# Editorial Foreword

## *Figura* and Figural Interpretation: Reflections on Reading Erich Auerbach

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### I.

The term *figura* (translated as "figure" in English) is also rendered as "type" in biblical hermeneutics.[①] In practice, *figura*/figure and type/typology function as interchangeable synonyms. Strictly speaking, however, the English figure is a direct rendering of the Latin *figura*, wheras *type* (or *typos*) derives from the Greek τύπος. A closer examination reveals that *figura* was frequently employed by later Latin Church Fathers such as Tertullian, Augustine, and Jerome, while figure entered English theology and literary criticism from the Middle Ages onward. Typology, although generally understood to convey a similar meaning, is thought to have emerged as a technical term only in the nineteenth century.

In Chinese scholarship, one translation of the Latin term *figura* is *yuxiang* 預象. Attentive readers may find that Zhao Jing, one of the authors in this issue, has rendered this concept as juxiang 具象, meaning "concrete image," in his paper. The term is most closely associated with Erich Auerbach (1892-1957), particularly in his renowned 1938 essay "*Figura*."[②] Although

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① CHEN Huirong, ed., *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (China Christian Council, 1999), 2176-77.

② This essay was first published in *Archivum Romanicum* 22 (1938): 436–89, and reprinted in 1939 (Florence: Leo Olschki). There are currently two English translations: "Figura," in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), 11–76, translated from *Neue Dantestudien* (Istanbul, 1944), 11–71; and "Figura," in *Time, History, and Literature*, trans. Jane O. Newman (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 65–113. All citations from *Figura* in this essay are taken from the Princeton translation.

Auerbach employed typological symbolism to articulate certain connotations of *figura*,[①] his decision to use the Latin term as the title of such a substantial essay was clearly deliberate, carrying deeper implications and interpretive intent.

For Auerbach, the return to philology and the close examination of the term *figura* not only enriches our etymological understanding of the concept, but more importantly, illuminates the distinction between two fundamentally divergent hermeneutical traditions in biblical exegesis: *figura*l or typological interpretation, on the one hand, and allegorical interpretation, on the other. A precise grasp of this distinction is indispensable — not merely as a prerequisite for understanding the architecture of Auerbach's thought, but as a foundational condition for approaching the entire history of Western intellectual and literary traditions through the lens of biblical hermeneutics.

If, according to our prevailing intellectual habits — particularly those that radicalize and oversimplify the notion of modernity — earthly history and the eternal order are viewed as irreconcilably opposed and incapable of genuine dialogue, then Auerbach's central aim is to construct an overarching framework grounded in the relationship between *figura* and fulfillment. Through this framework, he seeks to reveal the intrinsic and enduring connections between divine providence and human history, between ultimate faith and everyday life, and even across specific texts such as the Bible, the *Divine Comedy*, and nineteenthcentury French realist novels.

Does a fragmented world, then — one in which "all is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 1:2) — still retain meaning? Does the modern individual, exalting the "principle of individuality" and seemingly forever unable to "return home," remain condemned to perpetual solitude? Might modern society, marked by horizontal parallelism and radical flattening, recover a vertical and sublime dimension?

Auerbach, of course, offers no definitive answers, much less a final solution. Yet he compels us to ask whether the interpretive framework of

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[①] Erich Auerbach, "Typological Symbolism in Medieval Literature," in *Time, History and Literature*, 114-20.

*figura* and fulfillment belongs exclusively to Christianity, and whether it might also enable us to grasp — or even to transcend — the limitations of modernity.

## II.

Auerbach makes the following crucial observations in "*Figura*":

> Figural interpretation creates a connection between two events or persons in which one signifies not only itself but also the other — and that one is also encompassed or fulfilled by the other. The two poles of the figure are separate in time, but they both also lie within time as real events or figures.[①]

This assertion, grounded in extensive philological inquiry and the history of biblical hermeneutics, underscores that in *figura*l interpretation both the *figura* and its fulfillment possess full authenticity. In other words, each involves real events and real people — what Auerbach himself calls "real history." They are history, not abstract symbols, allegories, concepts, or ideas.

Precisely for this reason, figural interpretation stands in sharp contrast to allegorical interpretation. In Auerbach's view, allegorical interpretation — though it likewise employs concrete facts and stories, specific individuals, and tangible events to convey principles or doctrines through the method of "saying one thing while meaning another" — ultimately diverts the truth of the former into the untruth of the latter, and the history of the former into the nonhistory of the latter. More broadly, while figural interpretation might be regarded as a form of allegory — since it does not remain confined to a single mode of expression — it is nonetheless fundamentally distinct. As Auerbach observes, "it is also clearly different from most other forms of allegory that we know because of the concrete historicity of both the sign and the signified. The majority of the allegories that we find in either literature or the fine arts

[①] Erich Auerbach, "Figura," 96.

represent either a virtue (for example, wisdom) or a passion (jealousy) or an institution (the law), or at most a very general kind of synthesis of a historical phenomenon (peace, the fatherland). Never, however, do they capture the full concrete historicity of a particular event." ①

In short, the historicity shared by both the *figura* and its fulfillment constitutes the most distinctive feature of figural interpretation.

Within this tradition of typological exegesis, the real and historical Adam serves as the type/*figura* of the real and historical Christ (Genesis 2–3; Romans 5:14; 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, 45–49). Adam's existence genuinely becomes a "type" for the story of Jesus Christ — precisely why the "yu" (預, pre) connotation must be preserved when translating the term *figura*. The term "xiang" (象, image) corresponds to the etymological meanings of *figura* — such as outward appearance, form, or shape — while also underscoring the significance highlighted by Auerbach and commonly employed by medieval theologians in relation to historical events and figures. Does rendering it as "juxiang" (具象, concrete image) particularly accentuate this latter dimension of meaning?

Within the interplay between the New Testament and Hebrew Scripture, there is indeed no shortage of stories and even historical events that can be interpreted through the lens of *figura*. For instance, the slaughtered lamb in Egypt, the blood on the doorposts, and the crossing of the Red Sea foreshadow Christ ("our Passover lamb") and his true death, as well as Christian baptism. (Exodus 12-14; 1 Corinthians 5:7; 10:1-4; John 19:36). In typological interpretation, these events actually occurred and genuinely pointed to later events. For instance, the true bronze serpent raised on a pole in the wilderness which had real healing power foreshadowed the true Son of God lifted up on the cross who grants eternal life (Numbers 21:8; John 3:14-15) and so on.

The crucial point is that these elements exist not only within the Bible's own narratives but also reemerge in later texts. Dante's *Divine Comedy* stands as an exceptional transitional work, one that bridges past and future with remarkable depth.

① Erich Auerbach, "Figura," 96-7.

Auerbach wrote extensively on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, from his seminal study *Dante: Poet of the Secular World* to his detailed analysis of seventyeight lines from Canto X of the *Inferno* in Chapter 8 of *Mimesis*. At its core, his concern is deeply bound to *figura*l interpretation. What Auerbach ultimately seeks to clarify is how, within a single *Comedy* — the original title of the *Divine Comedy* before Boccaccio's renaming — a narrative that ought, by convention, to be told in a lower style, and events that seemingly have no place in Paradise, are nonetheless rendered as a solemn drama in which earthly history and sacred narrative are inseparably intertwined. Moreover, worldly history is not the antithesis of sacred history, devoid of significance, but rather an organic component of it, bound in a relationship of *figura* and fulfillment.

The most representative examples are found in Auerbach's interpretation of *Paradiso* Cantos 9 through 14 of the Paradiso, particularly Canto 9 and Canto 11.[①] In Canto 9, the prostitute Rahab ascends to Paradise. In Canto 10, Saint Francis of Assisi — one of the most renowned saints of the Middle Ages — renounces his father, abandons his inheritance, and marries a woman despised by nearly all: her name is "Poverty."[②]

It is unsurprising that, for these unconventional "events," Auerbach offers *figura*l interpretations readily intelligible within the medieval context. Rahab the prostitute's ascent to the Heaven of Venus is closely linked to her earthly deeds as recorded in the *Book of Joshua*, and even more to her distinctive significance within the Christian tradition. The scarlet cord tied to her window, which saved her and her household, foreshadows the saving power of Christ's blood, by which the Gentiles are incorporated into the Church. Auerbach explicitly observes that, all ancient commentators consider Rahab as a type of the Church.[③]

The most significant reason Saint Francis chose to marry Poverty was that this union, or its echo of another marriage, corresponded to the prophet

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① ZHANG Hui, "Saint Francis and Harlot Rahab in Heaven——On Auerbach's Unique Interpretation of The Divine Comedy," *Research of Chinese Literature*, no. 1 (2025): 1-11.

② See respectively Erich Auerbach, "St. Francis of Assisi in Dante's 'Commedia'," in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, 79-98; and Erich Auerbach, "Typological Symbolism in Medieval Literature," 114-20。

③ Erich Auerbach, "Typological Symbolism in Medieval Literature," 115.

Hosea's taking of Gomer as his wife (Hosea 1:2–3). Auerbach underscores the connection between the two weddings in striking terms: "And here another memory awakens, of Him who once formerly celebrated another such wedding, of Him who married a despised, abandoned woman, poor rejected humanity, the daughter of Sion." (Ephesians 5; Revelation 19–20).[①]

We need not dismiss the idea of *figura* with the crude logic of progress. On the contrary, as modern individuals distanced from the world of faith, only by striving — like Auerbach — to approach Dante and the world he constructed through Dante's own lens can we "sympathetically understand" the fundamental concerns underlying Auerbach's interpretation. The people and events within the three realms of the *Divine Comedy* retain, on the one hand, their full historical authenticity and sensory concreteness, while their very existence points toward and "fulfills" a deeper, often eternal and sacred order.[②] What we have lost is precisely that world in which "the connection between occurrences is not regarded as primarily a chronological or causal development but as a oneness within the divine plan."[③] Can we still hope for — or even conceive of — such wholeness under present conditions? Is all meaning in worldly history now merely selfimposed?

The greatest difficulty, perhaps, lies not in grasping the logic of Dante and his contemporaries. Rather, it lies in this: in an age that exalts the earthly and the real — indeed, that values only the present and the immediate — how can we inhabit history without being confined by it? How can reality and history themselves acquire a vertical, spiritual dimension? Is it possible to resist the allure of the cheap and abstract grand words offered by allegorical interpretation, while at the same time realizing what Auerbach calls "tragical realism" within *figura*l interpretation? How can modern reality — its gravity, its problematic nature, and even its tragic dimension — be genuinely attained?

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① Erich Auerbach, "St. Francis of Assisi in Dante's 'Commedia'", 85.

② Erich Auerbach, "Figura," 101-13.

③ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Thought*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), 555.

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