The essential thought of these two introductory chapters is that World Literature is the negation of a negation. It is the refusal to accept as final, in matters of the spirit, the limitations of political allegiance or local dialect. Our field is not this or that national literature, but Living Literature. Whatever quickens in us the sense of life is part of our literature, even if it was first said in Hebrew, Greek or German.

This is an internationalism of the spirit which is not merely compatible with the highest patriotism, but identical with it. We want to enrich our community with the best which has been thought and said in the world.

Note

A striking example of World Literature was offered by the success, in Paris, of Ben Jonson's Volpone, adapted by Julien Romains and Stefan Zweig.

Erich Auerbach

PHILOLOGY AND WELTLITERATUR

(1952)

Erich Auerbach (1892–1957) was a German literary scholar who after the Second World War came to the United States, where he began teaching at Yale University in 1950. He wrote major works on Dante and public life in the Middle Ages, yet the work that defines him most clearly in comparative literature is the book he wrote in Istanbul during the war: Mimesis, Darstellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur (Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature). This work spans the long history of the representation of reality, starting with Homer and the Bible and ending with contemporary (which for Auerbach was modernist) literature. Each chapter begins with an excerpt from a literary work, and the elegant combination of attention to the details of the text with a grand narrative of how reality has been approached in canonical literature has been much lauded despite its relative lack of philological detail. While Mimesis does not address the issue of world literature, it exemplifies a methodological approach that Auerbach described in his 1952 essay "Philologie der Weltiliteratur" (translated by Edward W. Said as "Philology and Weltliteratur").

In this essay, Auerbach strikes a pessimistic chord as he regrets the loss of linguistic capabilities among scholars as well as of the humanist spirit of Goethe's age. He also draws attention to the possibility that English might become the dominant world language, which would paradoxically both destroy and fulfill the dream of a world literature, while acknowledging the vastness of world literatures and the impossibility of their being mastered by an individual. His suggested approach, which must be seen as an extension of the strategy taken in Mimesis, resembles Clifford Geertz's later use of "thick description." Auerbach's technique later inspired New Historicism to focus on extracting all of the discourses found in particular examples in order to avoid syntheses that are not in touch with the texts themselves.

This is a daring approach which raises a number of methodological problems. At the same time, the New Historicism approach never presents itself as being in a closed circuit, but remains in a continued dialogue with other exemplary investigations. The juxtaposition of dissimilar works suggested by David Damrosch and the idea of literary history as a series of related experiments suggested by Franco Moretti can both be connected to ideas running through Auerbach's work although in contrast to Auerbach,