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The Historical Context and Realist Orientation of Erich Auerbach's Figural Interpretation (*Figura*)

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ABSTRACT

In the 1930s, Erich Auerbach, exiled amid Nazi antisemitism and Aryan philology, revived the Latin-patristic concept of *figura*: a historical-grammatical method connecting Old Testament prophecy to New Testament fulfilment. In contrast to the prevailing pure philology of the period, figural interpretation embraced a teleological view of history, transforming Hebrew scripture from narrowly Jewish law into a cultural bridge linking everyday reality and transcendental redemption. This article argues that Auerbach's figural interpretation constitute not merely a philological method but a cultural-political theory consciously devised to defend Judeo-Christian humanism and redefine Western literary realism. By tracing the concept's patristic origins, examining its wartime deployment against Nazi ideology, and highlighting its role in *Mimesis*—where mixture of styles elevates ordinary experience into the primary measure of literary realism—the article demonstrates figural interpretation as a threefold intellectual strategy: sharpening historical insight, confronting cultural-political crises, and innovating literary criticism.

INTRODUCTION

Erich Auerbach's theory of figural interpretation (*figura* in Latin) has become a vital methodology in current literary studies. Originating from the Latin Church Fathers' dual historical schema of Old-Testament type and New-Testament fulfilment, Auerbach reconfigures *figura* into a hermeneutic practice that both insists on reconstructing the historical-grammatical context in which a text first emerged, and demands that interpreters trace the transcendent meanings subsequently reactivated by later narratives, thus simultaneously grasping both historical specificity and reinterpretation. This dual orientation supplies the theoretical framework underlying the concept of "everyday realism" articulated in Mimesis, and during the Nazi anti-Semitic campaigns, provided Auerbach with a scholarly weapon to defend the historical continuity of Judeo-Christian humanism—demonstrating the combined significance of methodology, intellectual history, and political critique. Recently, figural interpretation has been adapted within fields such as postcolonial studies, narratology, and digital humanities to investigate the interactions between texts and history. However, existing scholarship has scarcely addressed how Auerbach implicitly critiques the ideology of Aryan philology and upholds a comprehensive vision of European history

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grounded in Judeo-Christian humanism. This paper, therefore, takes the formative context of figural interpretation as its starting point, systematically examining its theoretical structure and critical practice, with the goal of illuminating the real-world values and intellectual-historical significance underpinning Auerbach's hermeneutic approach.

Figural interpretation, forged by Erich Auerbach during his years of exile, serves simultaneously as a methodological tool, a historical-philosophical vision, and a form of political critique. Born into a German-Jewish family, Erich Auerbach (1892–1957) left Germany following the Nazi rise to power in 1933, subsequently holding academic positions at Istanbul University and Yale University. Together with Ernst Robert Curtius and others, he helped establish comparative literature as a rigorous philological discipline. In his influential 1938 essay, *Figura*, Auerbach meticulously traced the etymology of figura and outlined two competing traditions of biblical exegesis in patristic literature. Taking the interpretive relationship between Hebrew Scripture and Christianity as his point of departure, he articulated the notion of figural interpretation, thus formulating a distinctly humanist conception of historical continuity. This theoretical approach reached its systematic culmination in his landmark 1946 work, Mimesis. In it, Auerbach deployed the concept of *figura* to trace the evolution of realism in Western literature, explicitly challenging the Nazi ideology of a racially "pure" literary canon. Furthermore, by advocating the mixture of elevated and everyday stylistic registers, he established realism grounded in ordinary lived experience as a critical benchmark, directly responding to contemporary concerns about democracy and humanist values.

This article examines the unique historical context in which figural interpretation emerged, exploring the underlying ethical and political commitments embedded in both Auerbach's theoretical construction and his critical practice. Put differently, it seeks to uncover precisely what values Auerbach defended during a profound crisis in political culture. By clarifying this ideological dimension, the paper aims to offer fresh insight into Auerbach's philological paradigm and to deepen our understanding of how he sought to defend humanism at a pivotal moment of Western civilization's peril.

ALLEGORICAL VS. FIGURAL (TYPOLOGICAL) EXEGESIS IN EARLY PATRISTIC CHRISTIANITY

This chapter traces how the early Church Fathers diverged between allegorical and figural (*figura*) exegesis when interpreting Scripture and charts the emergence of the term *figura* alongside the evolution of its interpretation. It begins by reconstructing the formation of figural reading among the Fathers, showing how this approach links concrete Old Testament events—such as Moses' exodus from Egypt and Israel's passage through the Red Sea—to their New Testament fulfillment in Christ's passion and resurrection. By forging this link, figural exegesis bequeaths a teleological-historical narrative template that would go on to anchor European theological discourse for centuries. Clarifying this foundational historic-grammatical paradigm provides the theoretical basis for the chapter's later analysis of Erich Auerbach's appropriation of *figura*—both in his critique of classical stylistic hierarchies and in his formulation of a realist criticism rooted in everyday life.

Originally, the Latin *figura* denoted a strictly three-dimensional "shape" or "model"(Auerbach, 2014; Lewis & Short, 1879). The term first appears in the second-century BCE dramatists Terence and Pacuvius, who speak of a *nova figura*—literally a "new kind of molding." As Erich Auerbach shows, by the first century BCE authors such as Varro, Lucretius, and Cicero were already exploiting *figura* to translate or approximate the richer Greek vocabulary of "form"(Efal, 2009, 2012), thereby shifting the word's reference from the concrete to the abstract. The driver of this semantic drift was the broader "Hellenization of Roman education": once Greek scholarly and rhetorical traditions introduced terms like μορφή (morphē), σχῆμα (schēma), and above all τύπος (typos, "imprint, paradigm") into the Latin milieu, a single Latin equivalent was needed that could subsume the senses of shape, pattern, and norm (Lury et al., 2022). Figura took on that burden and steadily widened its semantic range. Among the Greek loan-terms, τύπος proved the most consequential. In early Greek Christian literature, *typos* regularly designates historically real "types" or "prefigurations." Because *figura* in late-antique and medieval interpretations became inseparable from this typological notion, Auerbach made it the keystone of his celebrated theory of figural exegesis—a philological practice grounded in a philosophy of history

in which the Old Testament foreshadows and the New Testament fulfils.

In patristic biblical interpretation, two markedly different hermeneutic tracks gradually crystallized (Hovind, 2012). The first, allegorical exegesis, associated with Philo of Alexandria and later Origen, presses beyond the literal sense of Scripture to uncover its moral and spiritual metaphors. The second, figural exegesis, grounded in Tertullian's and Augustine's arguments for the historical continuity between the Old and New Testaments, stresses the typological bond whereby concrete events in Israel's past "prefigure" and are "fulfilled" in Christ (Hovind, 2012). In *Figura*, Erich Auerbach sharply distinguishes these two approaches and pointedly criticizes allegory for attenuating the historical dimension of revelation. His preference for figural exegesis—precisely because it honors historical reality—forms the decisive fulcrum of his entire theory of "figura".

The drive to penetrate Scripture for a "spiritual" or *anagogical* sense—a quest that later Christian writers would call allegorical exegesis—arose from the deep seepage of Greek philosophy, especially Middle Platonism and Stoicism, into the infant church's hermeneutical habits. By privileging the soul's ascent over the text's surface narrative, this mode of reading supplied one of the chief intellectual threads by which Christianity, on both theological and cultural planes, loosened itself from its Jewish matrix. Its transcendental orientation finds a canonical expression in the Gospel of John: when the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate, goaded by the Pharisees, charges Jesus with aspiring to kingship, Jesus replies, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36), bluntly asserting the nonmundane character of the *basileia tou theou*. Philo of Alexandria gave this spiritualizing impulse its first systematic form (Seland, 2014). Steeped in the Platonism that pervaded the Hellenistic East, Philo sought to recast Hebrew sacred history through philosophical speculation, transmuting its persons and events from literal chronicle into interior stages of the soul's drama. In his commentaries the historical and grammatical strata are intentionally muted, while the mystical and moral dimensions are thrust into the foreground. The Old Testament thus becomes, for Philo, a grand narrative of the soul's progress—from fall, through hope, to ultimate redemption. As Auerbach puts it, "He saw in the fate of Israel in general, as well as in the lives of the individual actors in Jewish history, an allegory of the movement of the sinful soul in need of salvation from its fall through hope to its final redemption"(Auerbach, 2014: 97). By reading the collective fate of Israel and the lives of its patriarchs as emblematic of "the soul weighed down by passions and in need of liberation" (Philo, c. 20 CE/2004a: 23), Philo laid the methodological groundwork upon which the later Christian tradition would build its full-blown edifice of allegorical interpretation.

Philo's mode of allegorical exegesis—one that detaches the biblical text almost entirely from history and foregrounds a purely spiritual horizon—was adopted by the Catechetical School of Alexandria and deepened by Origen. Yet Origen's allegory is not as abstract as Philo's: whereas Philo allows the natural and cosmic dimensions to recede in favor of the moral and the mystical, Origen argues that careful, rational reflection on the *natural*, literal sense of Scripture provides the most secure springboard for drawing out its ethical and spiritual insights. Influenced by the Middle-Platonic tripartition of reality into body, soul, and spirit, Origen maintains that Scripture likewise contains three strata of meaning: **1)** a corporeal, *literal–historical* sense; **2)** a psychic, *moral–ethical* sense; **3)** a pneumatic, *spiritual* or *mystical* sense. Within this framework the historical-grammatical level is no longer eclipsed but serves as the indispensable point of departure. This more "concretized" allegorical method enables Origen—without violating the core tenets of Christian theology—to fuse the biblical text with principles drawn from Greek philosophy; his fundamental aim is to refashion and elevate Greco-Roman culture through the authority of Scripture (Ramelli, 2009). Writing from an apologetic stance, he weds Judaism's concern for historical reality to Greek speculative reason, guiding believers toward a right understanding of humanity's relation to God and toward self-regulation. Even so, the ultimate horizon of his exegesis remains spiritual. As Gerich observes, Origen by "compos[ing] an allegorization that devalues the relevance of the historical record by rendering the entire Old Testament as a mere shadow show of moral concepts and future happenings" (Lerer, 1996a: 109). Thus, the Old Testament—originally the national law of Israel—loses its primordial historical and popular character in his reading and becomes an esoteric book whose inner truth can be grasped only by passing beyond its literal and commonsense interpretation.

Figural exegesis that foregrounds the historical-grammatical level is rooted in the biblical logic of

typology: persons and events in the Old Testament possess their own spatio-temporal significance yet simultaneously foreshadow the redemptive realities to be effected in the New Testament. Within this framework the antecedent occurrence or figure is called a type: it refers both to itself and to its future fulfilment. The later occurrence or figure is the antitype, whose advent both completes and discloses the type's true meaning. In the patristic period typological reading was systematized. Pivotal here is the Latin Father Tertullian, who employed the term *figura* with such frequency that it acquired theological weight far beyond its original sense of "form" or "shape," gradually supplanting the Greek typos (which in Greek Christian authors denoted a historically real prophecy). On this basis a hermeneutical scheme centered on *figura–eventus* (figure–fulfilment) took shape, bequeathing to later interpreters such as Augustine an exegetical template that balanced historical fact with spiritual meaning.

Tertullian's biblical interpretation pointedly reject any reading that relies on a "purely spiritual" allegory. Instead, he secures the authority of the Old Testament at the literal-historical level: interpretation must stand on palpable historical facts, not on abstract mystical projections. Whereas Philo and Origen tend to "spiritualize" the events of both Testaments—thereby diluting their historical texture—Tertullian insists on preserving Scripture's full historicity while simultaneously unveiling a deeper mystery: the people and events of the Old Covenant are merely figurae, images that presage a future reality ultimately accomplished in the appearing and redemptive work of Christ in the New Covenant. In *Adversus Marcionem* he cites the renaming of Hoshea (Oshea) to Joshua (Jehoshua) as a paradigm. The moment Moses and the congregation first address Nun's son as "Joshua," they already foreshadow the coming "Jesus." Joshua leads Israel into a land "flowing with milk and honey"; likewise, Jesus Christ will guide a "second people"—Gentile believers drawn from the "wilderness"—into the promise of eternal life. This grand design is fulfilled not by the Law (Moses) but by the grace of the Gospel (Jesus) (Auerbach, 2014:78-79). Thus the very name-pair "Joshua–Jesus" becomes a figure of the future Christ: a concrete historical episode announces a greater redemptive fact, which will be realized in equally concrete history (Wilken, 2003). Within this reciprocal *figura–eventus* dynamic—figure and fulfilment—the Old Testament is understood as the figure of the New, and the New Testament as the disclosure of the Old's consummation. Because both are anchored in the same continuum of history, they jointly attest the truth of divine revelation.

> *Augustine likewise takes a clear stand against any allegorical method that divorces Scripture from its literal plane. In De Trinitate he observes:*
>
> *Consequently, in order that the human mind may be cleansed from errors of this kind, Sacred Scripture, adapting itself to little ones, has employed words from every class of objects in order that our intellect, as though strengthened by them, might rise as it were gradually to divine and sublime things. (Augustine, ca.400/2010:4)*

For Augustine, then, the literal-historical level and the factual reliability of the biblical narrative are paramount. Precisely because the Bible is not dependent on esoteric allegories, its sacred truth remains open to *all* believers; the literal sense becomes the common doorway into revelation. At the same time Augustine seeks a reconciliation between Tertullian's insistence on history and Origen's orientation toward the spirit, fashioning a figural hermeneutic that is both historically grounded and eschatologically dynamic. In his scheme, type and fulfilment do not form a simple binary; instead they trace a *three-step movement* through salvation history: first, the Mosaic Law and Israel's story as a prophetic promise of Christ's coming; second, the New Testament as a realm of partial fulfilment and fresh promise; and third, the complete realization that will arrive in the eschaton (Auerbach, 2014: 87). This triadic structure both extends the traditional *figura–eventus* pattern and displays Augustine's deep sense of how history itself participates in, and progressively discloses, the logic of salvation.

In Auerbach's view, the divide between figural (*figura*) and allegorical (*allegoria*) exegesis is more than a technical disagreement about method; it mirrors a long-standing clash between a *historico-realist* orientation and a *purely spiritual* one that runs through early Christianity and its wider cultural milieu. In the Western tradition, the line championed by Tertullian and Augustine—with its insistence on historical concreteness—ultimately prevailed (Snediker, 2024). Auerbach himself is unmistakably aligned with the figural perspective. He treats the doctrine of the Incarnation as a historical principle: God's promise of future redemption must

first appear in sensory, datable events, and Christ's *fulfilment* is never an abstract idea but an embodied realization fixed in space and time. Hence both the Old/New-Testament relation and the type/fulfilment relation must retain a heightened historical specificity. In this framework, "In every case, the only spiritual moment is the moment of understanding, the *intellectus spiritalis*, which recognizes the figure in its fulfillment (Auerbach, 2014:81).On that basis Auerbach translates the Christian dogma of the *Word made flesh* into a hermeneutical model that binds history and spirit together: the types of the Old Covenant are real events, the fulfilment narrated in the New is enacted in flesh and blood, and the work of the intellect is to trace the trajectory of redemption through them (Warley, 2025). This double orientation toward historical concreteness *and* spiritual discernment, he argues, forms the core paradigm by which Western Christian culture—and its literature—represents reality.

JUDEO-CHRISTIAN HUMANISM VS. ARYAN PHILOLOGY

This chapter situates figural exegesis within the political context of the Nazi campaign for an Aryan philology in the 1930s and 1940s. It explores how Erich Auerbach mobilized the figural structure—above all the indivisible unity of Old and New Testaments—to refute the myth of de-Judaization and to defend the historical continuity of the Jewish-Christian humanist tradition. In this perspective, *figura* is not merely a philological term but an ideological strategy for resisting racist discourse and safeguarding Europe's collective cultural memory. That historical function, in turn, supplies the motive and logic for the next chapter's deeper analysis of figural exegesis as a practice of literary criticism.

During the earliest expansion of the Christian faith, a purely "spiritual" or *tropological* mode of allegorical exegesis failed to attract new peoples. Its built-in mysticism often rendered doctrine unintelligible to ordinary hearers. As Erich Auerbach observes, "as a result of its origin and nature, it was restricted to a relatively small circle of intellectuals and initiates; they were the only ones who could take pleasure in and be sustained by its teachings" (Auerbach, 2014:98). The limitations of allegorical exegesis are twofold. First, its moral lessons usually stand far from the literal text and lack any common yard-stick; the exegete is thus free to dismantle the scriptural fabric, shattering its historical-grammatical coherence. Second, abstraction eclipses the divine economy of salvation: to non-Jews the Old Testament comes to look like an obsolete code that bears no relation to Christ's redemptive work. Confronted with this impasse, the earliest Jewish believers urgently required a new hermeneutic—one that preserved the place of the Old Testament within salvation-history while at the same time offering prophetic warrant for the advent of Jesus. Auerbach therefore traces the *origin* of figural interpretation back to Paul's Letters. In passages such as 1 Cor 15:21 and Rom 5:13, Adam is written as a "type" (*typos*) of Christ, whose grace supersedes the Mosaic Law. Paul thereby "strips away" the normative function of the Hebrew Scriptures and recasts the Mosaic narrative as a genuinely prophetic witness to the Messiah, laying the groundwork for the later, historically concrete method of figural exegesis.

At the historical moment when Christianity was breaking with Judaism, figural exegesis—that is, reading the Old Testament as "real prophecy"—proved decisive. By offering a coherent teleological view of history and a world order governed by divine providence, it captured the imagination and inner emotions of newly converted peoples (Auerbach, 2014:98). Although it emerged later than tropological allegory, figural interpretation, with its dynamic sense of concrete history, furnished the Church with fresh liturgical forms and narrative settings: the specifically Jewish aspect of law and norm in the Old Testament was quietly toned down, allowing Celtic, Germanic, and other groups to appropriate the Hebrew Scriptures as part of a single "universal history of salvation." Christ, understood as the final figura/fulfilment, endowed the faithful with a distinctive consciousness of world history; as that consciousness fused ever more firmly with belief, it gradually became, for nearly a millennium in Europe, the only legitimate philosophy of history.

By distinguishing between two modes of biblical interpretation—allegory (*allegoria*) and figure (*figura*)—Auerbach isolates a crucial thread: within the Christian tradition, an exalted and profound religious experience must be wedded to Judaism's esteem for everyday life and the material world. Even at the moment of the kingdom's ultimate fulfilment, the earthly realm of flesh and matter retains its concrete reality; it is not dissolved into an abstract, purely spiritual order. In the humanist criticism of *Mimesis*, Auerbach extends this figural logic to the whole of Western literature and culture.

The fundamental difference between allegory and figure, he argues, lies in the dimension of movement. Allegory is horizontal—it remains within the linear chain of historical time and causal relations. Figure, by contrast, is vertical: "It can be established only if both occurrences are vertically linked to Divine Providence" (Auerbach & Said, 2013:74). In other words, allegory unfolds symbols laterally within secular time, whereas figure, by vertically linking "heaven and earth, the sacred and the secular," elevates each moment of reality into a segment of salvation history, generating a multilayered pattern that combines historical concreteness with transcendent depth (Zakai & Weinstein, 2012). From this vantage point Auerbach installs the Hebrew Bible at the center of European humanism and insists that every event in ordinary reality simultaneously belongs to world history and sacred history. By foregrounding the primacy of figure in Christian thought, he forges an interior, indivisible bond between Old and New Testaments. Figure thus becomes the pivotal dimension that bridges the divine and the mundane, the historical and the transcendent, furnishing Western literature with its deepest metaphysical underpinning for representing reality.

In Erich Auerbach's hands, the practice of figural exegesis forged in late-antique and medieval scriptural scholarship acquires an urgent contemporary resonance: it is not merely a technical term of philology but a weapon for resisting racial mythmaking and defending cultural continuity. To grasp this stance one must return to the historical setting of *Figura*. At that moment the Nazi Third Reich was recasting the origins of an "Aryan" nation through radical racial and anti-Jewish policies, seeking to expel the Old Testament from the Christian canon and, by extension, to erase the Jewish strand from the foundations of European civilization. As Avihu Zakai (2016:2-3) has noted, Auerbach's investigations in *Figura* and *Mimesis*—into philology, history, and philosophy—were a direct answer to this pressing crisis: not only a political and social emergency, but a crisis within his own discipline, where "Aryan philology" had been elevated to official orthodoxy after 1933, zealously grounding scholarship in racism, antisemitism, and narrow nationalism. By reviving figural interpretation and reaffirming the indissoluble structure of Old and New Testaments, Auerbach rebuts attempts to purge Jewish elements from European culture and furnishes robust historical and theological arguments for a Judeo-Christian humanism.

Aryan philology began as a late-eighteenth-century linguistic breakthrough but was recast over the next two centuries as an ideological weapon in Europe's nationalist quest for a civilizational origin. In 1786 the Sanskritist Sir William Jones famously proposed that Sanskrit shared a common ancestry with Greek, Latin, and other classical European tongues, thereby laying the foundation for the hypothesis of an "Indo-European language family" and an accompanying Proto-Indo-European people. This discovery not only punctured the outdated conviction that classical antiquity is humanity's sole cultural center, it also inspired nineteenth-century comparative linguists to construct a new Western genesis independent of the Judeo-Christian tradition. As Arvidsson remarked, "Now it was no longer the authority of the Bible, but that of comparative linguistics that supported the new people" (Arvidsson, 2006: 60). By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, German Orientalists had further ideologized Aryan philology: it was repackaged as the scholarly fulcrum for forging a new Aryan people, poised to supplant the cultural centrality of Judeo-Christian humanism. "This rediscovered Aryan territory became the primitive homeland of Western man in search of legitimation" (Olender, 1992:139). In this discourse, comparative linguistics ceased to be a neutral pursuit of knowledge and became a tool by which the West sought both to legitimize its own history and culture and to provide a scientific foundation for racist mythologies.

When Auerbach composed *Figura* in 1938, Germany was in the throes of a political-religious mobilization that sought—through a newly minted "Rassenmythos" (Evola, 2018)—to overturn the Judeo-Christian cultural heritage. As early as 1899, the philosopher of history Houston Stewart Chamberlain—later dubbed John the Baptist to Hitler—had declared in *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* that any intermarriage between Aryans and other peoples would spell their decline; only an Aryan Jesus, he insisted, could supply the German nation with a new Germanic Christianity, one purged of the Old Testament. By 1930 the fascist theorist Alfred Rosenberg, in *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, had advanced the so-called "myth of blood," proclaiming that

> *History and the task of the future no longer signify the struggle of class against class or the conflict between one church dogma and another, but the settlement between blood and blood,*

> *race and race, Folk and Folk. And that means: the struggle of spiritual values against each other. (Rosenberg, 1993: 5)*

The year after Auerbach published *Figura* (1939) the Nazi–fascist camp had seized the upper hand in the anti-humanist debate: the Godesberg Declaration portrayed Christianity and Judaism as irreconcilable, and the Wartburg Institute, founded under the theologian Walter Grundmann, vowed to carry Luther's work to completion by thoroughly de-Judaizing the German church(Heschel, 1994). In this climate the Third Reich replaced the older European humanist tradition with a myth of blood–people–soil, creating the intellectual and spiritual crisis that confronted Auerbach directly. *Figura* is written precisely against this backdrop; by insisting on the inseparable unity of Old and New Testaments, Auerbach deploys figural interpretation as a reply to—and a resistance against—the Nazi project of eradicating the Judeo-Christian legacy.

Against this harsh political backdrop, Auerbach's distinction between allegorical and figural exegesis is far more than a dispute over philological technique; it embodies a profound political and epistemological agenda. On the surface the two methods differ only in how they handle the Bible's hidden meaning. In substance, however, each projects a radically opposed vision of history and of cultural lineage. Figural interpretation, by anchoring the Old–New Testament relationship in a chain of *type and fulfilment*, places the Judeo-Christian tradition at the very heart of real, lived history. *Figura* may appear to trace this system within a purely philological frame, yet its deeper aim is to construct a philosophy of history capable of countering Nazi "myth of blood." In direct opposition to the Third Reich's cult of Aryan philology, Auerbach proclaims that Jewish law, custom, and thought are inextricable components of Western civilization. Hence his demotion of allegory and elevation of figure serve a strategic purpose: to demonstrate that Europe's tradition of representing reality in literature and culture does not spring from the pagan Hellenic lineage worshipped by the Nazis, but is rooted instead in the Jewish-Christian spiritual heritage.

In his direct confrontation with the racist rhetoric of "Aryan philology," Auerbach labored to vindicate the Old Testament's centrality, authority, and reliability within Christianity and, by extension, the entirety of Western civilization. *Figura* (1938) can therefore be read as an apologia for the Judeo-Christian humanist tradition written at a moment of extreme peril. By the time of *Mimesis* (1946), Auerbach's mission had widened still further—now to defend the historical continuity of Western literature and culture as a whole. To borrow Avihu Zakai's vivid metaphor: The essay "Figura" is a *figura* of Mimesis, or conversely, *Mimesis* is the fulfillment and realization of "Figura" (Zakai, 2016:72).

FIGURAL EXEGESIS AS IDEOLOGICAL PRACTICE: TOWARD A REALISM OF EVERYDAY LIFE

This chapter seeks to demonstrate how Erich Auerbach transforms figural exegesis into a methodological key for literary-historical criticism. He begins by attacking the long-standing classical scheme that divides styles into noble and tragic (*stilus gravis*) versus low and comic (*stilus humilis*). In its place he champions the *mixtus* narrative strategy exemplified by Scripture and by Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in which everyday scenes stand side by side with sublime themes and are raised to an equal aesthetic and cognitive dignity. From this vantage point Auerbach introduces a new yardstick for evaluating narrative art: a realism of ordinary life. In so doing, figural exegesis completes its passage from a theological concept to a modern paradigm of literary criticism, offering a fresh theoretical framework for re-thinking the trajectory of Western realism.

Rooted in the Judeo-Christian humanist tradition, figural exegesis offered Auerbach the ideal point of departure for charting the landscape of Western literature and, at the same time, supplied an intellectual weapon against the racial mythology of Aryan philology. In the companion volume to *Mimesis*—the introduction to *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*—he openly acknowledges the tight knot that binds philology to ideology:

> *Spitzer's interpretations are always concerned primarily with an exact understanding of the individual linguistic form, the particular work or author. I, on the contrary, am concerned with something more general; my purpose is always to write history. Consequently I never approach a text as an isolated phenomenon; I address a question to it, and my question, not the text, is my primary point of departure. . (Auerbach, 1965, pp. 19–20)*

Starting with what appear to be isolated linguistic texts, Auerbach thus pursues a historical consciousness that embraces the whole of European literary-cultural life. He is convinced that philological research must serve humanist values: his inquiry into figural interpretation not only goes beyond Spitzer's purely linguistic analysis but also carries the larger thesis of the Jewish foundations of Western culture and literature. Guided by Judaism's esteem for this-worldly reality, Auerbach threads that concern through the development of Western letters; in *Mimesis* it crystallizes into a distinctive realism and sense of history—history, with all its concrete forces, is ever a *figura* that remains concealed and urgently awaits disclosure.

The logic of figural exegesis decisively shapes both the argumentative architecture and the rhetorical stance of *Mimesis*. Its most visible symptom is Auerbach's redefinition of the opposition between separation of styles and mixture of styles. For him, style is not simply a matter of rhetorical choice or linguistic ornament; it is inseparably bound to social hierarchy and the spirit of an age. From Greco-Roman antiquity, and later through the agency of seventeenth-century French classicism, separation of styles became normative: elevated tragedy was permitted to treat only nobles, gods, and heroes, while the quotidian realities of the common people were relegated to the supposedly lower realm of comedy. The historical horizon opened up by figural interpretation overturns this hierarchy. Auerbach openly repudiates separation of styles and, in biblical narrative, discovers the principle of mixture of styles (*mixtus*) -the sublime and the humble, the sacred and the secular, can coexist within a single text, thereby legitimizing ordinary life as a fit subject for literary grandeur. Hence the subtitle of *Mimesis*, The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, does not point to a simple mimetic reflection of reality; rather, it underscores the imperative to seize and to render the era's collective sensibility in the flux of social history and in the mental life of the lower strata, capturing the age's spirit precisely within everyday things.

Within the framework of figural exegesis, *Mimesis* explores the far-reaching impact of biblical narrative on three fronts of European letters—representation of reality, consciousness of time, and understanding of history. In the inaugural chapter, Odysseus' Scar, Auerbach sets Genesis alongside the Odyssey: whereas Homer's epic is vast yet legendary and fictive, the Old Testament, through a continuous and solemn historical narration, foregrounds reality and rationality. Auerbach thus concludes that both the Western sense of history and its practice of representing reality are grounded in the comprehensive *type-and-fulfilment* perspective furnished by the Hebrew Bible. His distinction between *allegory* and *figure* is shaped by Rudolf Bultmann's discussion of Jewish-Hellenistic Christianity: allegorical interpretation dilutes the historical weight and legal authority of the Old Testament, whereas figural interpretation preserves it (Zakai, 2016:65). The pairing of *Genesis* with the *Odyssey* is therefore meant to rebut anti-Jewish polemics, underscoring the psychological depth and historical reach of Hebrew narrative over the Winckelmann ideal of Greek clarity and harmony. This stance also answers to the long-standing disputes between Athens and Jerusalem. Between the fourth and eighth centuries, the Germanic tribes acquired a sense of time and history through the Hebrew Bible; in the twentieth century, however, the Nazis—brandishing the myth of blood and soil (Blut und Boden)—rejected the Old Testament and sought to resurrect classical Greece. Auerbach insists that such Aryan historiography lacks any factual basis. Compared with Greek mythology, it is the Hebrew Scriptures that provide Europe with a framework for grasping the parallel courses of secular history and salvation history; their reverence for historical reality underpins the foundational paradigm of Western literary realism.

Figural exegesis provides Auerbach with a humanist vision of history and reshapes his judgment on the separation of styles versus mixture of styles. True realism, he maintains, must present the everyday within the sweep of grand history, integrating any character or episode into the larger movement of an age. Hence he rejects the classical hierarchy of noble tragedy / low comedy, advocates the democratization of subject matter and style, and champions the sublime of ordinary tragedy. Chapter 2 of Mimesis, "Furnasanta", offers a close reading of Peter's threefold denial in Mark's Gospel to illustrate the point:

> *Through God's incarnation in a human being of the humblest social station, through his existence on earth amid humble everyday people and conditions… it portrays something which neither the poets nor the historians of antiquity ever set out to portray: the birth of a spiritual movement in the depths of the common people, from within the everyday occurrences of con-*

> *temporary life, which thus assumes an importance it could never have assumed in antique literature. What we witness is the awakening of 'a new heart and a new spirit. (Auerbach & Said, 2013:41-43)*

By juxtaposing Peter's coarse speech and actions with his profound inner turmoil, Auerbach uncovers the complexity of the common psyche. He thus interprets Jewish narrative as a form of everyday realism: the Incarnate Christ appears among the lowliest, and faith germinates in the textures of daily existence and in the depths of ordinary souls. The most mundane experiences thereby open onto the sublime—human beings discern spiritual power in quotidian life and perceive how the present moment is embedded in the history of redemption, discovering the grave depth latent in the commonplace. This ordinary sublime and the spiritual movement of the common people become the core of Western realist writing. Judaism and Christianity are reconciled, and Auerbach's realist stance serves as a potent rebuttal to the Aryan philology project that sought to excise the Old Testament from European cultural memory.

In Auerbach's view, the Bible is the true point of departure for Western literature's shift from the separation of styles to the mixture of styles; the realist aesthetic grounded in the Judeo-Christian figural vision reaches its climax in Dante's Divine Comedy—a vernacular elevated to the realm of the sublime, and the earthly Roman Empire presented as a *figura* of the Kingdom of Heaven. Chapter VIII, *Farinata and Cavalcante*, is exemplary: the poet introduces two sinners in a stately high style, then, in the Inferno scene, renders the sensual texture of their worldly desires, displaying

> *…open before us a world of earthly-historical life, of earthly deeds, endeavors, feelings, and passions, the like of which the earthly scene itself can hardly produce in such abundance and power. Certainly they are all set fast in God's order, certainly a great Christian poet has the right to preserve earthly humanity in the beyond, to preserve the figure in its fulfillment and to perfect the one and the other to the best of his capabilities. (Auerbach & Said, 2013: 201)*

The contrast with Auerbach's early study *Dante: Poet of the Secular World* (1923) is striking. In that book he still followed the German-philological tradition, treating classical Greece as Europe's sole point of origin and claiming that "ever since European literature first arose in Greece, it has possessed the insight that man is an inseparable unity of 'body' and 'spirit'" (Auerbach, 1961:1). Yet in the post-war *Mimesis* Dante is cast explicitly as a Christian poet; his characters gain concreteness and power through figural interpretation, reflecting Auerbach's pronounced *anti-classical* turn (Uhlig, 1996). Put differently, he no longer explains European letters through a Greek paradigm. Instead, he elevates the Bible-to-Dante lineage as the core tradition of Western realism and historical consciousness—thereby countering the Nazi project of Aryan philology, which sought to erase the Hebrew Scriptures from Europe's cultural foundations.

Auerbach's wariness toward the classical Greek legacy occasionally puts him in tension with the historicist credo he inherited from Vico. Vico had summed up the matter as follows: Every civilization, every age, possesses its own potential for aesthetic perfection … Works of art and life-forms must be regarded as products of mutable historical conditions and judged according to their internal laws, not by any absolute standard of beauty or ugliness (Auerbach, 2014:36). Yet whenever the value judgment between separation of styles and mixture of styles comes into play, Auerbach's balance clearly wavers: in his account, the French classicists—Corneille, Molière, Racine—become guardians of an outworn regime of stylistic partition, provoking "unhistorist wrath" (Ankersmit, 2002). Fired by a zeal to defend Judeo-Christian realism, he temporarily abandons the neutrality that historicism ought to maintain. This oscillation is closely linked to Auerbach's attempt to reconcile the Hegelian world-spirit with a perspective centered on existence and individuation. In his essay "Philology of World Literature" he justifies his stance: humanistic inquiry, he argues, is concerned not merely with material objects but with a system of valuation that penetrates and confers meaning, that writes the internal history of humanity and thereby shapes a conception of man tending toward unity in diversity (Auerbach, 2014:254). In other words, our grasp of the *Zeitgeist* does not arise from abstract metaphysics; it is rooted in the continual action of historical forces within everyday life: the world-spirit rides not only on Napoleon's horse, but also emerges quietly in the daily events and spiritual movements of ordinary people.

CONCLUSION

Auerbach treats figural exegesis, with its insistence on historical-grammatical concreteness, as the very fountainhead of Europe's historical consciousness; and he presents the displacement of allegory by *figura* as an immanent line of progress in the Western representation of reality, thereby championing the mixture of styles exemplified by Scripture. Yet his verdict on the two patristic modes of interpretation is less a disinterested historical assessment than a value proclamation shaped by the exigencies of the Nazi era. Confronted with Aryan philology, which sought to replace humanism with a myth of blood, race, and soil and to excise the Hebrew Bible from Christian tradition, Auerbach elevated philology into an intellectual battleground: by exposing the fissure between classical culture and Christian faith—both in form and in spirit—he resolutely defended the Old Testament as an indivisible component of Christianity and of Western civilization as a whole. He wove Judaism's esteem for everyday life together with Christianity's democratic impulse into an original, inseparable bond: through the value of an everyday realism, he linked the spiritual movements of ordinary people to the grand design of world history. From this teleological and progressive vantage point, the Western representation of reality becomes a vast drama steadily advancing toward democracy and universal openness.

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