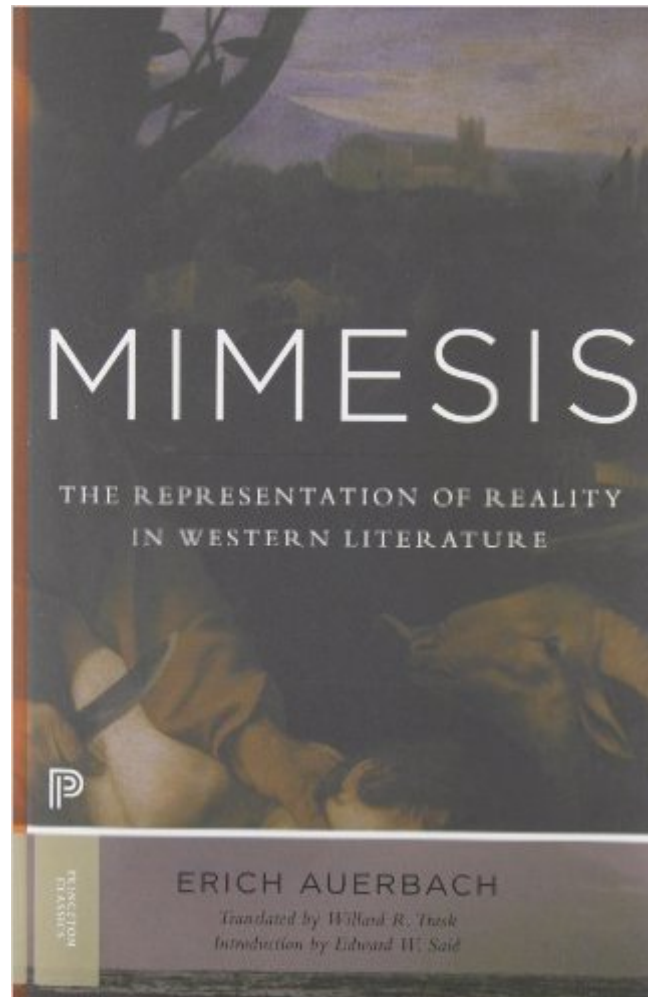


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# Mimesis: The Representation Of Reality In Western Literature (Princeton Classics)



## Synopsis

More than half a century after its translation into English, Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* remains a masterpiece of literary criticism. A brilliant display of erudition, wit, and wisdom, his exploration of how great European writers from Homer to Virginia Woolf depicted reality has taught generations how to read Western literature. This new expanded edition includes a substantial essay in introduction by Edward Said as well as an essay, never before translated into English, in which Auerbach responds to his critics. A German Jew, Auerbach was forced out of his professorship at the University of Marburg in 1935. He left for Turkey, where he taught at the state university in Istanbul. There he wrote *Mimesis*, publishing it in German after the end of the war. Displaced as he was, Auerbach produced a work of great erudition that contains no footnotes, basing his arguments instead on searching, illuminating readings of key passages from his primary texts. His aim was to show how from antiquity to the twentieth century literature progressed toward ever more naturalistic and democratic forms of representation. This essentially optimistic view of European history now appears as a defensive--and impassioned--response to the inhumanity he saw in the Third Reich. Ranging over works in Greek, Latin, Spanish, French, Italian, German, and English, Auerbach used his remarkable skills in philology and comparative literature to refute any narrow form of nationalism or chauvinism, in his own day and ours. For many readers, both inside and outside the academy, *Mimesis* is among the finest works of literary criticism ever written. This Princeton Classics edition includes a substantial introduction by Edward Said as well as an essay in which Auerbach responds to his critics.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Princeton has done it right: Not only has the text been scanned almost perfectly, but we're given Said's introduction and Auerbach's own retrospective essay on the book. The index is interactive, a true godsend in a work of this size, so full of scattered references & allusions. Plus, of course, it's one of the great works of mid-20C criticism--a reminder of how far we have fallen.

I first encountered Auerbach's "mimesis" in my undergraduate comparative literature studies at UC Irvine. It has remained with me ever since. The beauty of this book is not in its theories, or allusions, or wit. The merit is that it teaches you how to read a book the way books were meant to be read, the way German philologists of the turn of the 20th century read books -- the way Nietzsche read books. The range of texts here, from Homer to 20th century novelists, demonstrates the skills of reading applied to many different textual challenges. The primary issues are always to get a clear picture of the language and how it is used, to situate the narrative voice and outline what it does and does not depict about the world, the reason for or rhetorical consequences of its representation of reality, the life background and aspirations of the author, and the connection of all these things to the cultural norms in which the text was created. All the chapters can be read as separate essays, although the first chapter, which contrasts Homer's lapidary focus on the present moment with the psychological interiority of the Bible, should be read first as an introduction to the method and how to apply it. Each chapter begins with an excerpt from a literary text, followed by its translation if necessary. The reader should ponder each passage at length in order to assess the text in personal terms before plunging into Auerbach's analysis, which will be erudite, thorough, eye-opening, at times challenging but frequently convincing. Auerbach typically starts with the simplest ordering in a text -- the dramatic scene structures of Abbé Prevost and Voltaire, the syllogistic argument of Montaigne's essay, the narrative confusion in Gregory of Tours -- then cracks open the deeper significance, sometimes by quoting from contrasting passages in other works. He turns from language to historical moment to authorial biography to textual reception, and shows when and how each bit of evidence is useful. The great pleasure in all this is that you cannot come away from "mimesis" reading books as you have before: it is a master tutorial in reading.

I first read this work as an undergraduate over 50 years ago in a European classics lit. course. It was then mostly incomprehensible to me. Now older, and perhaps a little wiser, I nevertheless still

found the book to be a tough read. Auerbach's general thesis about the relationship between various literary texts and the representation of reality was now much clearer, but many details remained hidden from me due to my lack of Latin, old French, etc. I also found some of Auerbach's interpretations to be highly speculative. Still, the effort was worthwhile and Said's introductory essay is excellent.

Probably the most important book I have read in the last thirty years. Not for everyone and it requires work, research and some intelligence -- but WHAT rewards! A REMARKABLE, thought-provoking, and thoroughly "worth the effort" book.

a masterpiece, incomparably perceptive and knowledgeable: one's life thereafter is immeasurably enriched. It is hard to imagine how a work of this scope could have been achieved in the absence of a proper library.

This is an outstanding work of literary criticism. Each chapter is organized around a work of literature beginning with Homer and concluding with Virginia Woolf. The author typically quotes a short passage in its original language, a translation follows, then a close analysis of the language, and then a discussion of the historical milieu that gave rise to the work. The author proceeds slowly and carefully with precise and nuanced readings of the texts and deep insight into the world that gave birth to the text. But the book is not easy. Many of the texts analyzed will be obscure even to educated readers. Historical contexts will often be similarly obscure. Although foreign language texts are translated the translations often do not include material outside of the text.-- so unless you can read most of the European languages, Latin, medieval French, much will be lost. Not surprisingly the most accessible chapters are the first (Homer and the Old Testament) and the last (Virginia Woolf) which are not presented as translations Liberal arts education has changed radically since this book was first published (in German) over sixty years ago. Because there are very few modern readers who will have a similar level of erudition as Auerbach it would be helpful for the book to be reissued with appropriate footnotes.

You must own this book ... if you are interested in comparative literature, plain literature, history, the arts, or ... if you are just curious about Mind and Consciousness. This is an iconic work which immediately became the center piece of an entire discipline.

Everyone interested in narrative literature, professional or not, needs to read this book to learn to appreciate the composition of a literary text. One nice thing about it is that I can read any section without worrying too much about what comes before or after. This is a true classic in the sense that I can read its chapters over and over again, and each time come across new observations that add to my enjoyment of the text under discussion.

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