
and traditional Christian doctrine that the New Testament is elaborately and fully an historical
typological fulfillment of the Old."601 This insight was the source, in part, of his famous
statement: “My purpose is always to write history”; meaning: “I never approach a text as an
isolated phenomenon. I address a question to it, and my question, not the text, is my primary
point of departure” (LLP, 20; emphasis added).602

For Auerbach, then, “the language of both literary and nonliterary text is a key to the
conception of everyday reality in particular time and place.”603 In contrast to Spitzer, but in clear
parallel with contemporary exiles Hans Baron, Karl Popper, and Leo Strauss, or Curtius, who
lived his “inner emigration” in Germany during the Nazi regime, philology in “Figura” and
Mimesis is an endless Kulturkampf and contributes to idiosyncratic interpretations and canonical
reconstructions.604

Auerbach believed that the study of philology should serve humanist aims and values,
especially in face of Nazi barbarism. No wonder that early in his life, he adopted a “Goethean
humanism” (PW, 2), closely following the views of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832),
who believed that Weltliteratur meant “universal literature, or literature which expresses
Humanität, humanity,” and that “this expression is literature’s ultimate purpose.”605

Weltliteratur, Auerbach wrote, “considers humanity to be the product of fruitful intercourse
between its members” (PW, 2). Philology plays a crucial humanist function and is a crucial field
of study. One of the main reasons Auerbach turned to “Goethean humanism” was historicism, a

602 According to W. Wolfgang Holdheim in “Auerbach’s Mimesis: Aesthetic as Historical Understanding,” Clio, 10
(1981), p. 143, the right translation should be: “again and again I have the purpose of writing history.”
604 According to Wellek, “Review: Auerbach’s Special Realism,” pp. 304-5, “Mr. Auerbach’s extreme reluctance to
define his terms,” such as realism, “and to make his supposition clear from the outset … certainly would open the
door to unlimited idiosyncrasies.” For the idiosyncratic interpretations of Baron, Popper, and Strauss, see David
Weinstein and Zakai, “Exile and Interpretation: Reinventing European Intellectual History in the Age of Tyranny”
(forthcoming).
view that assigns a central, basic significance to specific historical, ideological, and cultural contexts in studying literary works. “Historicism was nothing other than the discovery that human life and society found whatever meaning they might possess in history, not in any metaphysical beyond or transcendental religious realm.” Goethe, wrote Auerbach, “contributed decisively to the development of historicism and to the philological research that was generated by it.” This view was one source of Auerbach’s concept of “historicist humanism.” World literature, he wrote, “is indebted to the impulse given” to it by “ historicist humanism,” or the search for the “inner history of mankind” (PW, 2-4). Since publication of the works of Vico and German philosopher, theologian, poet, and literary critic Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803), Auerbach continues, it “has been the true purpose of philology” (emphasis added). Auerbach became an avid follower of historicism, which sees “man not only immersed in history but always relative to his historical position.” He believed that “because of this purpose philology became the dominant branch of the humanities” (PW, 2-4). Auerbach’s historicism also stemmed from Germans Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) and Friedrich Meinecke (1862-1954), who held “the conviction that every civilization and every period has its own possibilities of aesthetic perfection,” and from Vico, “that every age has its characteristic unity.” Overall, as Wellek wrote, historicism was for Auerbach a “secular religion.”

606 On the impact of historicism on Auerbach’s thought and philology, see Breslin, “Philosophy or Philology,” pp. 369-81; Frank R. Ankersmit, “Why Realism? Auerbach on the Representation of Reality,” Poetic Today, 20 (Spring 1999), in which he argues that Auerbach’s historicism was influenced by the “historicist historical writing” of Friedrich Meinecke and “classical historicism as developed by Ranke, Humboldt, or Dilthey” (p. 54).  
608 Wellek, German, Russian, and Eastern European Criticism, p. 120.  
610 Wellek, German, Russian, and Eastern European Criticism, p. 134.  
611 Ibid., p. 131.
Needless to say, Aryan philology, based on the mythologies of Blood, Heroes, Volk, and Soil, radically deviated from this ideal.

Furthermore, following the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who, in 1784, coined the famous dictum: “Enlightenment is mankind’s exit from its self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to make use of one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. ... Sapere Aude! [dare to know] Have courage to use your own understanding! That is the motto of enlightenment.” Auerbach argued, “The inner history of the last thousand years is the history of mankind achieving self-expression: this is what philology, a historicist discipline, treats. This history contains the records of man’s mighty adventurous advance to a consciousness of his human condition and to the realization of his given potential” (PW, 4-5; emphasis added).

Like Kant, who claimed that his idealist philosophy constituted a “Copernican Revolution” in philosophy, Auerbach declared that “historicism” is “the Copernican discovery in the cultural sciences” (LLP, 10). At the same time, he “did go so far as to call historicism’s enrichment of the human adventure, its revelation of diversity, an inspiring scholarly myth: only a myth, that is, but one valid to his time.”

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613 See Kant, “Preface” to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787), where he states: “Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them a priori, by means of concepts, have, on this assumption, ended in failure. We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge. This would agree better with what is desired, namely, that it should be possible to have knowledge of objects a priori, determining something in regard to them prior to their being given. We should then be proceeding precisely on the lines of Copernicus’ primary hypothesis. Failing of satisfactory progress in explaining the movements of the heavenly bodies on the supposition that they all revolved round the spectator, he tried whether he might not have better success if he made the spectator to revolve and the stars to remain at rest. A similar experiment can be tried in metaphysics, as regards the intuition of objects.” See, [http://staffweb.hkbu.edu.hk/PPP/cpr/prefs.html](http://staffweb.hkbu.edu.hk/PPP/cpr/prefs.html), and Kant, *Critique of pure reason*, trans. and eds. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), p. 110.
614 Hartman, *Scholar’s Tale*, p. 179.
Philology, history, and humanism were inseparable in Auerbach’s mind. Following Vico, he argued that through “the manifold expressions of linguistic activity the historical dimension of human existence makes itself known to men.” During the rise and triumph of Nazism in Germany, he believed that the study of philology as a humanist enterprise was needed more urgently than ever. He declared, “our philological home is the earth: it can no longer be the nation,” and pleaded, as did Curtius, to return to the Middle Ages when Geist was “not national”: “We must return … to the knowledge that prenational medieval culture already possessed: the knowledge that that the spirit is not national” (PW, 17). Amid the struggle against Nazism and Aryanism, Auerbach and Curtius, as Geoffrey Hartman wrote, are “restorative scholars” — philologists who strove to rescue European humanist tradition by reconstructing European literary history.

Humanism stood in clear contrast to Nazi racism and barbarism. We can of course adduc ample evidence of German barbarism; for example, the thought of Spengler (1880-1936), who wrote in The Duties of German Youth (1924): “Who cannot hate is no Man, and history is made by Men. That we Germans can at last hate is one of the few results of this period which holds no promise for the future.” In his last publication, Jahre der Entscheidung (The Hour of Decision, 1933), he wrote: “The ancient barbarism which has been held down for centuries … is waking again with a warlike delight in its own strength. This barbarism is what I call strong Race … the eternal warlike in the type of the beast of prey – Man. The only form-giving power is the warlike ‘Prussian’ spirit; not only in Germany the legions of Caesar march again.” We should examine Auerbach’s “Figura” and Mimesis against this barbarian, military spirit.

615 Breslin, “Philosophy or Philology,” p. 372.
616 Hartman, Scholar’s Tale, p. 167.
Philology and Ideology

[Auerbach] does not leave the present behind. The study of history comprises not just what lies in the past but what remains actual.


The need to constitute authentic texts manifests itself typically when a society becomes conscious of having achieved a high level of civilization, and desires to preserve from the ravages of time the works that constituted its spiritual patrimony.

Auerbach, *Introduction aux Etudes de Philology Romane* (1949)

The Old Testament as a book of religious instruction must be abolished once and for all. With it will end the unsuccessful attempts of the last one-and-a-half millennia to make us all spiritual Jews.


In 1949, Leo Spitzer wrote that “the admirable work of Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis,*” was “written by a German in exile without any resentment against current German movements.” Spitzer, who “admired Auerbach’s broad *humanistische Bildung,*” could not have been more wrong. Auerbach was very sensitive to the political and social transformations in Weimar and Nazi Germany and an acute observer of the horrors of the history of his time. Spitzer’s assessment is based evidently on his own inclination to avoid political questions in “the enchanted garden of literary history” and to deal only with the “philological circle,” or *Weltanschauung*, or the strict confines of linguistic, philology, and literary history. For Spitzer, the “philological circle” means “the continuous movement of the interpreter’s mind from the text at hand to the context of

620 Spitzer, “Introduction,” pp. 1, 24. On the definition of Spitzer’s philological circle as moving “from the detail to the whole and then back to the details,” see Wellek, “Leo Spitzer (1887-1960),” p. 315.
widening awareness and back again.”

Auerbach’s “‘philosophical circle’ transcends Spitzer’s stilforschung [research of styles]”; he embraced the “historical sociology of literature”; namely, “historical process and change.” Spitzer therefore “considered Auerbach’s emphasis, in contrast with his own, to be socio-historical rather than strictly stylistic.” While Spitzer “starts with the analysis of a detail, assuming that the whole of the work is still unknown to him,” Auerbach “starts with an unrivaled knowledge” of the work. During the 1930s, both Auerbach and Curtius moved more and more in the direction of historicist philology in their struggle against Aryan philology; Spitzer always focused on “the ultimate unity of linguistic and literary history.” Auerbach and Curtius moved away from national literary history to emphasize a broader, unified European literary history against narrow nationalism, racism, and Nazism; Spitzer believed that “the best document of the soul of a nation is its literature.”

Whatever Spitzer’s view, Auerbach was not an ivory tower scholar. As Arthur Evans writes, “Auerbach’s writing is, first and foremost, that of an historian and critic of culture in the tradition of Jakob Burckhardt and German Kulturgeschichte; beneath the surface of scholarly detachment and aristocratic urbanity there is a pathos, an urgency of involvement born of a passionate commitment to the variety of attitudes and the shared values and assumptions of Western civilization.” Auerbach believed this task was related not only to the past but also to the present: “we must today attempt to form a lucid and coherent picture of this civilization and its unity. I have always tried, more and more resolutely as time went on, to work in this direction,

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622 Calin, Twentieth-Century Humanist Critics, pp. 44-45.


626 Ibid., p. 10; emphasis added.

627 Evans, “Erich Auerbach as European Critic,” pp. 200-1.
at least in my approach to the subject matter of philology, namely literary expression” (*LLP*, 6; emphasis added).

Upholding the unity of European civilization became Auerbach’s ultimate goal against the crisis of German philology.\(^{628}\) Note that in his first book, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World* (1929), he adhered to traditional German literary historiography, claiming that “European literature” began “in Greece.”\(^{629}\) By 1942, when he began writing *Mimesis*, the picture had changed radically; he claimed that Greek pagan culture produced the Homeric, unrealistic, legendary, and irrational style, which stood in contrast to the historic, realist, and rational style of the Hebrew Bible.

In contrast to the common view of *Mimesis*’s literary space extending between Homer and Virginia Woolf, Auerbach argued that his conception was based on the history of European literature “from Genesis all the way to Virginia Woolf” (*M*, 563; emphasis added). This difference is not merely stylistic but a major, crucial, ideological, epistemological stand — the re-assertion of the credibility, authority, and validity of the Old Testament in the humanist culture of Western civilization. His aim in “Figura” and *Mimesis* was not “only a literary inimitable masterpiece of individual, and in some other ways peculiar, interpretation of one great tradition of Western culture, but also an affirmation, while in exile in Turkey, of a complex” and “passionate attitude toward that culture.”\(^{630}\) Nonetheless, *Mimesis* does begin with Odysseus and end with Ulysses [Odysseus], signaling the decline of the West and the eventual return to paganism after two terrible world wars.

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\(^{628}\) According to Hartman, *Scholar’s Tale*, p. 166, *Mimesis* provides “a generous conception of the unity of European literature, shaped by its capacity to absorb the imaginaries of two very different civilizations.”


\(^{630}\) Nelson, “Erich Auerbach: Memoir of a Scholar,” p. 312.
Against Aryan philology’s elimination of the Old Testament from the Christian Western canon in general and German cultural and religious life in particular, Auerbach strove to show that it is not a mere Book of Laws dealing only with the narrow, ethnic, national history of Israel, as Aryan philology claimed, but most of all a prophetic book, a promise, containing a long series of sacred prophecies, such as the suffering and redemption of Christ. Christ’s life and message, the central theme in the Christian drama of salvation, are prefigured in the Old Testament since both are situated in the sacred dimension of time that moves from a promise in the Old Testament to its realization in the New. Through figural, typological interpretation, the Old Testament became once again inextricable from the New Testament and vice versa and thus from the history of Christian Europe as a whole. This ideology, humanist ideology, directed the writing of “Figura” and Mimesis.

A careful reader of Auerbach’s works will recognize that the power or influence of the Old Testament is not seriously discussed in the 1929 book on Dante, yet it is the heart of “Figura” and Mimesis. Changing historical circumstances led to the creation of very different works of literary history. Indeed, Dante: Poet of the Secular World presents no serious analysis of Old Testament events and heroes but discusses the influence of the classical world, Christianity, and Thomas Aquinas’s theology and philosophy on Western culture in general and Dante in particular. In “Figura” and Mimesis, the Old Testament is given a crucial, momentous role in the development of European culture and literature; moreover, Auerbach claims its superiority over classical culture in that it provides the content and form for European identity and its unique sense of time and vision of history. “Figura” and Mimesis cannot be separated from the politics of philology in Auerbach’s time or the struggle against Arian philology. To Auerbach, philology, politics, and ideology were inextricable. In the age of Aryan philology and Nazi tyranny,
humanist ideology led to the historization of philology, historicist humanist philology, the hallmark of “Figura” and *Mimesis*.

Confronting the premises of Aryan philology led Auerbach to interpretation, and interpretation led him to construct a magisterial new vision of European literary history based, not on racism, chauvinism, and nationalism, but universalism, or humanism founded upon the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Failing to understand that *Mimesis* has a clear, coherent ideological agenda, a philological and humanist ideology, seriously hinders us from understanding its unique form, content, structure, and texture. German barbarism drove Auerbach to exile, but, as for his beloved poet Dante or Popper and Baron in his own time, exile led to important new discoveries and to confrontation. Auerbach found his great mission in exile, a vocation that was not purely philological but humanistic and historical. Philology became an important ideological tool, a weapon in combating Aryan and Nazi racism. In this context, “Figura” and *Mimesis* are a project of European humanism.

To present and to analyze the great transformation of Auerbach’s mind in exile, we must first understand his life in Germany and the rise of Aryan philology. Next, I will explore his study of Dante, which raised many important themes and motives that he later incorporated in *Mimesis*: *realism* and *representation of reality*. Finally, I will explore the crisis of his existential exilic displacement, which led him to turn to the field of comparative literature; in exile, he confronted and attacked Aryan philology head-on.
In Auerbach’s experience, individuality as fate emerges out of the inevitably tragic sphere of everyday life. Hans Ullrich Gumbrecht, “‘Pathos of the Earthly Progress’: Erich Auerbach’s Everydays” (1996)

From his sketch of his life it should appear that he [Stendhal] first reached the point of accounting for himself, and the point of realistic writing, when he was seeking a haven in his ‘storm-tossed boat,’ and discovered that, for his boat, there was no fit and safe haven.

Auerbach, “In the Hôtel De La Mole,” Mimesis

Erich Auerbach was born in Berlin on 9 November 1892, the only son of a prosperous and distinguished Prussian Jewish merchant family: “I am Prussian and of Jewish faith” he wrote in 1921. He was “a member of the humanly liberal, financially comfortable, Prussian-Jewish haute bourgeoisie. His father bore the honorary title of Kommerzienrat [German honorary roughly translated as Councilor of Commerce], conferred by Wilhelmina Germany upon her distinguished financiers, industrialists, and business executives.” Young Auerbach received his preliminary education in the capital’s prestigious French Lycée (Französisches Gymnasium), famous for its rigorous training in classical studies and reading and writing French. He benefited from its “strong program of classical studies, and learned to speak French fluently and to write forcefully.” From 1910-1913, after completing his secondary studies, he studied law in Berlin, Freiburg, Munich, and Heidelberg and had the time and leisure to travel in Europe as well. In

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633 Evans, “Erich Auerbach as European Critic,” p. 212.
1913, at the age of twenty-one, he received the Doctor of Law degree, *doctor juris*, from the University of Heidelberg, with a thesis on criminal law that “was devoted to a program of reform in German penal law.” Then, as Auerbach wrote, he “undertook further journeys abroad and began in early 1914 to study Romance philology in Berlin.” Actually, “in the last year before the war, I transferred to the School of Humanities and began my studies” at “Berlin.” Before the outbreak of World War I, he had already renounced law for the study of literature, completing most of the requisites toward a doctorate in Roman philology at the University of Berlin. One of the reasons, no doubt, was that “Auerbach saw Roman philology as holding an unparalleled promise” because of its “potential to demonstrate a basic unity in European culture.”

From 1914-1918, Auerbach’s studies were interrupted by army service. He volunteered as an infantryman, fought in northern France, and in April 1918, severely injured his foot and was awarded a second-grade military medal. After the war, he continued Romance Studies in Berlin and with the transfer of his adviser Erhard Lommatzsch to the University of Greifswald, was “allowed to present” his dissertation, *The Technique of the Early Renaissance Novelle in Italy and France [Zur Technik der Frührenaissancenovelle in Italien und Frankreich]” to that university faculty.” He received his PhD in 1921.

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636 Auerbach, *curriculum vitae*, p. 313.
637 Gumbrecht, “‘Pathos of the Earthly Progress,’” p. 28.
638 Ziolkowski, “Foreword,” p. xvi; emphasis added.
640 Auerbach, *curriculum vitae*, p. 313.
During the Weimar Republic (1919-1933), Jewish origin was considered an obstacle to obtaining academic appointment, which may explain why Auerbach did not look for such a job. Instead, in 1923, he took a position as a librarian, Bibliotheksrat – a senior civil service rank – on the staff of the Prussian State Library in Berlin and served from 1923 to 1929. There, he met other Jewish scholars of his generation, such as Walter Benjamin (1892-1940). At thirty-one, he married Marie Mankiewitz; their only son, Clemens, was born later that year. These six years proved most productive and included an abridged translation of Vico’s *The New Science* (1924) as well as a collaborative translation of Benedetto Croce’s introductory study of Vico, *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* (1927). The Italian political philosopher, rhetorician, historian, and jurist exercised enormous influence on Auerbach, not the least, as Auerbach wrote, because Vico argued that the “entire development of human history, as made by men, is potentially contained in the human mind, and may therefore, by a process of research and revocation, be understood by men.” This observation is clearly the source for the essential and unique link in Auerbach’s thought between philology and humanism, literature, and history.

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642 Later in his life, Auerbach joked that “his parents – of the high bourgeoisie – secured for him a sinecure [a position requiring little or no work] in the National Library in Berlin. So, [with that wonderful smile], having nothing to do, I wrote a book on Dante and translated Vico. Then they asked me to be Professor of Romance Philology in Marburg. Me! What did I know about that? So, I read up on it over the summer.” Calin, letter to the author, 10 July 2011.


During his stay at the Prussian State Library, Auerbach completed his *Habilitationsschrift*, which he published as *Dante: Poet of the Secular World* (1929). As Auerbach wrote, he “spent 7 years at the Staatsbibliothek, and was almost 38 when I brought out the [study on] Dante and arrived at the university” of Marburg.\(^{645}\) He took the motto for the study from Heraclitus of Ephesus: “A man’s character is his fate,” which shows that, for Auerbach “Dante was the first European poet who had painted characters in their individuality.”\(^{646}\) However, this motto, suggesting, among other things, that our character is the basis of our misery, clearly did not apply to Auerbach himself, for soon his life was engulfed and eventually shattered by the great social and political transformation taking place in Germany and Europe – the rise and triumph of fascism, National Socialism, Hitlerism, and totalitarianism. As Auerbach soon learned, his fate was not based solely upon his own character. To the contrary, his life and career were forcefully and radically determined by ethnic, racist considerations and anti-Semitism. In contrast to the motto, in Auerbach’s experience, “individuality as fate emerges out of the inevitably tragic sphere of everyday life.”\(^{647}\)

With the success and wide recognition of his book on Dante, Auerbach was appointed professor (*ordinarius* – professor with a chair representing the area in question) and chair of Romance philology at the University of Marburg, succeeding Leo Spitzer, who went to the University of Cologne.\(^{648}\) He was then thirty-seven years old and would spend only six years as a professor in Germany. After Hitler was elected Chancellor in 1933, a law was passed that barred Jews from holding official positions. This law, “Law for the Re-Establishment of Professional

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\(^{645}\) Auerbach, letter to Dr. Martin Hellweg, 22 May 1939, in “Scholarship in the Age of Extremes,” p. 755.

\(^{646}\) Gumbrecht, “‘Pathos of the Earthly Progress,’” p. 20.

\(^{647}\) Ibid., p. 32.

\(^{648}\) According to Bremmer in “Erich Auerbach and His Mimesis,” p. 4, during 1929, Auerbach “was transferred to the University Library at Marburg, then recommended for *Habilitation* on the basis” of his book on Dante, and only later, in 1930, “was appointed chairman of the Department of Romance Philology.”
Civil Service,” was part of “a comprehensive legal policy aimed at diminishing the presence of the Jews in the German public, especially ‘in professions that shape and express the essence of Germandom, the Aryan character,’ such as schools and institutions of higher learning, and also in the areas of law, medicine and art.” Auerbach was dismissed from his post in 1935 and went into exile in Turkey in 1936 to teach at Istanbul State University. There, he launched his systematic repudiation of Arian philology and Nazi historiography, first in the essay “Figura” (1938), and culminating in the majestic *Mimesis* of 1946. He eventually emerged from this agonizing exilic experience as a scholar of comparative literature.

He arrived in the fall. Turkey was the only place that offered him an academic job that would allow him to escape Nazi Germany with his wife and young son; he replaced Spitzer at Istanbul State University after the latter went to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Auerbach spent the next eleven years as chair of Turkey’s “leading faculty for Western language and literature.” In a 1938 letter to the Romanist Karl Vossler, he wrote that “the bread of exile … tastes salty,” quoting Dante. He must have felt “the deep loneliness of exile.” Indeed, according to Edward Said, who also knew firsthand the misery of exilic displacement, exile is above all “life led outside habitual order”; it “is like death but without death’s ultimate mercy, it has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family, and geography.” More specifically, for us “who were exiled from the Third Reich,” wrote Jean Améry (1912 – 1978), exile meant misery: “What misery. Whoever didn’t know it was taught later by daily life in exile that the etymology of the German word for misery” implies “misery.” For exiles “there is no

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650 Konuk, *East West Mimesis*, pp. 3-4.
‘new home.’ *Home is the land of one’s childhood and youth. Whoever lost it remains lost himself.*  

Hence, “exile’s predicament” is “as close as we come in the modern era to tragedy.” At Yale University during the 1950s, Auerbach told Hartman a sad “anecdote of a concert violinist, a refugee like himself, who complained that in America his violin emitted a different tone.”

However, the hard existential experience could be a forge for new goals and missions. Dante and Machiavelli wrote their most significant works in exile, *The Divine Comedy* (1308-1321) and the *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy* (*Discorsi*, 1517), respectively. In 1938, Auerbach wrote that his challenge in exile was “to find a point of departure (*Ausgangspunkt*) for those historical forces that can be set against it.” “Figura,” which he published in 1938, should be seen as a point of departure; namely, the discovery of the Christian figural interpretation of history; and later, *Mimesis* was structured so that “each part of the investigation” or chapter “raises problems of its own and demands its points of departure” (*LLP*, 20).

In early 1937, Auerbach complained about the “whole monstrous mass of difficulties” he encountered in Turkey as well as the “troubles, cross-purposes, and misarrangements on the part of local authorities that drive some colleagues to despair.” He grumbled that “as far as research goes, my work is entirely primitive,” and that although “wonderfully situated,” the city was “also unpleasant and . . . rough.” Like so many other exiles, he lived “a life in translation.” Exiles crossed “from one meaning of Übersetzung [translation] to the other, from

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659 Ibid., p. 750.
one Übersetzung to another Übersetzung.\textsuperscript{660} In the words of George Steiner, it “seems proper that those who create art in civilization of quasi-barbarism, which has made so many homeless, should themselves be poets unhoused and wanderers across language.”\textsuperscript{661}

After two years in Istanbul, Auerbach began an agonizing, soul-searching quest for a mission, a grand errand that would mitigate his hardships, sustain his life as an exile, and, above all, provide some meaning and significance. Writing in October 1938, he first reveals a deep atavistic urge to face head-on the “evil that’s happening” around him and the world as he knew it. In a letter to Traugott Fuchs (1906-1997), Spitzer’s doctoral assistant, who also lived in Istanbul, he claimed: “The challenge is not to grasp and digest all the evil that’s happening – that’s not difficult – but much more to find a point of departure (Ausgangspunkt) for those historical forces that can be set against it.” The philologist gradually became an ideologist, a man more than willing to enlist his skills and scholarship against the evil forces surrounding him. He continued: all “those who today want to serve the right and the true are united only in negative – in matters active and positive they are weak and splintered.”\textsuperscript{662} No ivory tower academic, he is ready to use his pen as a weapon against the horrors of his time.

The historical reasons for such an important transformation are not hard to explain. In March 1938, Austria was occupied and annexed (Anschluss) to Nazi Germany,\textsuperscript{663} and on the first of October, the German Army invaded Czechoslovakia and occupied the Sudetenland. Nazi barbarity was no longer confined to Germany itself but expanded by military might and aggression into other countries in Europe. On 9-10 November, Kristallnacht, or the Night of

\textsuperscript{660} Seyhan, “German Academic Exiles in Istanbul,” p. 286.
\textsuperscript{661} Quoted in Said, Reflections on Exile and Other Essays, p. 174.
\textsuperscript{662} Auerbach, letter to Traugott Fuchs, 22 October 1938, p. 752.
\textsuperscript{663} For a description of the occupation and annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany in general, and of the sad and tragic fate of the Jews there in particular, see Edmund de Wall, The Hare with the Amber Eyes: A Family’s Century of Art and Loss (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), chaps. 24-26.
Broken Glass, fully revealed Nazi sadism in a series of coordinated pogroms and attacks against Jews throughout Germany and parts of Austria. At least 91 Jews were killed and 30,000 arrested and incarcerated in concentration camps. Jewish homes, hospitals, and schools were ransacked; the attackers demolished buildings with sledgehammers. Over 1,000 synagogues were burned, 95 in Vienna alone, and over 7,000 Jewish businesses destroyed or damaged. No event in the history of German Jewry between 1933 and 1945 was so widely reported as it was happening, and the accounts from foreign journalists working in Germany sent shock waves around the world.

In the gloom and desperation of late 1938, Auerbach was looking specifically for some “historical forces” that could fight German barbarism: “To seek for them in myself, to trace them down in the world[,] completely absorbs me,” he confessed, yet the “old forces of resistance” such as “churches, democracies, education, economic laws – are useful and effective only if they are renewed and activated through a new force not yet visible to me” (emphasis added).

Traditional, institutional modes of resistance no longer fit. Europe desperately needed a humanist renewal. He admitted that he knew “well what the most general rules and direction of the expected renewal must be,” but his main concern was not knowing what to do exactly, “concretely,” to face the expansion of German barbarism in Europe. This direction, he wrote, “is now hidden not only from me but from everyone who cares for the dignity and freedom of man.” Puzzled and confused, he claimed he could not completely turn “away from world events” as did so many people he knew. “I cannot do that. I am too deeply convinced of the historical order.” On the other hand, he had learned “too much (from life and from books) to allow myself to be deceived by illusory hopes.”

664 Auerbach, letter to Traugott Fuchs, 22 October 1938, pp. 752-55.
In June 1939, two months before Germany invaded Poland and World War II began, Auerbach wrote that in spite of “no lack of uncertainty and restlessness even now … life is for the time being enchanting here – Only books, that is, a usable U[iversity] L[ibrary] is lacking, and travel is impossible.” In a few weeks, the whole of civilized Europe was engulfed in a fierce war, devastated, trodden under the hordes of German barbarism. Nazism and fascism had the upper hand against humanist thought and belief. In this very dark moment, Auerbach assumed a “combative stance” in writing *Mimesis*. By 1942, he had finally found his unique voice, based on his epiphany in Istanbul, according to which he would provide an overarching humanist apology or defense of Western humanist civilization constructed in the form of a grand book analyzing Western literary realism.

After the war, Auerbach emigrated to the United States of America in 1947, teaching at Pennsylvania State University and then working at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton. He was made a Professor of Romance philology at Yale University in 1950, a position he held until his death in 1957.

Exile was inextricable from interpretation and *vice versa* in Auerbach’s mind and works. While in exile, he evidently considered how this condition can lead to revelation, creation, confrontation, and interpretation. One of the best examples, naturally the one dearest to him, was

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665 Auerbach, letter to Dr. Martin Hellweg, 22 May 1939, p. 756. Later in life, Auerbach said that in Turkey “I needed texts even if I could do without scholarship. There was a Greek monastery on a hill; in the library was the entire Patrologia Latina. So I climbed the hill every morning and came down every evening.” Calin, letter to the author, 10 July 2011. Compare Niccolò Machiavelli’s words about his exile in a letter to his friend Francesco Vettori, 10 December 1513: “When evening comes, I return home and go to my study. On the threshold, I strip naked, taking off my muddy, sweaty work day clothes, and put on the robes of court and palace, and, in this graver dress, I enter the courts of the ancients, and am welcomed by them, and there I taste the food that alone is mine, and for which I was born. And there I make bold to speak to them and ask the motives of their actions, and they, in their humanity, reply to me. And for the space of four hours I forget the world, remember no vexation, fear poverty no more, tremble no more at death; I pass indeed into their world.” See “Machiavelli’s letter to Francesco Vettori,” 10 December 1513, in *Machiavelli and His Friends: Their Personal Correspondence*, eds. David Sices et al (DeKalb, Ill: Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 1996), pp. 262-265.
Dante’s life and work. Dante wrote the *Divine Comedy* in exile from Florence, and like “Figura” and *Mimesis*, it bears the signs of its author’s sad, devastating experience as well a great revelation of his new mission and goal in life, transforming it into a great source of creation and confrontation. While in the *Comedy* Dante fought many who drove him from his beloved Florence, condemning some to eternal damnation, “Figura” and *Mimesis* attack the barbaric, racist, anti-humanistic premises of Aryan philology and Nazi barbarism that led to the murder of million civilians and world war. In the midst of the sorrows and sadness of exile, both authors had their individual epiphanies, finding their mission and their solace against the horrors of their time.
The Crisis of German Philology:  
Aryan Philology and the Elimination of the Old Testament

We expect our national Churches to shake themselves free of all that is un-German, in particular the Old Testament and its Jewish morality and rewards.

olution of the German Christians, rally at Berlin Sportpalast, 13 November 1933

Did Christianity arise out of Judaism being thus its continuation and completion, or does it stand in opposition to Judaism? To this question we respond: Christian faith is the unbridgeable religious contradiction to Judaism.

“The Godesberg Declaration,” Evangelical Lutheran Church, 4 April 1939

Elimination of Jewish influence on German life is the urgent and fundamental question of the present German religious situation … the de-Judaization of Christianity would continue the work of the Lutheran Reformation.

Walter Grundmann, 1939

Philology, the study of language in written historical sources, combines literary studies, history, and linguistics. It is the branch of knowledge that deals with the structure, historical development, and relationships of a language or languages, a discipline that attempts to establish the historical specificity of any text. As the study of literary texts and written records, it works to establish their authenticity and original form and to determine their meaning. The term describes the study of a language together with its literature and the historical and cultural contexts indispensable for understanding literary works and other culturally significant texts. It comprises the interpretation of authors and study of the grammar, rhetoric, history, and critical traditions associated with a given language. During the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, it was inextricable from such ideological and historical transformations as the
rise of Aryanism, racism, anti-Semitism, and Nazism in Europe: “philology is war by other means.”

During the nineteenth century, European philologists and historians searched for new origins of Western civilization as an alternative to the traditional Judaeo-Christian tradition. “The publication, in Europe, of the Sanskrit language and of its connection with the classical language of Europe was the catalyst for the whole post-Enlightenment quest for the Indo-Europeans that continues, unresolved, to this day.” The quest for Indo-Europeans began at the end of the eighteenth century, when English philologist and scholar of ancient India William Jones (1746-1794) “discovered the similarities between the European languages” and the “Sanskrit and Persian” languages, thus laying “the foundation for the hypothesis of an Indo-European language [Indo-Germanische] affinity and an Indo-European primal population.”

The historical linguistic construction of Indo-Europeans had tremendous implications for the Judaeo-Christian tradition: “Now it was no longer the authority of the Bible, but that of comparative linguistics that supported the new people.” The Indo-European hypothesis was formulated in this broad historical, philological context, and Aryan philology developed. The interest in “the Indo-Europeans” and “the Aryans” stemmed – and still stems – “from a will to create alternatives to those identities that have been provided by tradition,” or the Judaeo-

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669 Ibid., p. 60.
670 Aryanism and Orientalism were closely connected in Germany during the nineteenth century as Suzanne L. Marchand shows in her important study, German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). See also “Nazism, Orientalism and Humanism,” in Nazi Germany and the Humanities, ed. W. Bialas and A. Rabinbach (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), pp. 267-305.
Christian tradition. Research about the “Indo-Europeans and their culture and religion [was] used” in Europe “in the service of various ideological interests.”

Philology was inextricable from ideology and eventually powerfully transformed the course of history. Aryan philology “became the primitive homeland of Western man in search of legitimation.” Conversely, the rise of Indo-European research during the nineteenth century tried to provide “answers to a series of questions that first became urgent in the nineteenth century, questions pertaining to the origins and vocation of a Western world in search of a national, political, and religious identity.”

During the first half of the twentieth century, Aryan philology had tremendous influence on, among other things, Nazi and Third-Reich racial and anti-Semitic policies. Particularly in Germany, it strove to shape new Aryan origins of the German people and their history and to eliminate the Old Testament from the Christian canon. Philology was inextricable, not only from ideology and history in Germany, but from racial anthropology. Germany witnessed the “transformation of nineteenth century scholarly studies of philology into racist and even genocidal rant in the twentieth century.”

“The hypothesis that somewhere, sometime, an Indo-European race has existed has always been anchored in linguistic observation.” During the nineteenth and even more in the twentieth centuries, “racial anthropologists also began to discuss the Indo-Europeans” hypothesis; philology seeped into the field of anthropology, leading to “the growth and history of racial anthropology.” Furthermore, a transformation that “cannot be stressed enough” took place:

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671 Arvidsson, Aryan Idols, pp. xi, 4.
674 Arvidsson, Aryan Idols, p. 41.
“the shift from the Aryan or Indo-European ‘race’ of people as a linguistic family to a physical-genetic species.” By the end of the nineteenth century, “culturist philology was unable to prevent the word ‘race’ from being usurped by naturalist forces, and human beings came to be seen more and more as part of the necessary realm of nature, rather than the contingent realm of culture.”

The full depravity of Aryan racial anthropology was evident in Nazi Germany.

“From about 1940 to 1944,” historian Léon Poliakov wrote, “the most important differentiation between the inhabitants of Europe was that between Aryans and Semites: the former were permitted to live, the latter were condemned to die.” Earlier, thanks to the work of philologists and linguists, “the division between Aryans and Semites was accepted as a dogma by the majority of researchers” in Europe, and by “about 1860 this conviction was already a part of the intellectual baggage of all cultivated Europeans.” Linguistics imposed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries its “tyrannical influence” on “anthropology” and the other sciences and, in turn, crucially influenced the course of history. Philology became inextricable from existence since in the Third Reich, distinctions based on it condemned Jews to die.

Language use may not only nationalize and denationalize according to categories of Aryan and Semite but be used to indicate spurious “blood relationships” that justified murder, torture, and slavery in Nazi Germany and Europe generally during World War II.

During the nineteenth century, “scholars established the disciplines of Semitic and Indo-European” studies, inventing “the mythical figures of the Hebrew and the Aryan.” The invention of this “providential pair” revealed “to the people of Christianized West the secret of their identity” and “bestowed upon them the patent of nobility that justified their spiritual, religious,

675 Ibid., p. 61.
677 Ibid., pp. 255-56.
and political domination of the world." To describe "the earliest stage of human intelligence, philologists and mythologists invented" the categories of "Aryans and Semites." [T]he Indo-European hypothesis," in contrast to the traditional biblical hypothesis, "took the ultimate form," and "the Aryan-Semitic categories" greatly influenced "the human sciences throughout the nineteenth century."

The nineteenth-century discovery of Indo-Europeans "caused a furor that extended well beyond the discipline of comparative philology." All the human sciences from history to mythology "and soon to include ‘racial science,’ were affected by the discovery of the tongue [Sanskrit] that was known not only as Indo-European but also as Aryan." Thanks to the study of philology, or the science of language in which "philology and linguistics made common cause," scholars believed that they were now "in a position to make an accurate portrayal of prehistoric society." The categories of "Aryans and Semites" served "as a functional pair with a providential aspect, as elements of a theory of the origins of civilization." Throughout Europe, "the terms Aryan and Semite embarked on new ideological and political careers outside philology and physical anthropology." In this broad ideological, historical, and philological context, "the words Aryan and Semite became labels of life and death for millions of men, women, and children classed as one or the other."

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679 Olender, Language of Paradise, p. 20.
680 Ibid., pp. 2-3.
681 Ibid., pp. 7-8.
682 Ibid., p. 18; emphasis added.
684 Ibid., p. 18. As a young man in Vienna, Jean Améry, born Hanns Chaim Mayer, the Austrian-born essayist, read in the newspaper about the Nuremberg Laws, 1935, and immediately understood that “society had passed” a "sentence" on him “that henceforth I was a quarry of death.” At the “moment when I read the [Nuremberg] Laws, I did indeed already heard the death threat – better, the death sentence.” See, Jean Améry, “On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew,” 1966, in At the Mind’s Limits, pp. 85-9.
The first to spread “the doctrine of Indomania in Germany” was the Lutheran priest and pre-Romantic Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803),\(^{685}\) although the origins of Aryan philology in Germany may be traced to, among others, the polymath German biblical scholar and orientalist Paul de Lagarde (1827-1891), who promoted the idea of a new Germanic Christianity which could be cleansed or purged of its Jewish dross and therefore made appropriate for the German Volk. Jesus would find a place as the discoverer of eternal truth, as a pure human genius, and as a proclaimer of the Kingdom of God; but not as Jesus the Jew or the Jewish Messiah – these misconceptions arose from misunderstandings on the part of Jesus’ disciples, exacerbated by Paul’s Jewish Pharisaiic corruption of Jesus’ original message.\(^{686}\)

In theology, Lagarde was radically anti-Pauline. As for the Jews, he claimed: “Every Jew is a proof of the weakness of our national life and of the small worth of what we call the Christian religion.”\(^{687}\)

These Aryan, racist, anti-Semitic views were also advanced by Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855-1927), the British-born German author, whose 1899 book *Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (*The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*) became one of the main references for the early twentieth-century pan-Germanic movement and, later, *völkisch* anti-Semitism and Nazi racial policy. Its fifteen-hundred pages became “the new Bible of hundreds of

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\(^{687}\) Poliakov, *Aryan Myth*, p. 309. For an important study about the search for the historical Jesus in Germany during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* ([1906]; London: SCM Press, 2000).
thousands of Germans."\textsuperscript{688} Constructing Western history since the time of the Greeks in terms of a race struggle, "the chief prophet of Aryanism"\textsuperscript{689} argued that "only Aryans were regarded as being capable of creative culture" and that "the intermingling of Aryans with other races leads inevitably to decline." Further, being "the best representative of the western Aryan people," the Germans were "best placed to establish a new European order."\textsuperscript{690} In contrast, the Jews' "existence is sin, their existence is a crime against the holy laws of life."\textsuperscript{691} Chamberlain "spends around eighty pages in an attempt to prove the 'Aryanism' of Jesus."\textsuperscript{692} Scholars regard this book as pivotal in spreading the gospel of racism and anti-Semitism: "perhaps no book has contributed so much to the spreading of the anti-Jewish theory of race as this book, with its innocent-sounding title drawn from the philosophy of culture."\textsuperscript{693} Another historian described it as "this lofty bible of anti-Semitism."\textsuperscript{694}

Aryan philology exercised tremendous influence on the Nazi movement and the Third Reich. Proponents of this "'Germanic' ideology" aimed for "the revival of a mythical \textit{Deutschtum} and the creation of political institutions that would embody and preserve this peculiar character of the Germans."\textsuperscript{695} Its search for a non-Jewish or particularly Aryan Jesus was closely connected to the quest for the origins of the German people and creation of a new Germanic or Nordic Christianity.\textsuperscript{696} This quest began in Germany well before the establishment of the Nazi Party in

\textsuperscript{688} Poliakov, \textit{Aryan Myth}, p. 318.
\textsuperscript{689} Ibid., p. 313.
\textsuperscript{690} Head, "Nazi Quest," p. 64.
\textsuperscript{691} Poliakov, \textit{Aryan Myth}, p. 317.
\textsuperscript{692} Head, "Nazi Quest," p. 65.
\textsuperscript{694} Poliakov, quoted in Head, "Nazi Quest," p. 64.
\textsuperscript{695} Stern, \textit{Politics of Cultural Despair}, p. xiii.
\textsuperscript{696} On attempts to build a new Germanic or Nordic church in Nazi Germany, see Cardinal Michael von Faulhaber, \textit{Judaism, Christianity and Germany} (New York: Macmillan, 1934), p. 92; see also the important studies of Susannah Heschel, \textit{The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); "When Jesus was an Aryan," in \textit{Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust} (Minneapolis:
1919. It started with “the new biological and racial approaches that originated in the nineteenth century and grew in influence in Germany in the last three decades of that century,” the same decades when “a special word is coined and ‘anti-Semitism’ begins to be used for racial animosity against Jews.” Needless to say, the search for an Aryan Jesus in Germany ran counter to the work of major nineteenth-century scholars and philologists for whom “Christ remained a central figure in the conceptualization of Indo-European civilization.”

Aryan philology’s search for the Aryan Jesus was tied to major efforts in Germany to decanonize and exclude the Old Testament from Christian history in general and German culture and life in particular. “The Aryan Jesus was the confession of those who sought a teutonic brand of Christianity, rejecting the Old Testament and anything else that smacked of Jewish influence in the church.” This thrust can be clearly seen in the thought of the influential Nazi intellectual Alfred Rosenberg (1893-1946), one of the main authors of such Nazi creeds as racial theory, persecution of the Jews, and Lebensraum (habitat or, literally, living space).

Rosenberg was greatly influenced by Aryan philology. In Der Mythus des 20. Jahrhunderts (The Myth of the 20th Century, 1930), a book considered the Nazi manifesto with an influence second only to Hitler’s Mein Kampf, he argued: “History and the task of the future no longer signify the struggle of class against class … but the settlement between blood and blood, race and race, people and people. And that means the struggle of spiritual values against each other.” He claimed that “Humanity … divorced from the bond of blood” is “no longer absolute value for

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697 Head, “Nazi Quest,” p. 62. The term anti-Semitic or anti-Semite overwhelmingly refers to Jews only. It was coined in 1879 by the German journalist Wilhelm Marr (1819-1904) in a pamphlet called “The Way to Victory of Germanicism over Judaism.”


699 Heschel, “Reading Jesus as a Nazi,” p. 27.
More boldly, he declared: “Today, a new belief is arising: the Mythus of the blood, the belief that the godly essence of man itself is to be defended through the blood.” Rosenberg was greatly influenced by Chamberlain’s *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, where he found “the eternal Aryan values were contrasted to Judaeo-Christian depravity.” Hence, he declared: “The Old Testament as a book of religious instruction must be abolished once and for all. With it will end the unsuccessful attempts of the last one-and-a-half millennia to make us all spiritual Jews” (emphasis added). As for Jesus himself, Rosenberg followed Chamberlain and others in claiming “there is not the slightest reason to believe” that “Jesus was of Jewish ancestry.” He contemplated the creation of a National Reich Church based, not on the Bible, but on *Mein Kampf*: “The National Church demands immediate cessation of the publishing and dissemination of the Bible in Germany . . . The National Church declares that to it, and therefore to the German nation, it has been decided that the Führer’s *Mein Kampf* is the greatest of all documents … On the altars there must be nothing but *Mein Kampf*."

The struggle against the Jewish Bible and all Jewish influence reached its height after the Nazi Revolution of 1933, which signaled the triumph of Aryan philology in Germany. A mass rally organized Nazi Party-style by the German Christians – *(Deutsche Christen)* – on 13 November 1933 at the Berlin Sportpalast presents a clear example of the omnipresence of anti-Semitism fueled by the combined forces of Aryan philology and Nazi historiography. Officially organized in 1931 as the Nazi wing of the Evangelical Church, the movement developed during the 1920s

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701 Rosenberg, quoted in Head, “Nazi Quest,” p. 69.

702 Rosenberg, quoted in Marvin Olasky, “If we lose the battle [Dietrich Bonhoeffer on living in totalitarian times],” *http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/2549521/posts*. 
“as an effort to synthesize Christianity with a rabid German Nationalism.” It was formed “in 1921 for the racial survival and de-judaizing the Christian faith and had been represented in sundry Church parliaments.” In June 1932, its leaders published an ecclesiastical-political letter in Christliche Welt expressing their goals regarding the “rejection of the liberal spirit of the Judaic-Marxist ‘enlightenment,’” the “overthrow of humanitarianism born of the Judaic-Marxist spirit, with its resultant pacifism, internationalism, Christian world-citizenship, etc.,” and the “purification and preservation of the race.” The movement emphasized “Christ in the Community of Blood and Fate” in its 1933 guidelines, claiming: “Through God’s creation we have been put directly into the community of blood and fate of the German people and as the bearers of this fate we are responsible for its future. Germany is our task, Christ our strength.”

At the rally, before a packed hall of 20,000 supporters, banners proclaiming the unity of National Socialism and Christianity were interspersed with swastikas. Speakers addressed the crowd’s pro-Nazi sentiments with such ideas as the removal of all pastors unsympathetic to National Socialism and expulsion of members of Jewish descent. Not the least among these demands was “the removal of the Old Testament from the Bible” or the Christian canon and the adoption of a more “heroic” and “positive” interpretation of Jesus, who in pro-Aryan fashion should be portrayed as battling mightily against corrupt Jewish influences. A resolution was

705 Ibid., pp. 68-69.
706 Ibid., pp. 68-69.
passed: “We expect our national Churches to shake themselves free of all that is un-German, in particular the Old Testament and its Jewish morality and rewards”708 (emphasis added).

“Berlin’s vast Sportpalast rumbled one night last week with a great gathering of the ‘German Christians’” demanding “the super-Nazification of the Church,” according to Time magazine. “Their presiding officer was brisk, sleek, pomaded young Rev. Joachim Hossenfelder, Bishop of Berlin and Brandenburg,” yet the “prime hot-head was the Nazi Pastor Dr. Reinhold Krause, who was associated with the extreme wing of the Nazi movement. Meeting a few days after the 450th birthday of their Church’s founder, Martin Luther,” the Berlin rally “proceeded to juggle ecclesiastical dynamite.” Pastor Krause claimed German Protestantism needed a “‘second Reformation.’” He submitted three reforms, among them the “Elimination of the Old Testament and of ‘palpably misrepresenting or superstitious passages in the New Testament.’”709 He claimed that the Old Testament presented Jewish “commercial morality” and “unedifying stories of ‘cattle-dealers and pimps’” and rejected the theology of “Rabbi Paul.”710 The “meeting enthusiastically adopted a resolution supporting Dr. Krause’s reforms.”711 Indeed, many “Deutsche Christen theologians who were loyal to Nazi ideology rejected the OT precisely because they thought of it as a Jewish book.”712 For example, Ludwig Müller (1883-1945), leader of the German Christians and Reich’s Bishop (1933) of the German Evangelical Church,

708 The 13 November 1933 resolution of the German Christians appears in Cardinal Michael von Faulhaber, Judaism, Christianity and Germany, p. 35.
709 See http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,746354,00.html; emphasis added.
711 See http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,746354,00.html.
declared in 1934: “We must emphasize with all decisiveness that Christianity did not grow out of Judaism but developed in opposition to Judaism.”

In response to the triumph of Aryan philology after the Nazi Revolution of 1933, growing calls to eliminate the Old Testament from the German Christian canon, and the demands uttered in the mass rally, Cardinal Michael von Faulhaber (1869-1952) addressed the faithful congregated in a Munich cathedral in December 1933 on Advent Sunday, which introduces a season of waiting and preparation for the celebration of the nativity of Jesus at Christmas. The cardinal fiercely defended the Old Testament as an integral part of Christian tradition against Nazi and Aryan anti-Semitic readings, especially those advanced by Rosenberg and the Deutsche Christen. His greatest fears were the attacks on the validity and credibility of the Old Testament, the assertion that Jesus was not a Jew but an Aryan, and the grave threat toward the end of 1933 to establish in the Third Reich a “national church” free of Semitic taint, definitely Teutonic, and endowed with a special grant of favor from Hitler. In other words, he feared that in “the German nation a movement is afoot to establish a Nordic or Germanic religion, which is to take its place side by side with the two Christian [Catholic and Protestant] creeds.”

Cardinal Faulhaber began his first sermon by reminding the congregation that already in “the year 1899 on the occasion of an anti-Semitic demonstration in Hamburg, and simultaneously in Chamberlain’s book, The Foundation of the Nineteenth Century [1899], a demand was raised for the total separation of Judaism from Christianity, and for the complete elimination from Christianity of all Jewish elements.” Two decades later, he argued, these views had become

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713 Bergen, Twisted Cross, p. 21; emphasis original. For an important analysis of three distinguished, scholarly, and influential theologians who greeted the rise of Hitler with great enthusiasm and support, see Robert P. Ericksen, Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emanuel Hirsch (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).
714 Faulhaber, Judaism, Christianity and Germany, p. 92.
715 Ibid., p. 1.
widespread and propounded in many other books; for example, *The Sin against the Blood* (*Die Sünde wider das Blut*, 1917) by Artur Dinter (1876-1948), a German writer and Nazi politician who vividly set forth the racial- völkisch stereotypes of his time. The cardinal also mentioned *The Great Deception* (*Die große Täuschung*), published in two volumes in the early 1920s by Friedrich Delitzsch (1850-1922), a German Assyriologist and specialist in ancient Middle Eastern languages, remembered today for his scholarly critique of the Old Testament and its historical accuracy. Delitzsch called for the removal of the Old Testament from the Christian canon and assumed that Jesus was Aryan. In other works, he claimed the absolute superiority of “Babylonia” over “Israel” and that the Bible is devoid of religious and moral value. The third book mentioned in the cardinal’s sermon was *The False God* (*Der falsche Gott*, 1911) by Theodor Fritsch (1852-1933), a notorious and influential German political scientist, racist, and anti-Semite, who wrote that “the Jahve [sic] cult of the Old Testament is the deification of Jewish greed, egotism in the form of religion, which is bound to destroy the Germans.” Fritsch published anti-Semitic propaganda through his own publishing house, Hammer Verlag, in Leipzig, constantly attempting to demonstrate the moral inferiority of Judaism.

What these works had in common, Faulhaber complained, was the view that “Judaism and Christianity” were “incompatible”; hence, the demand that “the Jewish Bible must be replaced by a German Bible.” He warned his audiences, “these single voices have swelled together into a chorus”: “Away with the Old Testament! A Christianity which still clings to the Old Testament is a Jewish Religion, irreconcilable with the spirit of the German people” (emphasis added). Some “have indeed tried to save Him [Jesus] with a forged birth-certificate, and have said that He was

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not a Jew at all but an Aryan, because there were Aryans among the inhabitants of Galilee.”

These attacks on the Jews, Judaism, and the Old Testament, were inextricable from attacks on Christianity: “antagonism to the Jews of the present days is extended” not only “to the sacred books of the Old Testament,” but “Christianity” too is “condemned because it has relations of origin with pre-Christian Judaism.” In contrast, the cardinal stressed time and again the crucial importance of “the Old Testament and its fulfillment in Christianity.” Against the view that “Christianity has corrupted the German race because it is burdened with Old Testament ideas,” he repeated, “Let us venerate the Scriptures of the Old Testament!”

Clearly, voices like Cardinal Faulhaber’s were rare in Nazi Germany. In contrast, the Godesberg Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church on 4 April 1939 re-iterated the same harsh, negative attitudes toward the Jews and the Old Testament, particularly the relationship between Christianity and Judaism: “Did Christianity arise out of Judaism being thus its continuation and completion, or does it stand in opposition to Judaism? To this question we respond: Christian faith is the unbridgeable religious contradiction to Judaism.” The Godesberg Declaration was “intended to establish a common basis for German Christians” and “greeted with widespread support by most of the regional churches in the Reich.” Point three out of five boldly stated: The National Socialist worldview has against the political and spiritual influence of the Jewish race, on our national [völkisch] life. In full obedience to the divine rules of creation, the evangelical Church affirms its responsibility for the purity of our people [volkstum]. Over and above that, in the domain of faith there is no sharper opposition than the one existing between

717 Faulhaber, Judaism, Christianity and Germany, pp. 1-2.
719 Head, “Nazi Quest,” p. 76; emphasis added. On the 1930s crisis and the Church in Germany, see Klaus Scholder, A Requiem for Hitler and Other New Perspectives on the German Church Struggle (London: SCM Press, 1988).
the message of Jesus Christ and that of the Jewish religion of laws and political messianic expectation.\textsuperscript{720}

The declaration stated further that “National Socialism carried forward the work of Martin Luther and would lead the German people to a true understanding of Christian faith.”\textsuperscript{721} In the same vein, the Confessing Church (or Confessional Church, \textit{Bekennende Kirche}), which arose in opposition to government-sponsored efforts to Nazify the German Protestant church, responded in May 1939 to the Godesberg Declaration: “In the realm of faith, there is a sharp opposition between the message of Jesus Christ and the Jewish religion legalism and political messianic hope, already criticized in the Old Testament. In the realm of \textit{völkisch} life, the preservation of the purity of our people demands an earnest and responsible racial policy.”\textsuperscript{722}

The Godesberg Declaration was followed in May with the creation of the Institute for the Study and Eradication of the Jewish Influence on German Church Life.\textsuperscript{723} At its opening ceremony on 6 May, its scientific director and Professor of New Testament and \textit{völkisch} theology Walter Grundmann spoke on “The Dejudaisation of the Religious Life as the Task of German Theology and Church,”\textsuperscript{724} claiming that the “elimination of Jewish influence on German life is the urgent and fundamental question of the present German religious situation.”\textsuperscript{725} Greatly influenced by Chamberlain’s \textit{Foundations of the Nineteenth Century}, Grundmann’s aim was “a Nazified Christianity,” arguing that “the de-Judaization of Christianity would continue the work

\textsuperscript{720} See Friedländer, \textit{Years of Extermination}, p. 56; emphasis added.  
\textsuperscript{722} Friedländer, \textit{Years of Extermination}, p. 56.  
\textsuperscript{723} Heschel, \textit{Aryan Jesus}, esp. pp. 67-105.  
\textsuperscript{724} Head, “Nazi Quest,” pp. 76-77. See also Heschel, “Nazifying Christian Theology: Walter Grundmann and the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life,” \textit{Church History}, 63 (December 1994), pp. 587-605; and “For ‘Volk, Blood, and God’: The Theological Faculty at the University of Jena during the Third Reich,” in \textit{Nazi Germany and the Humanities}, pp. 365-98.  
\textsuperscript{725} Heschel, “Natzifying Christian theology,” p. 591.
of the Lutheran Reformation.”

His institute’s goal was the dejudaeizing of the church, and its significance lies in “its efforts to identify Christianity with National Socialist antisemitism by arguing that Jesus was Aryan who sought the destruction of Judaism.” Following the Nazi Revolution of 1933, Hitler’s search for scientific approaches to anti-Semitism “resulted in the organization of five anti-Jewish research institutes in the years” 1933-1939, among them Grundmann’s.

Historian Saul Friedländer notes, “[The Nazi’s] furious onslaught aimed at eliminating any trace of ‘Jewishness,’ any sign of ‘Jewish spirit,’ any remnant of Jewish presence (real or imaginary) from politics, society, culture, and history.”

The opening ceremony declared that the institute “is based on the conviction that Jewish influence in all areas of German life, including therefore of that of religion and of the church, must be brought to light and eliminated.” To pursue this grand goal, the institute would strive to show that “Christianity has nothing in common with Judaism. From the Gospel of Christ on it has developed in opposition to Judaism and has always been attacked by the latter.” Thus, “the De-Judaizing of the Church and Christianity has become an inescapable and decisive task for contemporary church life.” Only when this task was accomplished would it be possible “to rid the church life of the German people of those elements which derived from Jewish influence.” Accordingly, in its first year, the institute published “a de-Judaized New Testament” as well as a

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726 Heschel, “Reading Jesus as a Nazi,” pp. 31-32.
727 Heschel, “When Jesus was an Aryan,” p. 80.
728 Head, “Nazi Quest,” p. 70. For an important study dealing with anti-Semitic scholars in Nazi Germany, see Alan E. Steinweis, *Studying the Jews: Scholarly Antisemitism in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
729 *Years of Extermination*, p. xiv. This Nazi ultimate goal of eliminating any trace of ‘Jewishness’ is also evident in the field of exact sciences. For example, *Deutsche Physik* (“German Physics”) or Aryan Physics was a nationalist movement in the German physics community in the early 1930s against the work of Albert Einstein, labeled “Jewish Physics” (*Jüdische Physik*). The term was taken from the title of a 4-volume physics textbook by Philipp Lenard (1862-1947) in the 1930s. See, Steven Gimbel, *Einstein’s Jewish Science: Physics at the Intersection of Politics and Religion* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Univ. Press, 2012).
730 “Research Institute into Jewish Influence on German Church life, 6 May 1939,” in *The Third Reich and the Christian Churches*, ed. Peter Mattheson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 81-82. See also Head, “Nazi Quest,” p. 77.
“de-Judaized hymnal, and, in 1941, a de-Judaized catechism.”\textsuperscript{731} As academic director,
Grundmann regarded his work as “contributing to the Nazi war effort,” writing in 1943, “In the
fateful battle of the Greater Germany, which is a fateful battle against World Jewry and against
all destructive and nihilistic forces, the work of the Institute gives the tools for the overthrow of
all religious foreigners … and serves the belief of the Reich.”\textsuperscript{732}

The crisis of German philology led to the replacement of the European humanist tradition with
racism and the myths of Blood, Volk, and Soil in the German mind during the Third Reich. Volk
means more than people; to German thinkers since the birth of romanticism in the eighteenth
century, it has “signified the union of a group of people with transcendental ‘essence.’ This
‘essence’ infused man’s innermost nature, and represented the source of his creativity, his depth
of feeling, his individuality, and his unity with other members of the Volk.”\textsuperscript{733} Völkish ideas, or
Volk-centered ideology, captured the German imagination well before the Germany’s defeat in
World War I and greatly contributed to the rise of German fascism and Nazism. Volk ideology
sharply distinguishes culture and civilization. According to Spengler, for example, in \emph{The
Decline of the West} (1926), culture “has a soul, whereas Civilization is ‘the most external and
artificial state of which humanity is capable.’”\textsuperscript{734} For him, “Civilizations are the most external
and artificial states”; hence, he claims that “we are born as men of the early winter of full
Civilization, instead of the golden summit of a ripe Culture.”\textsuperscript{735} Völkish ideas adored culture but

\textsuperscript{731} Friedländer, \textit{Years of Extermination}, p. 57. On the history of the Institute for the Study and Eradication of the
Jewish Influence on German Church life and its first director, Walter Grundmann, see Heschel, \textit{Aryan Jesus}.
\textsuperscript{732} Head, “Nazi Quest,” p. 81.
\textsuperscript{733} Mosse, \textit{Crisis of German Ideology}, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{734} Spengler, \textit{The Decline of the West} (New York, 1926), vol.1, p. 356, quoted in Mosse, \textit{Crisis of German Ideology},
p. 6.
\textsuperscript{735} Helps, “Preface” to Spengler, \textit{Decline of the West}, p. xiv.
denounced civilization, or the view of a unified European civilization based on common humanist values and shared history.

Auerbach’s attempt in *Dante* and later “Figura” and *Mimesis* was to address Western civilization, or Judaeo-Christian culture, as a whole and not to succumb to narrow völkish, nationalistic, and particularistic Aryan and Nazi approaches to the study of literature. As he explained, “European civilization” was always on his mind, and he always believed that it had “its history as a distinct entity.” He confessed that his mission was “to form a lucid and coherent picture of this civilization” (*LLP*, 6). This mission probably formed during the Weimar Republic and later shaped his vocation in the field of philology and literature. Clear evidence can be found in his essay “Vico and Aesthetic Historicism” (1949), where he continuously attacks German “‘Nordic’ admiration for primitive and early forms of civilization” or “folk genius,” which was directed against rationalism. Germany developed “an extremely nationalistic attitude toward their fatherland,” which “the romantics” considered “the synthesis and supreme realization of folk genius.” More specifically, the romantics introduced the conception of natural and organic evolution into history itself; they developed an evolutionary conservatism, based on the traditions of the folk genius, directed as much against rationalistic forms of absolutism as against rationalistic tendencies toward revolutionary progress. Their organic conservatism resulted from their prevailing interest in the individual roots and forms of the folk genius, in folklore, national traditions, and the national individuality in general. Although this interest was extended to foreign national forms in the literary and scientific activities of the romantics, it led many of them, especially in Germany, to
an extremely nationalistic attitude toward their own fatherland, which they considered as the synthesis and supreme realization of folk genius.\(^{736}\)

Volk-centered ideology in Germany led eventually, not only to racism, but to the flight from reason and reality, or reading historical situations in apocalyptic terms. With defeat in World War I, during the Weimar Republic, and increasingly after the triumph of National Socialism in 1933 when Hitler came to power, many Germans believed “themselves involved in a permanent crisis of nationhood and ideology.” They regarded themselves “as knights riding bravely between death and the devil.”\(^{737}\) Not only in Germany but all over Europe, fascism, “exhibited a flight from reality into the realm of emotional and mystical ideology.” Fascist movements “were all part of the ‘displaced revolution’ which moved from a rejection of reality to glorification of ideology.”\(^{738}\) Auerbach’s reaction is his focus on reality in his many studies, especially his rejection of legendary, mythological explanations of reality in favor of rationalist, realistic interpretations of history in *Mimesis*.

One important dimension of Germany’s flight from reality was the construction of Aryan philology and Nazi historiography, which rejected the power and influence of the concrete Old Testament in favor of the murky conceits of Blood, Volk, and Soil. No wonder that after going into exile in 1936, the fight against Aryan philology became Auerbach’s central concern. If in *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, he adhered to the traditional German philological literary historiography that placed the cradle of “European literature” in “Greece” (D, 1), then by 1942, when he began writing *Mimesis*, he moved it to the Near East, clearly enlisting the power of philology to secure the power of the biblical story for European life, imagination, and civilization.

\(^{736}\) Auerbach, “Vico and Aesthetic Historism,” pp. 186-87; emphasis added.

\(^{737}\) Mosse, *Crisis of German Ideology*, p. 203.

\(^{738}\) Ibid, p. 203.
Exile and Interpretation:
The Struggle against Aryan Philology and Nazi Barbarism

“[T]he whole great and terrible reality of history.”
Auerbach, “Giannattista Vico and the Idea of Philology” 1936

My work … shows a much clearer awareness of the European crisis.
Auerbach, Literary History & Its Public (1958)

[Auerbach’s was] a traumatic period in which German scholarship had been totally politicized. Only a so-called Aryan canon was acknowledged: Judaic sources – modern authors such as Heine as well as nearly two millennia of Jewish Biblical exegesis – were exorcized.

I can speak solely for myself – and, even if with caution, for contemporaries, probably numbering into the millions, whose being Jewish burst upon them with elemental force, and who must stand this test without God, without history, without messianic-national hope. For them, for me, being a Jew means feeling the tragedy of yesterday as an inner oppression. On my left forearm I bear the Auschwitz number; it reads more briefly than the Pentateuch or the Talmud and yet provides more thorough information. It is also more binding than basic formulas of Jewish existence. If to myself and the world, including the religious and nationally minded Jews, who do not regard me as one of their own, I say: Iam a Jew, then I mean by that those realities and possibilities that are summed up in the Auschwitz number.

In September 1933, at the Nuremberg party rally called the Congress of Victory (Reichsparteitag des Sieges) because the Nazis had seized power over the Weimar Republic, Adolf Hitler expressed his views about the racial foundations of art and culture: “It is a sign of the horrible spiritual decadence of the past epoch that one spoke of styles without recognizing their racial determination … Each clearly formed race has its own handwriting in the book of art, insofar as it is not, like Jewry, devoid of any creative artistic ability.”739 The sheer racism and explicit anti-humanism expressed in these words called for nothing less than the total nationalization, racialization, and Aryanization of German culture, literature, art, and history. Auerbach no doubt

739 Quoted in Friedländer, Nazi Germany and the Jews, p. 71.
heard them, and he surely contemplated their barbaric and inhuman implications for his own existential condition. At the end of January 1933, he wrote to Dr. Erich Rothacker (1888-1965), professor of philosophy, sociology, and psychology at the University of Bonn, complaining that Rothacker’s racial views denied him “the right to be a German.”\textsuperscript{740} Things would go from bad to worse for German Jews in general and Erich Auerbach and his family in particular. In May 1933, Auerbach began recording his deep fears of “suspension” from his post at the University of Marburg.\textsuperscript{741}

Two years later, on 16 October 1935, following enactment of the Nuremberg Laws in September, “the administrators at Marburg University had summoned” Auerbach to a meeting.\textsuperscript{742} Naturally, he and his wife had no good expectations. The Nuremberg Laws excluded Jews from any participation in German political life and culture, deprived Jews of German citizenship, and prohibited marriage between Jews and other Germans. Since they defined Auerbach as a “full Jew,” hence, “non-Aryan,” the university had to terminate his employment.

The Nuremberg Laws were a watershed in European Jewish history. For Jean Améry (1912 – 1978), born Hanns Chaim Mayer, the Austrian-born essayist, who participated in organized resistance against the Nazi occupation of Belgium and as a result was tortured by the Gestapo and spent several years of imprisonment in several concentration camps, these laws meant “the death threat – better, the death sentence” for German-speaking Jews. “Had I not already heard a hundred times the appeal to fate – coupled with the call for Germany’s awakening – that the Jew should perish?” (\textit{Deutschland erwache! Juda verrecke}) Since then, he continued, or after 1935, to “be a Jew” meant “to be a dead man on leave. Someone to be murdered, who only by chance

\textsuperscript{740} Auerbach, letter to Dr. Erich Rothacker, 29 January 1933, in “Scholarship in the Age of Extremes,” p. 745. All references to Auerbach’s letters are to this edition.
\textsuperscript{741} Auerbach, letter to Dr. Karl Vossler, 22 May 1933, p. 745.
\textsuperscript{742} Konuk, \textit{East West Mimesis}, p. 3.
was not yet where he properly belonged.” No wonder that young Améry felt that the “degradation proceedings directed against us Jews, which began with the proclamation of the Nuremberg Laws” led “all the way to Treblinka.”  

Auerbach’s last paper before he went into exile was “Giamnattista Vico and the Idea of Philology” in which he defined philology, following Vico, as “the study of the principles of humanity” and argued that Vico’s *New Science* was the first work “understanding philology” as a science of man “as far as he is a historical being.” However, in contrast to the progressive Enlightenment view of history, he claimed that philology “presupposes a common world of man” in “*the whole great and terrible reality of history*.” In other words, in expounding Vico in his own historical situation, “he expounds his own concept of philology as understanding, as interpretation, and as history ‘in the terrible reality.’”  

Shortly before his death in exile in 1940, Walter Benjamin also wrote about the “terrible reality of history”: “This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.”  

In September 1935, a month before his dismissal from the University of Marburg, Auerbach and his family vacationed in Italy. He wrote from Siena, “Only this voyage liberated me from my error” of imagining he could continue his life and work in Germany. “I believe that my family and I (I have a wife and a child of 12) cannot endure it much longer in Germany.” In another letter from Siena at the same time, he referred to his work on “realism,” probably “Figura,” claiming that because of the political situation in Germany in general and his own  

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744 Wellek, *German, Russian, and Eastern European Criticism*, p. 130; emphasis added.
747 Auerbach, letter to Herr Saxl, 12 September 1935, p. 746.
university in particular, “my own work on realism” will “have to wait a while; there may still be more to get out of it.”

The hard and gloomy prospect of exile looms in a 23 September letter from Rome to Benjamin. After reading Benjamin’s memories of Berlin, _Berlin Childhood around 1900_, Auerbach wrote movingly about the “memories of a home that vanished so long ago!” He was no doubt deeply moved by Benjamin’s words in the introduction: “In 1932, when I was abroad, it began to be clear to me that I would soon have to bid a long, perhaps lasting farewell to the city of my birth.” This sad plight would soon be Auerbach’s as well. In the same letter, he wondered “if only there are still people who read documents,” such as his friend’s book, in these dark times in Germany. Anyone who has read _Mimesis_ will recognize this pessimistic tone, or “quiet tone”, which “conceals much of the pain of his exile” in Istanbul. By the last page and paragraph of _Mimesis_, Auerbach wondered whether, with the end of World War II, his book would find its readers: “Nothing now remains but to find him – to find the reader, that is. I hope that my study will reach its readers – both my friends of former years, if they are still alive” (_M_, 557). According to James Porter, the exact translation of this important line should be: “friends of mine from former years who have survived . . . an allusion to unnamed others who failed to survive,” such as Benjamin. Pessimism about Germany’s future and his personal fate naturally grew throughout 1935. It is “impossible to give you a picture of the oddity of my situation” in

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748 Auerbach, letter to Dr. Karl Vossler, 15 September 1935, p. 747.
Germany, he wrote to Benjamin. “At any rate, it has advantages over some others, yet hardly a chance of continuing, and it becomes more senseless day by day.”

Auerbach met Benjamin at the Prussian State Library in Berlin during the 1920s and evidently found a twin soul. His letters to him are more open, less reserved or reticent, than his other letters in which he usually avoided “any dramatic expressions and complaints.”

Auerbach’s typical style “is unruffled, at times even lofty and supremely calm,” but in September 1935, he wrote Benjamin with rare enthusiasm after receiving a letter from him: “What a joy! That you are still there [Paris], that you are writing – and with a tone that evokes memories of a home.” In October 1935, Auerbach wrote from Florence of Marburg: “I lived there among honorable people who are not of our stock, who have completely different presuppositions,” yet it was foolish to think that individuals, however good, could stand up to the terrible, evil forces of Nazism and fascism: “the opinions of individuals, even if there are many of them, don’t matter at all.”

A soon-to-be German-Jewish exile wrote these sad words about the impersonal forces of history that withered away the meaning and value of all personal opinions to his Jewish friend in exile, who had already fled Germany because of them.

In September 1935, a German newspaper related Auerbach’s predicament in clearer, more explicit words: “Anti-Semitism also is causing troubles for several Marburg professors whose names were inscribed on the pillory of the university as punishment for defending Jewish business.” We have no additional details, but the economist Fritz Neumark (1900-1991), who also fled to Istanbul after his dismissal from the Goethe-University in Frankfurt-am-Main, provides some insights into the life of Jewish professors in Germany at that time. He wrote that

757 Auerbach, letter to Herr Benjamin, 6 October 1935, p. 748.
758 “Scholarship in the Age of Extremes,” p. 759n35.
his university’s “Nazi student union” demanded that “all publications of the Jewish professors would be considered ‘translation from the Hebrew.’” This defamation, continued Neumark, “of people who had never considered anything other than German as their mother tongue” finally convinced him “that is was no longer possible for me to work at an institution which continued to call itself ‘The Johann Wolfgang von Goethe University’ for appearances sake.”

Neumark’s words should be understood in the wider and growing racist and anti-Semitic context. For example, in April 1933, a poster announced: “The Jew can only think Jewish; if he writes German, then he is lying.” In such terrifying and humiliating conditions, exile became the best option. Auerbach, his wife, and son left for Istanbul in 1936. There, he and about 130 other German-Jewish intellectuals found a place of rest and refuge.

Auerbach’s pessimism about the political situation in Germany only worsened. As he wrote to Benjamin in 1937, “the contemporary world situation is nothing other than the cunning of providence to lead us along a bloody and circuitous route,” which, he thought, was evident “already in Germany and Italy, especially in the horrifying inauthencity of ‘Bluebopropaganda’ [blut und Boden – Blood and Soil, the major slogan of Nazi racialist propaganda].” This cunning was revealed to him “for the first time” only in Turkey, in exile, and this utterance is one of the very rare occasions when Auerbach disclosed openly and explicitly the abyss of his heart and mind. The experience of exile eventually led to an important revelation about the true face of Nazi Germany and the true course and progress of history. Auerbach would soon experience many more desperate moments, such as the outbreak of World War II and the great success of the German Army in 1942, which posed a serious, existential threat, not only to his new life in Turkey, but to his beloved Western European humanist tradition as a whole.

760 Ibid; emphasis original.
761 Auerbach to Benjamin, 3 January 1937, p. 751.
A. Epiphany in Istanbul

The world of my own language sank and was lost to me and my spiritual homeland, Europe, destroyed itself.

Stefan Zweig's suicide letter, February 22, 1942

[Adorno believed that] the only home truly available [to exiles], though fragile and vulnerable, is in writing.


Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyness, lady, were no crime ...

But at my back I always hear
Time’s winged chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.

Andrew Marvell, “To His Coy Mistress” c. 1651-1652

The writing of *Mimesis* was based on a decisive spiritual, intellectual event in Auerbach’s life – the epiphany in Istanbul. In 1938, he was miserable, complaining, “I am a teacher who does not concretely know what he should teach,” but in 1942, he found meaning. Evidence can be found in the “Epilegomena to *Mimesis*” (1953), where he admits that *Mimesis* deals “with a version of thought [realism], which was formed by me around 1940” during his exile in Istanbul, and that idea of “realism, which is present in *Mimesis*, was dealt with previously only rarely – and even then in another context” (*M*, 562-63; emphasis added).

Clearly, his words about Peter’s denial of Jesus in chapter two of *Mimesis* captured much of his own exilic condition; his life in exile “prepared him for the visions which contributed decisively” (*M*, 42) to its composition. Spurned by the Nazis as a Jew, an unworthy human being of inferior race, he exacted perfect revenge: rescuing the Western humanist tradition based on its

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762 Letter to Traugott Fuchs, 22 October 1938, in “Scholarship in the Age of Extremes,” p. 752.
Judaeo-Christian heritage and the Jewish and Christian Scriptures in a text that captured the imagination of many readers afterward.

With his Istanbul epiphany, Auerbach found at last his epistemological, methodological starting point of analysis or point of departure, which enabled him to construct his response to Nazi barbarism and Aryan philology in a grand survey of European humanist literary civilization spanning three millennia and eight languages. This *a primo capite libri ad ultimum caput* clearly reflects the book’s overt ideological, philological, and literary goal. Clearly, in this context the cover illustration to the fiftieth-anniversary edition of *Mimesis*, depicting the central panel of Max Beckmann’s 1932 triptych “Departure,” with its “majestic optimism” and pagan-like Greek characters sitting on a boat, suggesting Odysseus’s return to Ithaca, does not accurately reflect, to say the least, the book’s form and content, which began with Genesis and criticized Greek classical, pagan culture.

As with “Figura,” the book of Genesis is the *Ansatzpunkt* for Auerbach’s reconstruction of the history of Western literature. His thesis may be clearly seen in the structure, texture, form, and content. *Mimesis* is not a mere “calm affirmation of the unity and dignity of European literature in all its multiplicity and dynamism,” as one critic argues.763 Nothing could be further from the truth. Rather, “Auerbach had faced with his flesh and blood the reality of evil force,”764 and refuting Aryan philology and Nazi barbarism became the goal to which he dedicated the rest of his years in exile from 1942 to 1945. Humanist ideology was inextricable from philology in his mind, which is hardly surprising for someone living under the horrifying shadow of Nazi atrocities. *Mimesis* was his *Kulturkampf* against Aryan philology’s counterattack on European humanist and Enlightenment traditions. Both “Figura” and *Mimesis* are pervaded by heated

ideological aims and missionary zeal. Curtius was not so far from the truth when he said that *Mimesis* is “a theoretical construct” from which Auerbach “seeks to extract theses in order to refute them.”\(^{765}\)

The period during which Auerbach claimed to write *Mimesis* – “Written in Istanbul between May 1942 and April 1945” (*M*, iv) – was charged with apocalyptic and eschatological dimensions. As Benjamin wrote: “History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but *time filled by the presence of the now.*”\(^{766}\) *Mimesis* is indeed “filled by the presence of the now,” or the time when the Nazi “*propaganda device*” led to “an ocean of filth and blood” all over Europe (*M*, 404; emphasis added). On the verso of the first page, Auerbach placed the dates of composing the book, which clearly reveals his space of experience and horizon of expectation, for these dates are eschatological and apocalyptic, revealing the urgency of the immediate threat and pointing to the eventual redemption from the terrible grip of Nazi barbarism.\(^{767}\)

Clear evidence is the prophetic, apocalyptic, and eschatological motto Auerbach chose for the book, yet, as every reader of *Mimesis* knows, it does not end optimistically, despite the destruction of Nazi Germany. The two world wars signaled to Auerbach, as to many others of his generation, the decline of Western civilization. Hence, we have the eschatological dimension or overtly pessimistic tone at the end of *Mimesis* as well as in his 1952 essay “Philology and *Weltliteratur.*” *Mimesis* is an apology for Western humanist culture and civilization, a defense of Western humanist literary history, yet he could not ignore the terrible impact of two world wars

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\(^{766}\) “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” p. 261; emphasis added.

\(^{767}\) In contrast, Bremmer, in “Erich Auerbach and His *Mimesis,*” p. 5, argues that Auerbach recorded “the dates of the composition” on the verso of *Mimesis*’s title page because he wanted readers to know that it was written in Istanbul, which “lacked most European books and journals.”
on his beloved European civilization: “His one-man project was not to save the civilization but to memorialize it – to record a culture that he likened to a drama or poem.”

In the eyes of contemporaries as well as historians, 1942 was the most crucial year of World War II because of three decisive battles on three different fronts. The battle of Midway in the Pacific took place between 4-7 June, the first battle of El Alamein in Egypt from 1-27 July, and the battle of Stalingrad, Russia, between August 1942 and February 1943. These decisive battles eventually turned the tide of the war in favor of the Allies, but in Istanbul, Auerbach could not know what the outcome would be, let alone whether the German Army would reach Turkey from the south via Egypt or the north after conquering Russia. On 8 May 1942, for instance, the German Army withstood a Soviet counteroffensive near Kharkov and inflicted heavy losses on the Red Army. The Wehrmacht was on the move and winning in Russia: it reached the Donets, recaptured the Crimea, and took Sebastopol by mid-June. Voronezh was taken while the bulk of the German forces moved toward the oil fields and the Caucasus. At the same time, Friedrich Paulus’s Sixth Army advanced along the Don in the direction of Stalingrad. The German Army clearly had the upper hand in Russia.

It also seemed invincible in North Africa. Panzer Army Africa (Panzerarmee Afrika) under Field Marshal Erwin Rommel (1891-1944) started the second phase of its advance toward Egypt, and from February-May 1942, the front line settled down near Tobruk. In June, Rommel attacked, defeating the Allies and reaching the El Alamein line just one hundred kilometers from

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768 Ziolkowski, “Foreword,” p. xii; emphasis added.
Alexandria and the vital Suez Canal. The British Army prepared to make its last stand. European civilization seemed on the brink.

Auerbach began writing *Mimesis* in May 1942. To what extent he was aware of these critical military threats can be seen in a letter written in summer 1946, where he describes in his aloof, reserved way some of the deep fears and anxieties he was suffering in 1942: “Things have gone well for us *against all odds*. The *new order* [Nazi German Army] *did not reach these straits; that really says it all*. We have lived in our apartment and *suffered* nothing but small discomfort and fear: *until the end of [19]42 it looked very bad*, but then the clouds gradually withdrew.”

He had more than enough reasons to begin writing his apology for Western humanism in May 1942, when his own personal fate and that of the whole of Europe were in great danger, and he was not alone in his sense of urgency. In America, Hans Baron started writing *The Crisis of the Italian Renaissance* and Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer began *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*. Thomas Mann conceived *Dr. Faustus*, an artist (Germany) who makes a bargain with Satan, and Stefan Zweig, the Austrian Jewish novelist, playwright, journalist, and biographer, committed suicide in Brazil when he felt that “the world of my own language sank and was lost to me and my spiritual homeland, Europe, destroyed itself.”

He concluded, “I salute all of my friends! May it be granted them yet to see the dawn after this long night! I, all too impatient, go before them.” The year 1942 was a great watershed, or epistemological

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771 Auerbach, letter to Dr. Martin Hellweg, 22 June 1946, in “Scholarship in the Age of Extremes,” p. 757; emphasis added.
transformation, in the intellectual history of the West. Auerbach’s book is one among many attempting to salvage European humanist culture from Nazism.

However, of all these intellectual exiles, especially the Jews, Auerbach’s case was the most serious and dangerous. Had Rommel overcome the British Army in North Africa, the road to the destruction, not only of Jewish Palestine, but the little Jewish haven in Istanbul, would have been open. Had the German Army not stopped in Stalingrad, the road to Turkey from the north would have been open. Overall, Rommel’s threatening advance in Africa and the German Army’s frightening success in Russia must have made Auerbach terribly anxious about the Wehrmacht pincer coming from north and south. In 1942, the Nazi barbarism he had eluded in Germany threatened to engulf him again in Istanbul.

Auerbach’s time had great apocalyptic and eschatological ramifications; it was a moment of tremendous consequence for the future of Europe and the world as a whole. No wonder that he chose as the motto to Mimesis one of the most apocalyptical and eschatological poems in England’s literary history, Andrew Marvell’s “To his Coy Mistress.” Marvell (1621-1678) wrote it in 1651-1652 during the Puritan Revolution (1640-1660); King Charles I had been executed, and many believed Christ’s Second Coming was at hand to establish the Kingdom of God on Earth. Auerbach chose the first line: “Had we world but enough, and time,” a rhetorical question to which Marvell responds in the next lines:

But at my back I always hear
Time’s winged chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.
This highly charged scenario signaling the end of time and history was a very common motive in Puritan apocalyptic tradition, especially during the revolution, and can be seen in the thought and writings of Marvell’s zealous friends Oliver Cromwell and John Milton, among others.774

Marvell wrote the poem while serving as tutor to twelve-year-old Mary Fairfax, the daughter of Sir Thomas Fairfax, commander of the Parliamentary Army during the English Civil Wars (1642-1651). Between 1653 and 1657, he tutored a ward of Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England, Ireland, and Scotland during the Commonwealth period (1653-1658), and in a 1650 poem, “An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell’s Return from Ireland,” praised Cromwell:

Then burning through the air he went,
And palaces and temples rent;
And Cæsar’s head at last
Did through his laurels blast. (ll. 21-24)

In 1657, Marvell served in the Foreign Office under the great scholar and poet John Milton, and in 1659 he was elected to Parliament.775

If we had world and time, he wrote in “To his Coy Mistress,”

I would
Love you ten years before the Flood;
And you should, if you please, refuse
Till the conversion of the Jews.


In fact, the young lovers had little time with apocalypse impending and the whole mystery of sacred, providential history soon to be unveiled and resolved. In this historical sacred moment, the conversion of the Jews was taking place, signaling the approach of Christ’s Second Coming and the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God. In other words, the essence of the poem is time, or rather lack of time; the young man situates his love for the lady within two apocalyptic, eschatological moments—ten years before the great flood that Noah outlasted in his ark (Gen. 5:28-10:32) and the end of the world, when all Jews become Christians.\footnote{776}

In light of the German Army’s frighteningly successful advances on the European and North African fronts, Auerbach must have felt, like Marvel, bereft of world and time. The real meaning of Marvell’s poem is not \textit{carpe diem} (seize the day), hedonistic advice from the ancient Roman poet Horace, but the urgent need to take action before the world ends. Marvel’s view was also not \textit{foied venom pipafo carefo} (today I will drink wine, tomorrow I will do without). Time and eternity, not love and present joy, are the essence of the poem—time running according to God’s plan like a speeding chariot. Since we know that Auerbach believed in divine providence – “I am more and more convinced,” he wrote in 1937, “that the contemporary world situation is nothing other than the cunning of providence”\footnote{777} – he adopted Marvell’s apocalyptic and eschatological scenario as the motto to \textit{Mimesis}.

\textsuperscript{776} Oliver Cromwell’s decision to readmit the Jews to England in 1655 after their expulsion in 1290 should be understood in this context. On the important role of the Jews in English apocalyptic tradition, see Zakai, “Reformation, History, and Eschatology in English Protestantism,” and “The Poetics of History and the Destiny of Israel: The Role of the Jews in English Apocalyptic Thought during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” \textit{Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy}, 5 (1996), pp. 313-50.

\textsuperscript{777} Auerbach to Benjamin, 3 January 1937, in “Scholarship in the Age of Extremes,” p. 751.
B. Philology, Teleology, and Historicist Humanism

*Mimesis* is ultimately an elegy for the difference and otherness that he [Auerbach] named the West.


*Mimesis* is quite consciously a book that a particular person, in a particular situation, wrote at the beginning of the 1940s.

Auerbach, “Epilegomena to Mimesis” (1953)

The motto from Marvell’s poem clearly reveals the specific historical moment within which Auerbach constructed his “representation of reality in Western literature.” As Hayden White argues, the content consists “in the figure of ‘figurality’ itself” and its immanence in “the notion of the progressive ‘fulfillment’ of that figure.” In other words, like Marvell’s poem, *Mimesis* speaks to promise and its realization, presenting “western literary history as a story of ‘fulfillment’ of the ‘figure’ of figurality.” Hence, “every ‘representation’ is also presentation,” and the concept of fulfillment (*Erfüllung*) “is crucial for understanding the peculiar nature of Auerbach’s conception of historical redemption,”778 or his unique teleological conception of literary history, which was based on a unique combination of Viconian history and Hegelian historical dialectic. Within this broad philological, philosophical, teleological context of “figurality” and “fulfillment,” we can understand Auerbach’s claim: “History is the science of reality” (PW, 4). Against the Nazi cult of blood, legends, myths, and heroes, representing the flight from reason and reality, Auerbach stressed the rationalist, realist, and humanist view of history as the progressive advance of the rationalist and democratic representation of truth. The

realist, rationalist interpretation or representation of reality is the goal of Mimesis and both the guiding principle and standard of judgment by which all historic-literary theories are measured.

What is the promise and its fulfillment? What is being represented in Mimesis? Its ultimate goal is to describe “the rise of more extensive and socially inferior human groups to the position of subject matter for problematic-existential representation” (M, 491). His humanist ideology led, in the first place, to the selection of literary works and passages that “must not be sought exclusively in the upper strata of society and in major political events but also in art, economy, material and intellectual culture, in the depths of the workaday world and its men and women, because it is only there that one can grasp what is unique, what is animated by the inner forces, and what, in both a more concrete and a more profound sense, is universally valid” (M, 444). As philology is inseparable from ideology in his mind, Mimesis takes on the politics of presentation and representation against the “Nazi world view,” Aryan ideology, and the creation of “myths and heroes [that] was an integral part of Nazi cultural drive.” When the “flight from reason became a search for myths and heroes” in the Third Reich, Auerbach stressed the rationalist, realist, and humanist view of history.

The politics of presentation and representation during the 1930s and 1940s determined subject matter; Mimesis is Auerbach’s humanist presentation and representation of changing Western concepts of reality, or history. If “Figura” aimed to refute Aryan philology, an internal German crisis, then following the outbreak of World War II, when the fate of the whole European humanist culture was at stake, Auerbach responded with a grand apology, defense, and justification of Western humanist tradition. His study was not merely philological but also historical. As Wellek wrote, “Auerbach never rests content with analysis of style but moves from

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that to reflection on the attitude of a writer toward reality and his technique of reproducing it, and these topics, in turn, lead to reflection about periods and cultures, social conditions and assumptions.” This overarching goal is evident in the attempt at “the breakdown of the limits” of “ancient doctrines of the three levels of style”\textsuperscript{781} – “the sublime, the intermediate, and the low, or lowly” (\textit{LLP}, 33) – and “the breakdown of the hierarchy of genres and stylistic levels which came with the dissolution of French classicism and the rise of modern realism.”\textsuperscript{782} In antique, classical culture theory, the low style (\textit{sermo remisus} or \textit{humilis}) associated with comedy and the popular classes, and the elevated style (\textit{sermo gravis} or \textit{sublimis}) with the tragic, the historic, the heroic, and the sublime.

These two epistemological transformations – breaking down both the three styles, \textit{Stilhöhen}, and the hierarchy of genres and styles – are inseparable from the progress of the Western egalitarian, humanist, and realist tradition. The first transformation took place in early Christianity with the figural interpretation of history, when “the deep subsurface layers, which were static for the observers of classical antiquity, began to move” (\textit{M}, 45; emphasis added), and the second with Historicism in which “the thing we call separation of styles, the exclusion of realism from high tragedy, was overcome, and this is a basic prerequisite both for a historical and contemporary realism” (\textit{M}, 444). \textit{Mimesis} does not deal with the history of the representation of reality in Western literature \textit{per se} but only Auerbach’s presentation of the evolution of realism in Western literature; namely, his idiosyncratic interpretation of this evolution based on his humanist ideology and struggle against Aryanism and Nazism. In 1958, Auerbach admitted, following Augustine, that “\textit{a considerable part of discovery is to know what}

\textsuperscript{781}Wellek, “Review: Auerbach’s Special Realism,” pp. 300-1.
\textsuperscript{782}Ibid., pp. 300-1.
you are looking for” (LLP, 24; emphasis added). In “Figura” and Mimesis, he diligently executed a grand, overarching humanist ideological agenda.

As the art of recovering the character and origins of Western civilization, or the restoration of Western literary classics, philology played an important humanist role in the fight against Hitlerism. Auerbach searched for the “inner history” of Western culture in which “mankind achiev[es] self-expression” (PW, 5). Philology’s recovery of texts reveals the “inner history of mankind” (PW, 4). This contention leads directly to Mimesis’s unique mission: it is not “about the triumph of realism over nonrealist literature, or an attempt to account for this triumph; it is rather an account of the struggle between the different proposals made over three thousand years as to how reality should be represented. Auerbach approaches realism and its history from the inside, as it were, rather than the outside.” This “history of how writers from Homer to Virginia Woolf have attempted to represent reality” implies that “realism can only be defined by means of a history of realism,” or that realism and history are the same.783

However, if Auerbach’s goal is to show “how reality has been represented since the age of Homer,”784 the question remains: why write the book at all? The answer lies in the importance he attached to philology, or “historicist humanism.” He maintains “that humanism was not only the overt discovery of materials and the development of methods of research, but beyond that their penetration and evaluation so that the inner history of mankind … could be written” (PW, 4; emphasis added). Ultimately, this “inner history” is what he had in mind when he said: “My purpose is always to write history” (LLP, 20). He continues that since the time of “Vico and Herder this humanism has been the true purpose of philology; because of this purpose philology became the dominant branch of the humanities” (PW, 4). Mimesis is driven by this

784 Ibid., p. 73.
understanding: “Imitation of reality is imitation of the sensory experience of life on earth – among the most essential characteristics of which would seem to be its possessing a history, its changing and developing. Whatever degree of freedom the imitating artist may be granted in his work, he cannot be allowed to deprive reality of this characteristic, which is its very essence” (M, 191; emphasis added).

At the same time, in many cases, Auerbach’s ideological, teleological humanist approach in Mimesis stands in clear contrast to his overt historicist approach, or his “historicist humanism,” which stipulated that “epochs and societies are not to be judged in terms of a pattern concept of what is desirable absolutely speaking but rather in every case in terms of their own premises” (M, 443). This discrepancy between ideology and historicism suggests that Mimesis is based on a serious self-contradiction. Auerbach’s analysis is pervaded by many value judgments, which stand in clear contrast to his professed historicist approach. For example, he talks about “God’s incarnation in a human being of the humblest social station, through his existence on earth amid humble everyday people and conditions” (M, 41). Saint Peter was called from “the humdrum existence of his daily life,” and Christianity is “the birth of a spiritual movement in the depths of the common people, from within the everyday occurrences of contemporary life” (M, 42-43). On the other hand, Ammianus Marcellinus’s Res Gestae of the second half of the fourth century is denounced as “magical and sensory” at “the expense of the human and the objectively rational,” thus leading to “the stage of a magical and sensory dehumanization” (M, 53) to the “dominance of the mob” as well as to “irrational and immoderate lust” and the “spell of magical powers.” In contrast, Christianity is the “fight against magical intoxication” (M, 68-69). Based on his negative views of nobility, Auerbach stresses time and again that Christ came “as a human being of the lower social station,” and his first disciples were simple men and women. He accords a
great role to the “new sermo humilis,” low style or ordinary speech, born with Christianity (M, 72). Likewise, although of humble origins, “nothing human is foreign” to the sixth-century Gregory of Tours, whose “soul faces living reality,” and although his Latin style is very simple and different from that of other late antiquity authors, “it exists as a language which is spoken, which is used to deal with everyday reality” (M, 92-94). He criticizes Marcellinus, the Roman historian, “of a half silly, half spectral distortion of ordinary average occurrences in human life,” (62-63) and characterizes the realism of the late Middle Ages as “poor in ideas; it lacked constructive principles and even the will to attain them” (M, 259). Finally, he claims that Molière “constantly avoids any realistic concretizing, or even any penetrating criticism, of the political and economic aspects of the milieu in which his characters move” (M, 370). Because he views history in such teleological humanist terms, he emphasizes “the rise of more extensive and socially inferior human groups to the position of subject matter for problematic-existential representation” (M, 491).

Auerbach’s preference for ordinary, simple people and these widespread value judgments, especially his negative assessment of the ruling classes, stand in clear contrast to his humanist credo. Historicism aims to eschew judging past centuries and people in favor of understanding them in their own historical contexts. Aesthetic, historicist humanism, Auerbach explained, “is based on historicism, i.e., on the conviction that every civilization and every period has its own possibilities of aesthetic perfection; that the works of arts of the different peoples and periods, as well as their general forms of life, must be understood as products of variable individual conditions, and have to be judged each by its own development, not by absolute rules of beauty
and ugliness.” Still, especially in *Mimesis*, he judges past events, people, and classes constantly in the name of rationalism, understanding reality, realism, and history. For example, he argues that Tacitus’s historiography lacks “methodological research into the historical growth of social as well as intellectual movements” (*M*, 40). Clearly, this claim is anachronistic. In his analysis of the French classicists, such as Corneille or Molière and, above all, Racine, “Auerbach’s relativist tolerance begins to strain.” Here, as in other places in *Mimesis*, “the historicist fails to meet the standard of his own historicist relativism” and, “despite his historicism,” saw fit “to condemn the French classicists so harshly.”

Why was Auerbach more than willing to betray his own self-professed credo of historicism, or, more specifically, why did “French classicist” literature “so provoke[d] Auerbach’s unhistoricist wrath”? The cause of this shortcoming can be explained by his ideological struggle against Nazi barbarism. *Mimesis* has an important philological, ideological, and historical agenda. It searches for the representation of reality, realism, or the truth in Western literary history. In this quest, at the moment of grave crisis, his zeal in defending the humanist cause led him to abandon some of the basic principles of historicist humanism and to betray his own commitments. This contradiction is the main source of his idiosyncratic approach, but we find idiosyncratic interpretations arising with other intellectual exiles of the time—Popper, Strauss, and Baron, for example. In a time of terrible danger, they all made ideological concessions. Auerbach used philology to advance his humanist ideology at the expense of his historicism.

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786 Ankersmit, “Why Realism?” pp. 55, 57. He argues that Auerbach “had a profound dislike” of Schiller,” p. 55.

787 Ibid., p. 55.
C. Mimesis – An Apology for Western Judaeo-Christian Humanist Tradition in an Age of Peril, Tyranny and Barbarism

[F]leeing Nazi Europe, fueled by adversity, many wrote criticism as a kind of message in a bottle dispatched to former interlocutors whose whereabouts were unknown, whose lives were uncertain. Emily Apter, The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature (2006)

[Auerbach] was not alone either in his desire to create a new world for himself or in his desire to make a terrain of that world somehow familiar. Many other German refugees were involved in similar experiments with their past, redefining themselves by creating a new world to inhibit. That world was often not as new as they may have suggested. The new structure often bore a remarkable resemblance to the old.

Carl Landauer, “‘Mimesis’ and Erich Auerbach’s Self-Mythologizing” (1988)

Auerbach’s Mimesis, wrote René Wellek, reveals “glimpses of reality from many centuries and societies.” In this sense, “the book provides a short history of the human condition,” or of “man’s attitude toward reality.” It “conducted us through the whole of Western history and brought home to us many deep insights into the nature of man and his struggle with reality, his self, time, and history.” True, yet the book is above all a presentation and representation of European humanist culture dealing with the changing conception of realism in a time of peril based on a unique combination of a Viconian conception of history, a Hegelian dialectic of history, and Marxist dialectic, historical materialism. Rooted in historicist humanism, Mimesis presents an overtly teleological view of the advance of a rationalist and democratic representation of reality, history, and truth, which Auerbach learned from Vico and Hegel and molded into a grand literary history of Western civilization reaching its culmination in the nineteenth century, as the brothers Goncourt wrote, “a time of universal suffrage, of democracy, of liberalism” (M, 495).

788 German, Russian, and Eastern European Criticism, pp. 114, 121-22.
Accordingly, Auerbach’s modern realism is based, on the one hand, on the view that “real everyday occurrences in a low social stratum, the provincial petty bourgeoisie, are taken very seriously,” and, on the other, that “everyday occurrences are accurately and profoundly set in a definite period of contemporary history” \((M, \text{485})\). In other words, modern realism is founded on “a serious representation of contemporary everyday social reality against the background of a constant historical movement” \((M, \text{518})\); it “cannot represent man otherwise than as embedded in a total reality, political, social, and economic, which is concrete and constantly evolving” based on a “rationalistic system concerning the general factors which determine social life” or “upon discovery” of “historical forces” \((M, \text{463-64})\). Auerbach’s teleological humanist conception of history emphasizes \textit{“the rise of more extensive and socially inferior human groups to the position of subject matter for problematic-existential representation”} \((M, \text{491}; \text{emphasis added})\).

And given that modern realism for Auerbach means “a concrete portrayal of contemporary political and economic conditions,” \((M, \text{443})\) his realism is inextricable from history and rationalism and vice versa. It signifies nothing less than “the literary style of democracy, and free movement within a hierarchy of styles” as the literary analogue of freedom in a society that respects democratic equality.”\(^{789}\) In other words: “Realism is the art of mixed styles.”\(^{790}\)

\(^{790}\) Shahar, “Auerbach’s Scars,” p. 608.
1. The Real, *Geist*, and History

What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational. ("Was vernünftig ist, das ist wirklich; und was wirklich ist, das is vernünftig")

History is the mind clothing itself with the form of events or the immediate actuality of nature.

What is rational is actual, and what is actual is rational.

Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* (1821)

World history is the rational and necessary course of the world spirit.

Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (1822-1823)

The spirit [*Geist*] is not national.

History is the science of reality that affects us most immediately, stirs us most deeply and compels us most forcibly to a consciousness of ourselves. It is the only science in which human beings step before us in their totality. Under the rubric of history one is to understand not only the past, but the progression of events in general; history therefore includes the present.

Auerbach, “Philology and Weltliteratur” (1952)

Reality, or the real, is a key concept in Auerbach’s philological philosophy. He defines *realism* as “a concrete portrayal of contemporary political and economic conditions” or “a serious representation of contemporary everyday social reality against the background of a constant historical movement” (*M*, 442-43, 518). According to his grand, teleological, historical, and philological analysis, it must “embrace the whole reality of contemporary civilization” (*M*, 497).

This crucial concept demands explanation. Auerbach borrowed it along with its teleological explanation from Hegel, according to whom what is *rational* is *real* – the full actualization of the potential, implicit nature of spirit (*Geist*) – and what is *real* is *rational* – reality understood as self-expression of the spirit: “What is rational is actual, and what actual is rational (*Was
vernünftig ist, das ist wirklich; und was wirklich ist, das is vernünftig). Geist for Hegel assumes three basic shapes: “that of human individuals, that of people or nations (Volksgeister), and that of universal world spirit (Weltgeist, which is a form of absolute Geist or God).” The three are dependent. In Philosophy of Right (1821), he wrote: “The element in which the universal mind exists in art is intuition and imagery, in religion feeling and representative thinking, in philosophy pure freedom of thought. In world history this element is the actuality of mind . . .” (emphasis added). “History is the mind clothing itself with the form of events or the immediate actuality of nature,” so all actions in history “culminate with individuals as subjects giving actuality to the substantial.” Therefore, all reality is reason; namely, the reality of reason has a universal necessity. In Lectures on the Philosophy of World History (1822-1823), Hegel argued that his topic was “a philosophical history of the world” because “reason governs the world” and “therefore world history is a rational process.”

In contrast to the scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which held that reality is to be understood solely by means of the mechanical principles of efficient causality, Hegel stressed teleological causality. Geist has a purpose (telos) and meaning to be actualized, and it, not mechanical principles, organically unifies the various elements of reality in the development process by articulating their relationships in and through experience. Hegel

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793 Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, pp. 216-18; emphasis added.

794 Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of World History, pp. 67, 79; emphasis original.

explains reality and its principle of spirit as a gradual, historical process. The steps by which spirit evolves are self-actualizing. His philosophical goal is to explain reality as the comprehensive process of development in the universe and its various expressions of the absolute spirit as a purposeful whole.

Spirit, reason, and history are linked essentially and intrinsically in Hegel’s thought. “World history” is “a rational process”; hence, he argues that “world history is the rational and necessary course of the world spirit.” He concludes that “reason has governed and continues to govern the world, and thus also world history.”\footnote{Ibid., pp. 80-81; emphasis added.} Note that for Hegel, Geist “is purely universal and abstract.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 91; emphasis original.} Following him, Auerbach wrote that “the spirit [Geist] is not national” but universal (PW, 17). Hegel’s discussion of Geist leads directly to his concept of divine providence: “the wisdom that has the infinite power to actualize its purpose.” The mark of history is thus the actualization of spirit or, more precisely, “the actualization of spirit in history.” Conversely, he argued that the “spirit is found in its most concrete actuality in the theater” of “world history.”\footnote{Ibid., pp. 83, 86; emphasis added.} The concrete actuality of spirit is the mark of history, a contention Auerbach borrowed and used extensively in Mimesis. He also believed in divine providence. In 1937, he wrote that “the cunning of providence” was transforming European civilization into “an International of triviality and a culture of Esperanto,”\footnote{Auerbach to Benjamin, 3 January 1937, PMLA, 122 (2007): pp. 750-51.} or the nightmare of a uniform, standard world that would eventually leave no room for humanist philology.

Hegel placed the dimension of freedom in the context of the spirit and its actualization in history: “World history is the progress of the consciousness of freedom.” Hence, “spirit’s consciousness of its freedom” and “the actualization of its freedom” constitute “the final end of
the world in general.” Spirit’s actualization takes the form of human “passions, interests, ideals,” and given that the “actions of human beings proceed from their need, passions, and interests,” they are “the sole driving force of history.” In sum, the “transition of [the spirit’s] determinate nature into its actual existence is mediated by consciousness.” World history, the theme of Hegel’s lectures, “presents the stages of the development of the principle whose content is the consciousness of freedom.” In *Mimesis*, Auerbach will transform this Hegelian view of the historical advance of the spirit, reason, and freedom into a grand progressive, rationalist, democratic representation of reality — a unique drama of Western civilization’s literary history.

Hegel concludes that world history’s “entire course is a consistent [expression] of spirit, and that the whole of history is nothing other than the actualization of spirit, an actualization that culminates in states, and [that] the state is the worldly actualization of history.” This process is God’s work: “What is important to discern is that spirit can find freedom and satisfaction only in history and the present – and that what is happening and has happened does not just come from God but it is God’s work.”

Hegel’s historicist and idealist account of reality revolutionized European philosophy, and his historicism, his view of reality, and his teleological view of history and the spirit enormously influenced Auerbach’s thought. According to Ankersmit, it is “likely that Auerbach’s interpretation of Dante originated” in his reading of Hegel; “Auerbach’s notions of figura, the mixture of styles, and realism thus return us to the heart of the Hegelian system.” Chapter 8 of *Mimesis* fully acknowledges this debt: “I used” Hegelian ideas about “realism” as “the basis of a study of Dante’s realism” in 1929 (*M*, 194). Hartman says Auerbach’s view is a “subdued Hegelian perspective concerning humanity’s self-realization through an odyssey called

800 Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, pp. 88-89, 109-10; emphasis original.
801 Ibid., p. 521.
history.” In Auerbach’s words, “The inner history of the last thousand years is the history of mankind achieving self-expression” (PW, 4-5).

Vico’s crucial influence on Auerbach is also apparent everywhere in Mimesis. Vico is best known for his principle, *verum esse ipsum factum* (truth lies in achievement, or “the true is precisely what is made”), and “*verum et factum convertuntur*” (truth and achievement are convertible, or “the true and the made are ... convertible”). Constructed in part against Descartes’s famous principle that clear ideas are the source of truth, Vico argued that the mind does not make itself as it gets to know itself. Descartes believed that we may have “absolute certainty” of knowledge “based on a metaphysical foundation, namely that God is supremely good and in no way a deceiver.” In contrast, Vico emphasized that the truths of morality, natural science, and mathematics do not require metaphysical justification but analysis of the historical causes through which they are made. This grand historization of epistemology is the source of Vico’s epistemological humanist concept that makers or creators can know what they make: because God created the world (*il mondo della natura*), He is the only one who knows the truth of it. As Auerbach explained Vico’s views of humans, “the historical or political world, the world of mankind” (*il mondo della nazioni*) can “be understood by men, because men have made it.” In this grand philological-philosophical-historical structure, history is intrinsic to truth and vice versa. No wonder that Auerbach, following Vico, claimed: “Only in the entirety of history is there truth, and only by the understanding of its whole course may one obtain it.”

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803 Hartman, Scholar’s Tale, p. 172.
and that the maker alone, God or human, has full knowledge of the product. Vico believed that “there is no knowledge without creation; only the creator has the knowledge.”

Structurally, *Mimesis* is based on a grand humanist teleological view of the rise of Western representation of reality, or the realist view of history, from its inception in the Judaeo-Christian tradition to its culmination in nineteenth-century French realism and eventual decline in the first half of the twentieth century, evidenced in an overriding sense of crisis about “the decline of the West.” More specifically, this teleological humanist structure of literary history is based on Vico’s three stages of the development of history, though Auerbach used only two – the transformation from the Age of Heroes, or pagan Greeks, to the Age of Men and the Judaeo-Christian tradition. It is also based on the Hegelian dialectical conception of history, based on thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, which Auerbach associates with the pagan classical world, the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and the nineteenth-century French realists, respectively. “Historically, the nineteenth-century realist novel has been a leading moral educator of mankind in the West, and for this it deserves praise.” Finally, *Mimesis* is a grand apology for Western Judaeo-Christian tradition in an age of peril, tyranny, and barbarism.

“My purpose is always to write history,” wrote Auerbach and he described *Mimesis* as “an historical process, a kind of drama, which advances no theory but only sketches a certain pattern of human destiny. *The subject of this drama is Europe*” (*LLP*, 20-21; emphasis added). We saw that in “Figura,” he used an arbitrary, idiosyncratic distinction between *figura* and *allegory* to advance his ideological agenda about the centrality, validity, and credibility of the Old Testament to the New Testament, or the Jewish Bible to Western history, against the racist premises of Aryan philology. Now, in *Mimesis*, he makes an arbitrary, idiosyncratic distinction

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between the Homeric and biblical styles, or the Greek and the Hebrew experience, as modes of presentation or representation to advance his ultimate agenda about the priority of the Judaeo-Christian tradition in shaping Western culture’s sense of time and vision of history, or realism, and its unique role and power in the progress of Western civilization. His aim was not to write a literary history but history as “a kind of drama” describing “a certain pattern of human destiny.” Drama involves serious conflicts or contrasts of character. In *Mimesis*, the “subject of this drama is Europe,” or “human destiny” as a whole.

*Mimesis* boldly claims: “*Interpretation in a determined direction becomes a general method of comprehending reality*” (*M*, 16). Auerbach’s interpretation in both “Figura” and *Mimesis* is not only “a general method of comprehending” the history of Western literature and its representation of reality but leads to a unique view. The chronology - “from Genesis all the way to Virginia Woolf” (*M*, 563) - reflects an ideological stand: words have enormous importance, and the opening and ending chapters of *Mimesis* are crucial to understanding its content and form. In other words, “interpretation in a determined direction” is a unique “method of comprehending reality” or analyzing the representation of reality in Western culture.

An essential dimension of this idiosyncratic approach is “Auerbach’s anticlassical bias,” or unwillingness to accept traditional German philology’s view that the Western humanist tradition was born with classical Greek culture.809 His book on Dante begins with classical culture, yet “Figura” does not seriously discuss it, and *Mimesis* makes his overt anticlassicism explicit. Years of living in the shadow of an Aryan philology and Nazi racist culture that adored the classical world developed Auerbach’s deep suspicion.810

810 For the crucial influence of classical Greek culture in Germany, or German Graecophilia, see Marchand, *Down from Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970*, and Eliza Marian Butler, *The Tyranny of*
For this reason, in part, he avoided defining his method: “On principle, Auerbach refused to systemize and aimed to enlighten primarily through demonstration of his techniques.”\textsuperscript{811} The first chapter of his book on Dante, “Historical Introduction: The Idea of Many in Literature,” defines a method, but “Figura” and \textit{Mimesis}, as responses to the evils of the time, apparently did not require a well-defined, systematic, methodological presentation. With regard of \textit{Mimesis}, more particularly, Auerbach argued in 1957 that “\textit{Mimesis} is a book without an Introduction; the chapter on Genesis and Homer is conceived as an introduction.”\textsuperscript{812} Montaigne’s comment about authors can be easily applied to Auerbach: “even good authors are wrong to insist on fashioning a consistent and social fabric out of us. They choose one general characteristic, and go on and arrange and interpret all a man’s actions to fit their picture … He who would judge them in detail and distinctly, bit by bit, would more often hit upon the truth.”\textsuperscript{813}

Ultimately, Auerbach’s struggle was ideology disguised as philology. He was the first to acknowledge the unique ideological, historical, and philological context of his work, addressing in plain words the persona, place, and time that led him to compose it: “\textit{Mimesis} is quite consciously a book that a particular person, in a particular situation, wrote at the beginning of the 1940s” (\textit{M}, 574). He provides the rationale for our effort to contextualize \textit{Mimesis} historically. In what follows, our goal is not to analyze its ideological sources but to reveal its development, unique content, and form as Auerbach’s response to the evils of the time.


\textsuperscript{811} Ziołkowski, “Foreword,” xii. According to Ankersmit, “Why Realism?” p. 55, the reason Auerbach avoided methodological discussion is that, for him, “realism exists only solely in the variants through which it has manifested throughout the long course of history investigated in \textit{Mimesis}.”

\textsuperscript{812} Auerbach’s letter to Martin Buber, 12 Jan. 1957. The National Library of Israel. Martin Buber Archive ARH Ms. 350.

\textsuperscript{813} Quoted in Hart, “Literature as Language: Auerbach, Spitzer and Jakobson, p. 237.
2. *Mimesis*: Form and Content

Only in the entirety of history is there truth, and only by the understanding of its whole course may one obtain it.

Auerbach, “Vico’s Contribution to Literary Criticism” (1958)

Whatever we are, we became in history, and only in history can we remain the way we are and develop therefrom: it is the task of the philologist, whose province is the world of human history, to demonstrate this so that it penetrates our lives unforgottably.

Auerbach, “Philology and Weltliteratur” (1952)

The need to constitute authentic texts manifests itself typically when a society becomes conscious of having achieved a high level of civilization, and desires to preserve from the ravages of time the works that constituted its spiritual patrimony.

Auerbach, *Introduction aux études de philologie romane* (1949)

He knew too much about his own time, and that knowledge, so often repressed, continually returned to shift the course of his argument away from the free play of the material in itself.


Understanding *Mimesis*’s form and content may help us to understand Auerbach’s goal in its composition. At its heart lies a humanist belief that people can comprehend the “real,” history and truth. “History is the science of reality” and the underlying theme of *Mimesis* (PW, 4). We may change its subtitle to “the representation of history in Western literature” without damaging its aim because it uses history and reality interchangeably. *Mimesis* is driven by an essential conflict or antagonism between two radically different interpretations of reality and, hence, history – rationalistic realism, originating in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and pagan, Homeric, irrational, mythological, legendary antirealism. Historicist humanist philology aims to find the real in history, which is equal to the truth. It is no exaggeration to say that “history and existence” for Auerbach “coalesced into one.”

He wrote, “Whatever we are, we became in history, and only in history can we remain the way we are and develop therefrom; it is the task of

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philologists, whose province is the world of human history, to demonstrate this so that it penetrates our lives unforgettably” (PW, 6).

In Plato’s allegory of the cave in The Republic, the prisoners mistake appearance for reality, thinking the shadows they see on the wall are substance; they know nothing of real causes or reality. This view was radically transformed by the Judaeo-Christian tradition in which history and reality, and not abstract, Platonic eternal ideas, are the source of the truth. Literary text is intrinsically connected to its historical context “not to some Platonic archetype of literature or art or beauty, nor to any changeless canon of classics.” As we have seen, Auerbach’s philological philosophy is based on an Ansatzpunkt, a major “point of departure of a literary-historical analysis,” providing insight into very large literary or cultural movements like the epistemological, semantic departure from the pagan to the biblical view of reality. According to “Figura,” the rise of the figural interpretation of reality or history in early Christianity provided the Ansatzpunkt from the classical, pagan world. “A solution which struck me as on the whole satisfactory,” Auerbach wrote, “resulted from an investigation of the semantic history of the word figura” (M, 555). Mimesis depicts the progress of Western literature as a series of major literary, semantic, cultural, and historical turning points described in each chapter. “The procedure I have employed – that of citing for every epoch a number of texts and using these as test cases for my ideas – takes the reader directly into the subject and makes him sense what is at issue long before he is expected to cope with anything theoretical” (M, 556; emphasis added).

Each text or translation at the beginning of the sections in Mimesis is “a theme of a chapter devoted to its stylistic interpretation. But the sequence of twenty chapters also comprises an

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817 See also Auerbach, “Introduction: Purpose and Method,” p. 19.
anthology – or, better, an imaginary museum – of European civilization extending across three millennia and eight languages, from Homer to Virginia Woolf. In this sense, *Mimesis* is “Figura” writ large, but for Auerbach, unlike Spitzer, no text is an isolated, autonomous phenomenon: “Auerbach led the reader immediately into the concrete. He then was able to work outwards from the text as a totality of stylistic relations to the ‘other forms of life’ in the period.” For example, the analysis of the three levels of style (“the sublime, the intermediate, and the low, or lowly”) was only a way to explain “the dialectical relationship between representation and reality,” or “between experience and expression” in history. For Auerbach, style is a sufficient but never a necessary condition for explaining a given text. In this context, “*Mimesis* was intended to be something more than a [mere] contribution to literary criticism.”

Auerbach restructured “Figura” to serve as the framework for *Mimesis* by making philological, semantic, epistemological turning points, or “semantic development,” the core. In *Mimesis*, “chapter after chapter analyzes different techniques of representation, each of which captures a particular culture’s most basic forms for organizing experience.” For example, the universe of the Old Testament is “a different world of forms” than Homer’s (*M*, 7) because “it organizes representation according to quite different categories.” With respect to style and text, “Homer’s syntax and tropes are less important in themselves as a style than they are as a formal index of the ancient Greek worldview,” and “Hebrew theology is less significant as such than the organizational principles it presupposes.” In other words, *Mimesis* is structured on “disconnected fragments: each of the book’s chapters is marked not only by a new author who

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818 Levin, “Two Romanisten,” p. 466.
819 Stock, “Middle Ages as Subject and Object,” pp. 531-32.
821 Stock, “Middle Ages as Subject and Object,” pp. 531-32.
822 Auerbach, “Figura,” p. 76.
824 Ibid., p. 378.
bears little overt relationship to earlier ones but also by a new beginning, in terms of the author’s perspective and stylistic outlook.” This structure determines the content: the representation of reality is described as “an active dramatic presentation of how each author actually realizes, brings characters to life, and clarifies his or her world.”

He argues that “each part of the investigation” or chapter “raises problems of its own and demands its points of departure” (LLP, 20). As a historical survey, the book is “organized in autonomous, self-contained units, and deals with a tradition of glorious achievement from its origins through its continuous evolution to the present,”

but, overall, the teleological historicist and humanist view of Western literature stands in contrast to pagan, mythological, and legendary delusion.

Auerbach’s philological enterprise relies on a singular and coherent structure: “Turning point of a momentous cultural change upon a pivot of syntax (along with its meaning of course) was an art he had fashioned for himself.” He looked for radical epistemological semantic literary changes in the presentation and representation of reality in each period discussed, not for a mere transition, “[b]ut the task that my theme imposed on me was a different one: I had to show not the transition but rather the complete change” (M, 562; emphasis added). He believed that “every text must provide a partial view on the basis of which a synthesis is possible. I have often applied this method, particularly, in Mimesis” (LLP, 19). Thus, he moves “from specific phenomena – specific passages in specific texts – to general principles or observations and from the general back to the specific.”

In “Figura,” Auerbach wrote that his goal was to move from words to history, or “to show how on the basis of its semantic development a word may grow into a historical situation and give

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826 Lambropoulos, Rise of Eurocentrism, p. 6.
rise to structures that will be effective for many centuries” (F, 76; emphasis added). He describes the structure of Mimesis as follows:

I started with the ancient conception of the three levels of style and asked all the selected texts in what way they were related to it. This was tantamount to asking what their authors regarded as sublime and significant and what means they employed to represent them. In this way I was able to disclose something of the influence of Christianity on the development of literary expression, and even to throw light on an aspect of the development of European culture since antiquity. (LLP, 20; emphasis added)

History and historical development, rather than merely philology, semantics, or stylistic analysis, were his ultimate concern. For example, “Christianity posited a new vision of existence” in its “fusion of styles” and “the equalization of lives propagated by Christian doctrine.” This method clearly explains the unique structure of the chapters in Mimesis: almost each is based on a different Ansatzpunkt: “Of course a single starting point cannot suffice for such enormous subjects; at most it can perform a function of guidance and integration; each part of the investigation raises problems of its own and demands its points of departure” (LLP, 20).

Here again, following Vico, “through the manifold expressions of linguistic activity the historical dimension of human existence makes itself known to men.” In Mimesis, his “immediate and explicit historical concern is to capture and record the whole of European civilization through an examination of select literary fragments.” Given that he began in 1942, no wonder that the “socio-political conditions of Europe before and after World War II, the

830 See also Porter, “Erich Auerbach and the Judaizing of Philology,” p. 141.
831 Breslin, “Philosophy or Philology,” p. 372.
apparently steady dissolution of moral and political order, and the rise of barbaric ‘new order’
justify the sense of urgency and fear that surface throughout Mimesis.”832

Faithful to the premises of aesthetic historicism acquired from Vico, the “underlying premises
of Mimesis” are “that literary style and language” portray “the view of reality in a given text”;
that “the chronological organization of these views explains the ‘movement’ or change of literary
styles in European literature”; and, finally, that “through an understanding of an individual’s
style,” we can “understand the view of reality, or, more broadly, the general milieu of a given
historical period.”833 In other words, figural interpretation “accounted for western culture’s
unique achievement of identifying ‘reality’ as ‘history’” because “historical things are related to
one another as elements of structures of figuration.”834

The experience of exile determined not only the form of Mimesis but also its unique content.
Auerbach “found himself perforce in the position of writing a more original kind of book than he
might otherwise have attempted, if he had remained within easy access to the stock of
professional facilities.”835 He wrote: “it is quite possible that” Mimesis “owes its existence” to
“the 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, it might never have reached the point of
writing” (M, 557).

Equally important was his ideological zeal, fury, and enthusiasm. We know that Auerbach was
not fond of explaining his method in writing; apart from the first chapter of his book on Dante,
he deals explicitly with method only in “Introduction: Purpose and Method” in Literary
Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages (1958). In Mimesis, we

832 Thomas DePietro, “Literary Criticism as History: The Example of Auerbach’s Mimesis,” Clio, 8 (1979), pp. 377-
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833 Ibid., p. 378.
835 Levin, “Two Romanisten,” p. 466.
are “plunked into particularity without an introduction. Auerbach shies away from generalization, though a brief epilogue draws together the guiding threads of his approach.”

The passion of his defense of Western Judaeo-Christian civilization in an age of peril rendered methodological questions secondary.

Nevertheless, a coherent, well-defined humanist ideology pervades Mimesis. Auerbach divides and structures the chapters in time and space according to an “ideology of periodization,” a grand teleological framework, “an overarching forward movement toward the goal of fully actualized, universal realism, in which the limitations of style separation and ‘class boundaries’ are overcome, and a profound and informing awareness of ‘creatural’ sensoriness is maintained in tandem with a full consciousness of historical process.” He is “looking for representation of everyday life in which that life is treated seriously, in terms of its human and social problems or even of its tragic complications” (M, 342-43). History is seen as the representation of reality, reaching its full realization and culmination with the French realistic novels of the nineteenth-century, a teleological view according to which the “history of the last thousand years is the history of mankind achieving self-expression” (PW, 5). This interpretation is also based on an “ethical dimension in which humanistic values and a sense of the tragic coexist.”

In Auerbach’s words: “what we are tracing is the combination of the everyday with tragic seriousness” (M, 282). Mimesis, then, is a “teleological literary history” based on “the two opposing mimetic modes adumbrated in chapter 1”; namely, the Homeric and biblical styles. Auerbach’s is a “‘progressivist’ vision of the unfolding [humanist] literary history in the West.”

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836 Ibid., p. 467.
838 Ibid., pp. 157-58; emphasis added.
839 Ibid., pp. 157-60.
which the common and everyday came to be the subject of truly serious literature,” emphasizing “the everyday reality of the lower social strata of European society.”

This framework is based on Hegelian dialectic, according to which history progresses toward a better and more egalitarian condition. It posits that history develops in three stages: a thesis; an antithesis, which contradicts or negates the thesis; and the tension between the two, which is resolved in a synthesis. In Mimesis, we have “a modified Hegelian model in which literary discourses play the role of historic-political forces. A humanist ideology of progress is built into this model, with the nineteenth-century ‘realistic’ French novel serving as a provisional endpoint.”

In this view, the Homeric style serves as the thesis; biblical Judaeo-Christian style as antithesis; and French realism as synthesis. Hence, “Mimesis is not only a history of a specific kind of literary representation, that is ‘figuralism,’ but also a history conceived as a sequence of figural-fulfillment relationship” or “a figural fulfillment in the beyond” (M, 116). For example, Auerbach explains that the all-inclusive subject of Dante’s Comedy is status animarum post mortem (“the condition of souls after death”), which reflects “God’s definitive judgment” or God’s providential “design in active fulfillment” (M, 189-90).

The unique form and content of Mimesis are inextricable from Auerbach’s goal in writing it and his mission, following the 1942 epiphany in Istanbul, of “recreating, still in German, the Weltliteratur of a fallen Welt.” His aim is “the interpretation of reality through literary representation or ‘imitations’” (M, 554). Given that “mimesis is realistic by definition, and figura is symbolic mode, one of the contributions of Auerbach’s book is to demonstrate precisely how

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841 Ibid., p. 158.
842 White, “Auerbach’s Literary History,” p. 128.
843 Lerer, Error and the Academic Self, p. 274.
they conjoin and enmesh” in the dialectic confines of Western history. However, as Auerbach explains, a “systematic and complete history of realism would not only have been impossible, it would not have served my purpose” (M, 556). Mimesis does not trace the history of European realism per se but rather the “evolution of realism” in Western literature, or Auerbach’s idiosyncratic humanist interpretation of it in opposition to Aryanism and Nazism. His realism “is the representation of the historical, concrete aspects of human being” in contrast to a simplistic, irrational culture of legends and heroes.

Auerbach’s mission and the form and content of Mimesis are essentially linked. He tells us that he belongs to “a certain group of modern philologists who hold that the interpretation of a few passages from Hamlet, Phèdre, or Faust can be made to yield more, and more decisive, information about Shakespeare, Racine, or Goethe and their times than would a systematic and chronological treatment of their lives and works” (M, 548). Accordingly, he “could never have written anything in the nature of a history of European realism.” His “method . . . consists in letting myself be guided by a few motifs which I have worked out gradually and without a specific purpose, and in trying them out on a series of texts which have become familiar and vital to me in the course of my philological activity” (M, 548; emphasis added). In contrast, I argue that his method is based on a specific, clear, coherent ideological aim; his claim that his book was written without “a specific purpose” is far from the truth. The whole thrust of “Figura” and Mimesis is based on an overarching mission to demonstrate the poverty of Aryan philology and Nazi historiography. In a blatant contradiction, he claims, “He who represents the course of a

human life, or a sequence of events extending over a prolonged period of time, and represents it from beginning to end, must prune and isolate arbitrarily” (M, 548-49; emphasis added); surely, to “prune and isolate arbitrarily” is a specific purpose.

Like “Figura,” Mimesis has a definite agenda, aim, and goal – probing and proving the centrality of the Judaeo-Christian tradition to Western literary tradition. In Mimesis, the biblical interpretation “is treated as the most important one, and is used systematically throughout the book as the basic approach to Western literature,” with chapters 18 and 19 “form[ing] the apogee of Mimesis, a celebration of the Biblical understanding of history which entered its modern maturity with the nineteenth-century realist novel.” The last chapter examines, among other works, Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse (1927), comparing it “extensively to the Odyssey,” to reveal how “the pagan element reappears” in Western culture. In this context, Mimesis moves from Odysseus (“child of wrath”) to James Joyce’s Ulysses (Odysseus in Latin) to reflect the decline and eventual fall of the West into paganism again and Auerbach’s deep pessimism after the two World Wars that wrecked European life and culture. Figural dominance, or the triumph of the Hebrew Bible in early Christianity, has ended, and now “the Homeric, the pagan element, threatens to take over again.” In “Auerbach’s survey of the canon” of Western literature, “the central dialectic evolves between the Homeric and the Biblical, the pagan and the religious, the mythical and the historical, the Hellenic and the Hebraic.” In 1942, the crisis was not solely a specific German crisis of philology and ideology but a general Western humanist crisis that could arbitrarily and murderously deny humanity to anyone and everyone.

848 Lerer, Error and the Academic Self, p. 225.
850 Ibid., p. 15.
3. *Mimesis*: Method and Approach

When Stendhal and Balzac took random individuals from daily life in their dependence upon current historical circumstances and made them the subjects of serious, problematic, and even tragic representation, they broke with the classical rule of distinct levels of style, for according to this rule, everyday practical reality could find a place in literature only within the frame of a low or intermediate kind of style, that is to say, as either grotesquely comic or pleasant, light, colorful, and entertainment.

[A] solution which struck me as on the whole satisfactory resulted from an investigation of the semantic history of the word figura. For this reason, I use the term figural to identify the conception of reality in late antiquity and the Christian Middle Ages.

I see the possibility of success and profit in a method which consists in letting myself be guided by a few motifs which I have worked out gradually and without a specific purpose, and in trying them out on a series of texts which have become familiar and vital to me in the course of my philological activity; for I am convinced that these basic motifs in the history of the representation of reality … must be demonstrable in any random realistic text.

Auerbach, *Mimesis*

Scholars have argued that Auerbach did not provide an adequately systematic introduction or coherent methodology in *Mimesis*, but its epilogue clearly and fully develops both. Why didn’t he make it the introduction? We know that he started this ambitious book in haste with great urgency in 1942, which may explain, in part, his strategy. Hence, the first chapter, “Odysseus’ Scar,” provided the general introduction. This is how Auerbach conceived of the main goal and aim of the first chapter. A clear proof can be found in Auerbach’s letter of 1957 to Martin Buber (1878-1965), the Austrian-born Israeli philosopher, best known of his philosophy of dialogue. In 1956 Martin Buber wrote to Auerbach asking if he may write an introduction to the Hebrew translation of *Mimesis* which will appear in 1957. To this request Auerbach replied: “But *Mimesis* is a book without an Introduction; the chapter on Genesis and Homer is conceived as an introduction; a theoretical polemic at the beginning of the book would have contradicted the
intention of the book.” (Emphasis added) Apparently, only after he finished Mimesis in 1945 did Auerbach have the time and will to explain its unique philological form and content in the “Epilogue.” Consequently, I will discuss the epilogue before probing the chapters.

“The subject of this book,” Auerbach writes there, is “the representation of reality through literary representation of ‘imitation’” (M, 554). This theme had occupied him “for a long time,” probably from the 1929 book on Dante: “rudiments of ‘everyday tragic realism’ are already in Dante.” He argues that with regard to the concept of realism, his “original point was Plato’s discussion in book 10 of the Republic – mimesis ranking third after truth – in conjunction with Dante’s assertion that in the Commedia he presented a true reality.” Plato thought that poetic mimesis corrupts the soul, weakening the control of reason over other drives and desires, As Auerbach studied “the various methods of interpreting human events in the literature of Europe,” his “interests” became “more precise and focused.” At this moment, some “guiding ideas began to crystallize” in his mind, and he sought “to pursue” them in Mimesis (M, 554; emphasis added).

The first concerns “the doctrine of the ancients regarding the several levels of literary representation – a doctrine which was taken up again by every later classicist movement.” In teaching French realist literature, he had found that “modern realism in the form it reached in France in the early nineteenth century is, as aesthetic phenomenon, characterized by complete emancipation from that [ancient] doctrine.” With regard to the classical theory of separation of styles, or distinct levels of style, this “emancipation is more complete, and more significant for later literary forms of imitation of life, than the mixture of le sublime with le grotesque proclaimed by the contemporary romanticists” of the nineteenth century. Thus, when “Stendhal and Balzac took random individuals from daily life in their dependence upon current historical

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852 Hacohen, personal letter to the author, 10 January 2012.
circumstances and made them the subjects of serious, problematic, and even tragic representation, they broke with the classical rule of distinct levels of style, for according to this rule, everyday practical reality could find a place in literature only within the frame of a low or intermediate kind of style, that is to say, as either grotesquely comic or pleasant, light, colorful, and entertainment.” (M, 554; emphasis added). The intermediate style, according to Auerbach, is “between tragedy and comedy,” (M, 411) or a short of style “in which the realistic mixes with the serious.” (M, 401) In this way and many others, of course, the French realists “opened the way for modern realism, which has ever since developed in increasingly rich forms, in keeping with the constantly changing and expanding reality of modern life” (M, 554; emphasis added).

This discovery of the French realists’ “revolution early in the nineteenth century against the classical doctrine of levels of style” was only the beginning, or turning point, in his overall search for the evolution of realistic representation in Western literature. If his first guiding idea concerns “the doctrine of the ancient regarding the several levels of literary representation,” then the second is related to revolutions, or major turning points, in the history Western literature. Auerbach knew that the French realist revolution “could not possibly have been the first of its kind.” In fact, he found that “[t]he barriers which the romanticists and the contemporary realists tore down had been erected only toward the end of the sixteenth century and during the seventeenth by the advocates of rigorous imitation of antique literature” (M, 554). He soon made another important discovery: before the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, “both during the Middle Ages and on through the Renaissance, a serious realism had existed.” In these periods, it was possible “in literature as well as in the visual arts to represent the most everyday phenomena of reality in a serious and significant context,” so the classic “doctrine of the levels of style”
already “had no absolute validity.” Despite their many differences, “medieval and modern realism” are “at one in this basic attitude” (M, 554-55).

At this point in the discussion, Auerbach confesses that “it had long been clear” to him “how this medieval conception of art had evolved, and when and how the first break with the classical theory had come about. 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 styles” (M, 554; emphasis added). With this last discovery, he had at hand a new chronology, or literary history; the main thesis of Mimesis is that the Christian representation of reality, based on the figural interpretation of history, reached its climax with Dante during the Middle Ages, and, later, the secular representation of reality, based on historicism, reached its climax with the nineteenth-century French realists. In historicism, “the thing we call separation of styles, the exclusion of realism from high tragedy, was overcome, and this is a basic prerequisite both for a historical and for a contemporary realism of tragic dimensions” (M, 444). In every instance of realistic representation, therefore, “Auerbach uncovers the same underlying pattern: the mixture of styles, that is, the breakdown of hierarchical divisions of style and subject matter (elevated style for heroes, kings, and nobles; comic style for low-born characters). The principal turning points in the history of realistic representation – sublime realism (the Gospels), figural realism (the literature of late Antiquity and the Middle Ages), contingent realism (the nineteenth-century French novel) – all share a common structure.”

His is then the method of historicism or of historical relativism.

The first two themes of Mimesis are the classical separation of styles and the various literary revolutions against it. The third and last is concern with the figural interpretation of history, or

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representation of reality, first formulated in “Figura.” Auerbach explains that the “two breaks” with “the classical doctrine of levels of style” \( (M, 555) \) – the “medieval and figural or modern and practical type of realism” \( (M, 440) \) – took place under “completely different conditions and yielded completely different results” \( (M, 555) \). The “view of reality expressed in the Christian works of late antiquity and the Middle Ages differs completely from that of modern realism,” yet the early view is very “difficult to formulate.” To overcome this difficulty, a “solution which struck me as on the whole satisfactory resulted from an investigation of the semantic history of the word figura. For this reason, I use the term figural to identify the conception of reality in late antiquity and the Christian Middle Ages” \( (M, 555) \; \text{emphasis added} \). “Figura” is the basis, or turning point, for understanding the Christian conception of reality to the Middle Ages. He defines his meaning in many places in \textit{Mimesis}, most specifically in chapter 3, “The Arrest of Peter Valvomeres” \( (73-77) \). In sum, the “three closely related ideas, . . . which gave the original problem form” are “the base upon which the entire study is built” \( (M, 555) \; \text{emphasis added} \).

These three “guiding ideas” clearly define Auerbach’s aim in writing \textit{Mimesis}: “we are looking for representation of everyday life in which that life is treated seriously, in terms of its human and social problems or even of its tragic complications” \( (M, 342-43) \; \text{emphasis added} \). Following Vico, he describes his main goal as a “constant \textit{endeavor to poeticize and sublimate reality}” in Western literature \( (M, 331) \; \text{emphasis added} \). Accordingly, \textit{Mimesis} is erected around “the two major events in Western history, the birth of Christianity and the French Revolution,” and as such is not only a literary history but also “a narrative of social evolution.” In other words, the “story of realism is the story of the triumph of the notion of equality and the concomitant notion of human dignity.” \( ^{854} \) This is why Auerbach argued that “it was the story of Christ, with its ruthless mixture of everyday reality and the highest and most sublime tragedy,

\footnote{854} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 359.
which had conquered the classical rule of styles” (M, 555). In this way, in sum, “Christian populism mixed with sublime transcendence announced a democratic humanism.”

Had Auerbach placed the epilogue at the beginning of Mimesis, he would have certainly helped many readers to better understand his otherwise very complex and difficult study. He argues that, “I see the possibility of success and profit in a method which consists in *letting myself be guided by a few motifs which I have worked out gradually and without a specific purpose*, and in trying them out on a series of texts which have become familiar and vital to me in the course of my philological activity; *for I am convinced that these basic motifs in the history of the representation of reality ... must be demonstrable in any random realistic text*” (M, 548; emphasis added). In the epilogue, he claims that a “*systematic and complete history of realism would not only have been impossible, it would not have served my purpose*” because “the guiding ideas had delimited the subject matter in a very specific way. I was no longer concerned with realism in general.” Now “the question was to what degree and in what manner realistic subjects were treated seriously, problematically, or tragically.” As an important result, he decided that “*comic works, works which indubitably remained within the realm of the low style, were excluded*” (M, 556; emphasis added), so Mimesis is not a work about realism in general.

Throughout Mimesis, Auerbach avoids any theoretical discussion of categories, such as “realistic work of serious style and character,” claiming that he was not “fit to analyze it theoretically and to describe it systematically.” He must admit that not “even the term ‘realistic’ is unambiguous” and adds, “My interpretations are no doubt guided by a specific purpose,” yet “*I have been guided only by the texts themselves,*” which “*were chosen at random, on the basis of accidental acquaintance and personal preference rather than in view of a definite purpose.*”

We are right to be suspicious. We have seen that Auerbach was not guided by the texts

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855 Ibid., p. 361.
themselves and did not choose them at random. Further, he had a very definite view of history and literary history. The very term “representation of reality” denotes a specific humanist worldview, which stood in contrast to the Nazi culture of blood, myths, legends, and heroes. His study is above all aimed “to [bring] together again,” after the horrors of World War II, “those whose love for our western history has serenely persevered” (M, 557). “[W]ritten during the war,” the book’s historical context - Armageddon - determined its form and content (556-57; emphasis added).

Finally, every reader of *Mimesis* is familiar with its last moving lines: “Nothing now remains but to find him – to find the reader, that is. I hope that my study will reach its readers – both my friends of former years, if they are still alive, as well as the others for whom it was intended” (M, 557). It was certainly written “in view of a definite purpose”: the salvation and preservation of European Judaeo-Christian humanist tradition. Hence, he emphasizes “our western history,” not merely Western literary history. From first to last, *Mimesis* has an important humanist agenda; it was written in a time of Nazi tyranny and against Nazi barbarism for those, living and dead, who hold fast to humanist culture and values. Hartman writes, Auerbach’s “historicism seeks to generate by purely scholarly means testimony to oppose the forces of uniformity and intolerance.”  

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856 Hacohen’s translation of this passage differs from the one above: “May my study reach its readers – both my friends of past years who have survived and all others for whom it is intended and may it contribute to bringing together again those who unambiguously kept their love for our Western history.” “Typology and the Holocaust,” *http://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special_issues/jewish-emigres*, pp. 33, 34, 36.

857 *Scholar’s Tale*, p. 179.
Epilogue: Exile, Interpretation and Alienation

The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong man has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his. (Emphasis added)

Hugh of St. Victor, Didascalicon (ca. 1130)

In America (1947-1957), Auerbach belonged to a distinguished group of German-speaking intellectual exiles, who were, in Walt Whitman’s words, “Language-shapers on other shores,”858 including Leo Strauss, Hans Baron, Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Ernst Kantorowicz, and Hannah Arendt. Their language and concepts were formed during the ideological and intellectual struggles of a specific, wretched moment in German history, and they all developed idiosyncratic interpretations in their own disciplines and constructed their disciplines in light of their battles against Nazism and fascism, directed by their common humanist ideology. In exile, each strove to save Western society from the menace of Nazism.

The idiosyncracy of Mimesis can be seen in its fate as well as its reception. David Damrosch wrote, “The book lives on, in effect, only in fragments … Auerbach’s exile in Istanbul seems, in retrospect, to have been neither so prolonged nor so complete as his book’s latest exile here in America.” He “has found surprisingly few followers” and “has not inspired further work of comparable range or synoptic ambition.”859 Auerbach conceded that Mimesis was a German book, but more important, it was written to solve the crisis of German ideology and Nazi barbarism that worked to erase the value, the truth, of European humanist tradition.

859 “Auerbach in Exile,” p. 97.
Auerbach wrote to Harry Levin that “his European reviewers, though they were friendly, looked upon *Mimesis* as no more than ‘an amusing series of analyses of style.’” How insulting to an author whose goal was not merely “to show, by stylistic study, the forms of literary realism shifting from Homer and Petronius through the age of Zola” but to emphasize how “literary discourses play the role of historic-political forces.” One of these European critics, whom Auerbach names in the letter to Levin, was Curtius. In fall 1949, he attended a Princeton seminar in literary criticism where Auerbach presented his work on realism. Curtius strongly criticized Auerbach’s philological-philosophical system and continued his argument in a 1952 review of *Mimesis*. According to one participant at the Princeton seminar, every “blow” Curtius “struck at Auerbach was meant to break down” his concept of “realism.” For example, Curtius objected to “the whole category of ‘realism’ as applied to Flaubert.” Auerbach replied in these revealing words, which capture much of his tendency to impose his rigid categories on the course and progress of Western literary history: “No matter if Flaubert did not want to be called realist; he worked the same way *whether he liked it or not*” (emphasis added). Eventually, as one participant reported: “Auerbach concede[d] that only part of Flaubert was realist. ‘But,’ Auerbach added and no doubt putting his finger on what was, in a sense, the heart of the matter, ‘I was writing a book on the treatment of everyday life.’”

Auerbach responded more completely to Curtius’s criticism later in “Epilegomena to *Mimesis*” (1953). Curtius, explained Auerbach, “sees in the book *a theoretical construct*, from which he seeks to extract theses in order to refute it.” Curtius apparently struck a chord here.

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865 Ibid., p. 36.
“But the book is no theoretical construct,” Auerbach complains, because “it aims to offer a view, and the very elastic thoughts or ideas that hold it together cannot be grasped and proven wrong in single isolate phrases” (M, 562; emphasis added). He focuses on two points in Curtius’s criticism, the doctrine of the three styles and typology, which constitute the foundation of his concept of realism. He also asserts his particular circumstances: Mimesis deals “with a version of thought, which was formed by me around 1940,” during his exile in Istanbul, when “the idea of realism . . . present in Mimesis, was dealt with previously only rarely – and even then in another context” (M, 562-63; emphasis added). Exile led to interpretation, or Auerbach’s unique presentation and representation of the Western humanist “version of thought” in light of the crisis of European civilization during World War II.

With regard to typology or figural interpretation, Auerbach argued that he began to work on this motif “seventeen years ago,” in 1936, when he was writing “Figura,” and he dealt with it “from Paul up to the seventeenth century,” or the Enlightenment. Curtius tended to minimize the influence of typology, which supported Auerbach’s whole mission to provide, in part, meaning to his exilic displacement in Istanbul, and Auerbach responded angrily and personally: “The effect of typology is most certainly just as important and permanent a phenomenon for the medieval structure of expression as is the survival of ancient rhetorical topoi [or literary commonplaces] of form and content,” which Curtius had developed in European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages (1948). He answered Curtius’s imputation that he was exaggerating the role and power of figural interpretation, claiming “that typology is the real vital element of Bible poetry and hymns, or, even more, of almost the whole Christian literature of late antiquity and the Middle Ages” (M, 568-69). This post-World War II controversy between two German humanist philologists is most revealing; both struggled against the menace of Aryan philology,
yet Curtius’s attack shows how idiosyncratic Auerbach’s interpretation or his concept of reality is. Naturally, Curtius’s criticisms were very hard for Auerbach to accept since figural interpretation was inextricable from his existential exiled predicament in Turkey and his Kulturkampf against Aryan philology and Nazism.

However, criticism of Mimesis was not Auerbach’s primary subject after the war. In 1952, he published the essay “Philology and Weltliteratur,” which provides important insights into his work, especially his concepts of humanism and the human condition in general. In expressing his deep pessimism about the fate of Western civilization, it continues the last chapter of Mimesis, and we may regard it as an extended epilogue. Goethe conceived Weltliteratur around 1827. By it, he meant “universal literature, which expresses Humanität, humanity, and this expression is literature’s ultimate purpose.” Auerbach deployed the same meaning, claiming Weltliteratur “considers humanity to be the product of fruitful intercourse between its members.” He continues his thesis about the relationship between historicism, philology, and humanism, noting that “approximately five hundred” years ago, “the national European literatures won their self-consciousness from and superiority over Latin civilization;” scarcely “two hundred years passed since the awakening of our sense of historicism, a sense that permitted the formation of the concept of Weltliteratur” by which Goethe “contributed decisively to the development of historicism and to the philological research that was generated out of it.” Historicism, humanism, and philology, or “historicist humanism” and history, are essentially and inextricably connected because the concern of that humanism was not only the overt discovery of materials and the development of methods of research, but beyond that their penetration and evaluation so that an inner history of mankind – which thereby created a conception of man unified in his multiplicity – could be

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written. Ever since Vico and Herder this humanism has been the true purpose of philology: because of this purpose philology became the dominant branch of the humanities. (PW, 2; emphasis added)

Philology became queen of the humanities because it “drew the history of the other arts, the history of religion, law, and politics after itself, and wove itself variously with them into certain fixed aims and commonly achieved concepts of order” (PW, 4).

For Auerbach, humanism was not based on the glorious cultural past of the classical world and the early Italian Renaissance, as Burckhardt and Baron, for example, believed, but was a new phenomenon related crucially to the rise of historicism in early eighteenth-century Germany. Likewise, Auerbach’s humanism was not Baron’s civic humanism of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian Renaissance but “historicist humanism”; hence, the singular and prominent role Auerbach attaches to the realm of history:

History is the science of reality that affects us most immediately, stirs us most deeply and compels us most forcibly to a consciousness of ourselves. It is the only science in which human beings step before us in their totality. Under the rubric of history one is to understand not only the past, but the progression of events in general; history therefore includes the present. (PW, 4-5)

Auerbach also closely follows Kant’s famous 1784 dictum about the Enlightenment, claiming, “The inner history of the last thousand years is the history of mankind achieving self-expression: this is what philology, a historicist discipline, treats. This history contains the records of man’s mighty adventurous advance to a consciousness of his human condition and to the realization of his given potential” (PW, 5; emphasis added). This “inner history” of human progress is an important drama “whose scope and depth entirely animate the spectator, enabling

867 What is Enlightenment? p. 58.
him at the same time to find peace in his given potential by the enrichment he gains from having witnessed the drama.” The drama of *Mimesis* was transformed by the postwar world.

Following Vico’s epistemology and humanist philology, Auerbach defines the specific task of the philologist as follows: “Whatever we are, we became in history, and only in history can we remain the way we are and develop therefrom: it is the task of the philologist, whose province is the world of human history, to demonstrate this so that it penetrates our lives unforgettably” (PW, 5-6). Nonetheless, Auerbach did not forget the great historical lesson of his time, the horror of Nazism and fascism: “our philological home is the earth: it can no longer be the nation … We must return, in admittedly altered circumstances, to the knowledge that *prenational medieval culture already possessed: the knowledge that the spirit* [Geist] *is not national*” (PW, 17; emphasis added).

Clearly, like “Figura” and *Mimesis*, “Philology and Weltliteratur” is not simply a philological study but an important ideological and existential statement about the human condition. It is very pessimistic. In the last paragraph, Auerbach writes “*Paupertas* and *terra aliena*” (PW, 17), meaning that Geist now finds itself in an indigent, devastated, and strange land. In other words, “the whole world is a foreign land” – *mundus totus exilium est* – for Spirit, a view in clear contrast to Hegel’s teleological philosophy of history, which Auerbach had embraced in the past. After two terrible world wars, alienation from, not reconciliation with, the world is the mark of the human existential condition: exile. This important theme of exile and alienation from the world was the main subject of a series of sermons that the Bishop of Hippo Regius preached following the sack of Rome: “Citizens of Jerusalem … O God’s own people, O Body of Christ,
O high-born race of foreigners on earth . . . you do not belong here, you belong somewhere else.”

Christian life is figured as a permanent pilgrimage upon earth as “resident aliens.”

Exile and alienation dominated the respective historical intellectual crises of both the Doctor of Grace and the German philologist. For Augustine, it meant that Christianity’s fate on earth was once again exile, as it had been before the Conversion of Constantine the Great in 312, when the Christian Church was transformed from a persecuted sect into the established faith of the Roman Empire. Auerbach felt that Western humanism was once again exiled after World War II.

In the modern “standardized” world of culture, the concept of *Weltliteratur* comes to an end:

“There is no more talk now – as there had been – of a spiritual exchange between peoples, of the refinement of customs and of reconciliation of races” (PW, 1, 4, 6-7, 17; emphasis added).

*Weltliteratur*, as a unique and important ideal of historicist humanism, reached its end, and Auerbach and his method are in a state of exile and alienation, excluded from modern Western culture. His sense of exile in Istanbul and his deep, atavist sense of alienation never left him.

Two great world wars, one in which he took an active part and was seriously wounded, as well as the upheavals of the Weimar Republic, the rise of Nazism, and the triumph of Aryan philology had a great impact not only on the composition of *Mimesis* and “Philology and *Weltliteratur*” but also on their fate. These cataclysms convinced Auerbach that the story of Western Europe in particular and Western civilization in general was not characterized by success. He defended Western humanist tradition with all his might, but he was not blind to its faults and shortcomings.

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870 Auerbach’s deep pessimism was not unique. Three years after the end of World War II, on 8 March 1948, the American weekly newsmagazine *Time* featured on the cover of its 25th-anniversary edition a picture of Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), captioned “Man’s Story is not a Success Story.” See Zakai, “The Irony of American History:
However, immediately following his claim about historicist humanism’s exile and alienation from the world – *Paupertas* and *terra aliena, or mundus totus exilium est*, Auerbach quotes a moving passage from the medieval philosopher, theologian, and mystic Hugh of St. Victor (c. 1096-1141), a monk from Saxony:

It is, therefore, a source of great virtue for the practised mind to learn, bit by bit, first to change about invisible and transitory things, so that afterwards it may be able to leave them behind altogether. *The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land.* The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong man has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his. (PW, 17; emphasis added)\(^871\)

Auerbach wrote that “Hugo [sic] intended these lines for one whose aim is to free himself from a love of the world. But it is a good way also for one who wishes to earn a proper love for the world” (PW, 17). Given that his attempt “to earn a proper love for the world” proved unsuccessful, Auerbach seems to identify with “the perfect man,” whose love of the world has been “extinguished” and to “whom the entire world is as a foreign land.”\(^872\) He paid this sad price for living in the “Age of Catastrophe”; namely, the “decades from the outbreak of the First World War to the aftermath of the Second,” when “for forty years,” European civilization “stumble[ed] from one calamity to another. And there were even times when even intelligent

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\(^872\) Compare The General Epistle of James, 4:4: “the friendship of the world is enmity with God” and “whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.”
conservatives would not take bets on its survival.” Auerbach was among those who defended and protected its survival, but the long struggle led to his existential state of exile and alienation.

Now in America, Auerbach quotes these beautiful, haunting words, which provide a good summary of his entire philological enterprise, or, in fact, his entire life and works. Like Augustine and Pascal, to name only two Christian apologists, Auerbach writes an apology for, and defense of, Western humanist civilization, yet in the end, he remains very pessimistic about its fate and destiny. This pessimism is clearly expressed in *Mimesis*, which starts with Odysseus and finishes with *Ulysses* - paganism returns to rule the West once more.

In the end, the man who was excluded from German culture and life – *Heimat* - forced into exile in Istanbul where he composed his *magnum opus* and *opus famos*, discovered the world he was writing for, the European humanist world, radically changed after the war and the rise of industrial capitalist society. Istanbul was *terra aliena*, but after the war, he lost his home in the world, which had become a land foreign to him - standardized, uniform, and dehumanized. He believed that “European civilization is approaching the terms of its existence,” and “its history as a distinct entity” seemed “to be at an end” (*LLP*, 5-6). Wellek, Auerbach’s colleague at Yale, noted that after World War II, he “wrote “gloomily about the tomb of Western civilization,” and this “gloom intensified in his last year.” The goal to which *Mimesis* was dedicated was no longer threatened by German Nazism and barbarism, but the very historical forces that he felt led to a more perfect rationalist understanding and representation of reality now worked against *Weltliteratur*, the great symbol of historicist humanism. Ironically, the historical reality that Auerbach strove so hard to portray in *Mimesis* seemed blunted and stunted by standardization and uniformity.

874 *German, Russian, and Eastern European Criticism*, p. 123.
However, out of his agonizing existential exilic experience, he gave us a majestic, magisterial work of humanist literary history of Western civilization. In its broad cross-cultural analyses and sense of a world historical humanist ideological debate beginning with the Old Testament and Homeric epic, it enlarged the scope and significance of literary criticism and sparked the future field toward comparative rather than national perspectives that, in fact, enacts Weltliteratur. This is no small accomplishment when we consider how, why, and in what conditions and against whom this great German philologist composed his magnum opus and opus famos. If only he had lived a little longer to see authors in India, Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, and in Western communities of the excluded adopt the techniques of Western realistic representation to assert their political, economic, and social relevance and to demand readers’ attention. Even at his most tendentious, pushing his idea of progress through such recalcitrant authors as Rabelais, his pure love of the texts and brilliant illumination of their insights shine through.
Conclusion: Jewish Identity and Historical Imagination