

About-Face: Erich Auerbach and the Physiognomy of Character



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The platform of my presentation is a canonical work of literary criticism, namely Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946). Of particular interest is Auerbach's understanding of *milieu*, a biological term that was first used sociologically in the *Avant-propos* to Balzac's *Comédie humaine*. Balzac's title, through its contrastive echo with Dante's *La Divina commedia*, lends an infernal cast to those milieux that, by Auerbach's account, exceed the material surroundings from which Balzac's characters are sprung: they also "often acquire for him a sort of second significance which ... can best be defined by the adjective *demonic*." Caricature is the necessary expression of character formed by an irresistible reality. Bestial physiognomies are precipitated out of the often musky atmosphere that human dwellings seem literally to exhale. Kafka's Gregor Samsa may, as centipede, embody in the extreme this same complementary relation between person and milieu. Instead of *The Metamorphosis*, however, this paper will examine Kafka's "The Sudden Walk," the first sentence of which measures an accumulation of the escape velocity necessary for the subject to break out of his routine and rise, fully drawn, to his true stature. The crescendo of this sentence (the first of only two) is driven by a succession of conditional clauses that enumerate the habits to be shed, while also framing the syntactical shift that enables what for Auerbach is the key capacity of realism—to dramatize an inner event. "You have to change your life": The admonitory coda to Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo" could well serve as Emma Bovary's epitaph, though Rilke's sonnet (the starting point for this paper), in conditioning this "inner about-face" (Auerbach) on the truncation of classical form, provides an unlikely vantage point from which to re-consider Auerbach's seminal study.