



## Mimesis 2

### English 201 Major British Authors

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The first chapter is treated in a separate handout.

**Fortunata.** This chapter describes passages from three authors: Petronius, Tacitus, and Mark. There are a number of points being made here, but the most important for our purposes is Auerbach's claim that "on the whole the rule of the separation of styles, touched upon in the first chapter of this study, remains inviolate. Everything commonly realistic, everything pertaining to everyday life, must not be treated on any level except the comic, which admits no problematic probing."

This means that early Greek and Roman *realism* is limited to illustrating a (usually non-aristocratic) individual acting well or badly in society. Any implicit criticism is leveled at the individual, at his or her vices or flaws in character. Unlike later realism, "the author himself attributes no importance whatever to the contemporary-historical aspect of his work." Unlike characters in the novels of Balzac or Thackeray, what a character does is not conditioned (or "constructed") by his or her social and historical milieu. In fact, the idea of history *as an external force* is alien to these writers, as it is to everyone before Georg W. F. Hegel (1770-1831). So, early Greek and Roman comic critiques of individuals do not aim at some large, revolutionary social change (although they might critique particular social mores or political aims). Characters are not symbols of social or historical forces—these forces are a modern conceit. Auerbach therefore argues that "the literature of antiquity was unable to represent everyday life seriously ... it could represent it only in the low style, comically or at best idyllically ...." He illustrates this further with Tacitus, who describes seriously a rebellious legion, but does not entertain their views except as indicative of vice. This is apparently typical of a late Roman view which "does not see forces, it sees vices and virtues, successes and mistakes."

The change comes with the Christian gospels, which import to Rome, and thence to Europe, stylistic attributes from the Hebrew Scriptures. In the story of Peter's betrayal, we see a *realistic* portrayal of people low on the social ladder. According to the classical separation of styles, this should be a comic story critical of vices and virtues, but it is not. Instead, the story implies large historical forces (of sin, judgment, and redemption). And it "entails entering into the random everyday depths of popular life, as well as readiness to take seriously whatever is encountered there." We meet a fisherman who is not meant to prompt our scorn or laughter, but our serious consideration of both his moral position and his terrifying struggle to fulfill his historical and spiritual obligations.

Finally, the Judeo-Christian tradition demands of increasing numbers of readers their attention towards, not a superficial reality described in words, but a deeper moral meaning. This tradition, within which European literature is formed, involves an "antagonism between sensory appearance and meaning ...." The sign and the signified divide.