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Virgilian Incarnation: Hartman and the Issue of Auerbach's Jewishness

ORTWIN DE GRAEF

University of Leuven

PIETER VERMEULEN

Stockholm University

WE SHARE A CERTAIN PUZZLEMENT, a frustration, about the rustling of religion in Geoffrey Hartman's writings, the flickerings of faith we fail to feel. That is our problem, and as such is not particularly relevant here—except inasmuch as it responds to Hartman's own repeated expressions of a similar frustration, as when he records his “at once reflective and frustrated” sense of exclusion “from an emotional identification with religious rituals” or, in terms that are directly relevant to our debt to his work as literary scholar, when he expresses a certain exasperation about the “persistence of religious overtones” in his own writing: “That I find it impossible to empty ‘mediation’ of a religious overtone is frustrating.”¹ Frustration is the right term here; it suggests friction and unease rather than arrogant annoyance. There is a sense of exile from religious feeling, subtly balanced by a sense that the religious overtone is somehow still essential.

With regard to the principle of mediation, the final movements of Hartman's memoir suggest, the evacuation of religion would spell wall-to-wall “standardiz[ation]” (*ST*, 163), leading to “disconnect and apathy” (*ST*, 164), a vision of “fear” which may be read as Hartman's update of the closing vision of *Mimesis*, the magnum opus of his teacher Erich Auerbach, whom he honors in the appendix following this finale (“Erich Auerbach at Yale”). Recalling that closing vision, Hartman writes that

1. Geoffrey Hartman, *A Scholar's Tale: Intellectual Journey of a Displaced Child of Europe* (New York, 2007), 147, 40. Further references in the text as *ST* plus page number.

Auerbach “foresaw a prosaic modern era but did not regret it as such, only a tendency towards standardization” (*ST*, 178). Yet in *Mimesis* itself, that sense of regret at the tendency toward standardization at the present time, while certainly there, is hard to read as a sentiment fully felt by Auerbach himself. Certainly, it is not something Hartman simply projects, invents, or imposes; yet it requires qualifications involving precisely the religious overtones, or undertones, in mediation which Auerbach seems to receive differently.

We suggest that this difference is due to the fact that Auerbach is not particularly troubled by the Incarnation, and that that relative insouciance is partly due to what Hartman calls his “quiet, secular radicalism” (*ST*, 177), a sober, scholarly modernity severing him from a Jewishness Hartman is tentatively tempted to recover for him, and for which the Incarnation must always remain a disastrous scandal spelling the universal dissolution of theocultural difference.

(What does it mean to be “tentatively tempted”? The phrase could have been Hartman’s, in its willingness to court ungrammaticality for alliteration’s sake—subjective genitive: the surplus significance alliteration generates against grammar—here, the scrambling of passion and agency in the autumnal inflection of a valedictory vision tinged with Virgilian regret and the hope in harvest of prodigal return.)

Auerbach evidently recognizes the concept of the Incarnation as the pivotal point that energizes the drama of fulfillment central to Christian figural realism; he is fascinated by it as a philologist, a scholar of human linguistic production, a historical anthropologist, a humanist, an expert on Christian exegetical traditions. But whether it did or did not take place is not his concern. As a matter of fact, it didn’t, not because it would somehow contravene God’s true intent, but because it is no less fanciful a fiction than that intent itself is, and equally beside the point. The point being the representation of reality, and particularly the emergence of ordinary life as a serious cause of concern, as something that used to go without writing.

A decisive turning point in this development is the “tremendous phenomenon” of the *Divina Commedia*, whose defiant vernacular is “a well-nigh incomprehensible miracle.”² As Auerbach’s extreme qualifications suggest, the stakes are high. Mixing the monstrous and the miraculous, Dante has unleashed the human. He has driven the systems of significa-

2. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. W. R. Trask (Princeton, N.J., 2003), 185, 182. Further references in the text as *M* plus page number.

tion of Christian figural realism to the limit and has shattered the frame: “The image of man eclipses the image of God” (*M*, 202). In previous dispensations, the representation of ordinary life receives its legitimacy from its understanding as a figural anticipation of the final fulfillment, when all shall be revealed in a dialectically conclusive repetition of the miracle of the Incarnation in the mode of comedy. Dante essentially perverts this logic by working an apparently more mundane but ultimately far more disturbing miracle:

A direct experience of life which overwhelms everything else, a comprehension of human realities which spreads as widely and variously as it goes profoundly to the very roots of our emotions, an illumination of man’s impulses and passions which leads us to share in them without restraint and indeed to admire their variety and their greatness. (*einer Erleuchtung seiner Bewegungen und Leidenschaften, die ohne jede Hemmung zur heißen Teilnahme an ihnen, ja zur Bewunderung ihrer Vielfalt und ihrer Größe führt.*) And by virtue of this immediate and admiring sympathy with man (*dieser unmittelbaren und bewundernden Teilnahme am Menschen*), the principle, rooted in the divine order, of the indestructibility of the whole historical and individual man turns *against* that order, makes it subservient to its own purposes, and obscures it. (*M*, 201–2)⁵

Dante’s human beings constitute the auto-incarnation of the human and at once invite all to cannibal thanksgiving, urging the human to partake of the human without restraint. The lurid fervor of Auerbach’s phrasing—“heiße Teilnahme am Menschen ohne jede Hemmung” (sharing in them without restraint), oddly tempered in Trask’s translation—marks the intensity of this miraculous release of the human figure from the logic of fulfillment. The flames of Dante’s explosive deflection of Christian apocalyptic realism flicker and flare up again over the following centuries until they fade into an alternative fulfillment in the final pages of *Mimesis*.

Crucially, this alternative apocalypse does not coincide with the convulsions of war ravaging Europe, as Auerbach diagnoses its condition from his position on the margins, as an exiled professor of philology in early 1940s Istanbul. For these convulsions are only the last clashes between increasingly incoherent ideological constellations seeking to contain the human in new, mutually competing sectarian frames of significance, already shattering under the strain of what is to come. In the

3. Quotations from the original German are from Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (Tübingen, 1946), here 193.

representational practices of serious realism in the decades following the First World War—Auerbach’s central concern in his final chapter—the formal counterpart of this frame-breaking is the “dissol[ution of] reality into multiple and multivalent reflections of consciousness,” which produces “a certain atmosphere of universal doom” and “leav[es] the reader with an impression of hopelessness,” of “something confusing, something hazy [. . .], something hostile to the reality which they represent” (*M*, 551). We seem to have come a long way since the miraculous outburst of “immediate and admiring sympathy with man” triggered by Dante, but Auerbach reassures us we’re getting close to the goal. Announcing “something entirely different” (*M*, 551) that also characterizes the contemporary realist writing under consideration here, he returns us once more to the human, now instantiated in “der beliebige Augenblick,” the random moment in the ordinary everyday lives of different people which signifies our common humanity over and against the “controversial and unstable orders over which men fight and despair” (*M*, 552).

We recall how Dante’s denizens of Hell, too, broke through the “divine order” that justified their being and left that order behind in a claim to “sympathy with man” (*M*, 202). Yet there is a subtle but decisive difference: Dante’s characters are uniquely individuated in their representation of themselves against the Order that frames them, while the “random moment” is transfigured into evidence of “the elementary things which men in general have in common” (*M*, 552) irrespective of the various “orders” they fight about. Dante gives us the “self-fulfillment” of the human individual: the paradox of the *Divina Commedia* is its interruption of the eschatological drive that structures it, giving the singular soul in limbo a brief pause to forget “the path of purification” (*M*, 202). Modern realism’s counter-paradox is that in its emphatically contingent “representation of the random moment in the lives of different people,” “the goal [of] the long way to a common life on mankind on earth” (*M*, 552) stands revealed. In Dante the representation of the human obscures the goal; in modern realism the representation of the human exposes the goal: the common life of humankind on earth produced by the economic and cultural leveling process that is modernity’s “very simple solution” to the fragmentation and dissolution driving it. Not so much an apocalypse as a calypse, collapsing the God-thing and covering the globe with human species-life.

What’s to regret? Auerbach’s final sentences register regret but stop short of assuming it: “Perhaps [this very simple solution] will be too simple to please those who, despite all its dangers and catastrophes, admire and love our epoch for the sake of its abundance of life and the incompa-

rable historical vantage point which it affords. But they are few in number, and probably they will not live to see much more than the first forewarnings of the approaching unification and simplification" (*M*, 553). It's anybody's guess who "those" are, but Auerbach clearly measures his distance, entertaining the apocalypse as an allegory only, a trope for the fulfillment of the mediation of the human in the acceptance of the scandal of the trace—of mediation—as only ever human—a scandal itself mediated by the Incarnation in the mode of last-ditch denial, and finally standardized in the human condition as the suspension of the "as if" of all other-than-human intention.

Hartman notes that Auerbach was inspired "by his reading of the Christian Fathers, their post-Pauline, anti-Marcionic saving of the text of the Septuagint," and adds that "it must remain an open question whether Auerbach could have drawn a similar perspective from his own tradition's exegetical literature had he known it better" (*ST*, 174). The strange tension here between making one tradition your own while ignoring "your own" troubles Hartman's brief development of that open question in a reflection on the "messianic ingathering" imagined in midrash as "an end-state, an ingathering not of the Jews alone but all nations unified by a God whose Name is One" (*ST*, 174). Our sense is that, yes, Auerbach could certainly have grounded his perspective in "his own" tradition had he known it better, but that ultimately that would have made little difference, in the sense that in the absence of a God whose name is One, and that absence is a given, this messianic ingathering and unification would suffer the same implosion as the logic of Incarnation, leaving both traditions, his own and the one he actually knew, equally other as human histories of the "as if" as a thing of the past.

When the thought of the human is finally thought (or written) as thought only by the human, the scandal of the Incarnation is exhausted in its own consumption. What's to regret?

We suggest that Auerbach's remarkable lack of frustration at the unfolding spectacle of a globalized incarnation is something that Geoffrey Hartman has been unable to forget but has transfigured as regret. Again, this regret is not something Hartman invents or imposes: the sentiment is certainly voiced in *Mimesis*, and while it is not quite assumed by Auerbach there, he does perform it more emphatically elsewhere, especially in the opening movements of his late essay "Philology of World Literature,"⁴ to which Hartman also refers in "Erich Auerbach at Yale" (*ST*, 178). Yet

4. See Erich Auerbach, "Philologie der Weltliteratur," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Romanischen Philologie* (Bern, 1967), 301–10.

Hartman's inheritance of this sentiment of regret involves a peculiar religious modulation that deserves to be registered because it goes to the core of his concern for the literary. Already at the close of an important essay from 1970 assessing the future of literary history, Hartman invokes what he calls Auerbach's "Virgilian regret" at the end of *Mimesis*.⁵ What heightens the affective charge of Hartman's phrase—*Virgilian* regret—and allows us to sound its overtone is that it seems to imagine Hartman's relation to Auerbach-as-Virgil on the model of Dante's relation to *his* guide. The phrase through which Hartman imagines his relation to Auerbach, in other words, carries the trace of the very moment in literary history—Dante's *Commedia*—where he cannot follow his guide, the moment of the auto-incarnation of the human that Auerbach fails to regret.

This is not the only moment when the relation between guide and guided breaks down. In the appendix to his memoir, Hartman writes that "[his] relationship to Auerbach changed when [he] started teaching at Yale in 1955," when Auerbach invited him "for a *gemütliche* (cozy) conversation every fortnight" (*ST*, 170). During these meetings, as Hartman explains, they tried to make sense of the poetry of the Metaphysical poets, such as John Donne and Andrew Marvell, whose works left Auerbach, according to Hartman, "somewhat mystified." At Yale in the 1950s, such an exercise in Metaphysical poetry was almost compulsory: their stock in the literary critical market had risen after the aggressive marketing efforts of T. S. Eliot and the New Critics who followed in his wake, a wake that, in the 1950s, also extended to Yale. Influential critics such as William Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks codified the New Critical dogma of the literary artifact as a self-sufficient unit, as a "well-wrought urn" that magically neutralized the traces of the paradoxes and ironies it contained. These scholars' extraordinary faith in poetry's ability to contain paradox resonated with what Hartman in his memoir refers to as the "distinctive, if quietly assumed, Christian ethos" that reigned at Yale in the 1950s (*ST*, 104). In fact, the New Critical marketing of poetry as a "verbal icon," as a "concrete universal," as a placeholder of undissociated sensibility, or as the miraculous convergence of linguistic matter and spirit can only be understood on the model of, precisely, the Incarnation, the unique theologico-historical event that, for the New Critics, is sacramentally consecrated—rather than exhausted—in every successful act of poetry.

In the context of such a presumptive promotion of the incarnational

5. Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Toward Literary History," in *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays, 1958–1970* (New Haven, Conn., 1970), 386.

logic, the scene is set: Auerbach and Hartman sitting down to try to make sense of the very poets who, supposedly, update and perpetuate the Incarnation. Two readers poring over poetry that, for those who believe in it, is empowered by its somehow successful repetition of the flash in which the Word became flesh. Two readers, neither of them buying into the premise that propels this poetry, yet, we speculate, resisting it in very different ways.

Auerbach, having accepted the exhaustion of the Incarnation, was bound to fail to understand what the New Critical fuss is all about. The globalization of incarnation is a foregone conclusion to which our regret or joy have become strictly irrelevant; it has conquered the world and lost its edge, and the New Critical effort to contain the wedding of matter and spirit in poetry—and poetry only—is too little too late. And what about Hartman? In his memoir, we read that he and Auerbach failed to sustain the pedagogical fiction they had constructed for these reading sessions—the fiction that for once, the properly Englished pupil (Hartman) would teach the teacher (Auerbach) about English poetry. “Needless to say,” Hartman writes, “I learned more from him than he from me” (*ST*, 170). Which brings us back to the Virgil-and-Dante routine, the scenario that, as we know, was shipwrecked on the Virgil-and-Dante moment, the moment that Auerbach, with frustrating insouciance, accepted as the auto-incarnation of man.

So again: what about Hartman? We only know what came after: a quietly persuasive career-long demonstration of the need to move *beyond* formalism without abandoning form, and of the insufficiency of the New Critical dogma that contemplates literary form as the confirmation of the Incarnation. For Hartman the critic, poetical form will continue to point beyond itself to something intangible escaping the dissolution of individuated existence into common humanity. It can, in the words of the poet in whose name Hartman’s countercredo will relentlessly be professed, point to “something loftier, more adorned, / Than is the common aspect, daily garb / Of human life” (Wordsworth, *Prelude*, book 5, 577–79). Hartman quotes from this passage from book 5 of Wordsworth’s *Prelude* in an early essay on Virginia Woolf. The essay covers the same ground as the last chapter of *Mimesis*, in which, we remember, “der beliebige Augenblick” in Woolf’s work furnishes evidence for “the elementary things which men in general have in common,” a leveling out that Auerbach has learned to take for granted, even to the point that “the issue of Jewishness” is no longer an issue.⁶ Hartman’s return to this setting endows Wordsworth

6. “In retrospect, I find it remarkable that the issue of Jewishness did not come up,” Hartman confesses in his reflections on Auerbach (*ST*, 177).

with the capacity to somehow transcend the “common aspect,” the “daily garb” of a human fate that allows no religious exception.

Instead of the skull beneath the skin, Hartman’s Wordsworth sees the shroud beneath the daily garb of common human life and finds it wanting. This vision bespeaks what we have called Hartman’s frustration with the “secular radicalism” of Auerbach’s quiet celebration of Mrs. Ramsay’s stocking as just that: a stocking knitted by the human for the human. Yet Hartman’s frustration never hardens into a proud profession of either faith or disbelief. The text of his career offers us, his grateful readers, not exactly—or rather exactly not—a Christmas stocking but a generous invitation to share this hint of frustration, this shrouded irritation witnessing a certain unraveling.