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Disfigurations: Erich Auerbach's Theory of *Figura*

James I. Porter

Miracles occur on earth and the Incarnation is a thing of the flesh.
—ERICH AUERBACH, "*Figura*"

Erich Auerbach is a critic of many legacies. The most frequently read of his essays outside of those that together make up *Mimesis* is without a doubt his landmark study "*Figura.*" "*Figura*" was published in 1938, two years into Auerbach's forced exile in Istanbul after he was dismissed from the University of Marburg under the Nazi racial laws prohibiting Jews from occupying government-sponsored posts.[1] Formally speaking, the essay is a model of German philology from the time. Running some fifty pages in its

The present essay develops suggestions that I first made in "Erich Auerbach and the Judaizing of Philology," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Autumn 2008): 115–47, and is in ways its pendant. I wish to thank Bob Alter, Cliff Ando, Daniel Boyarin, Eric Downing, Jaś Elsner, Marco Formisano, Paula Fredriksen, Constanze Güthenke, Richard Neer, Steve Nichols, and Maria Pantelia for generous comments and invaluable suggestions. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

1. "*Figura*" was first published in *Archivum Romanicum* 22 (1938): 436–89 and then reissued in 1939 by Leo S. Olschiki in Florence as a self-standing offprint. It was reprinted in Erich Auerbach, *Neue Dantestudien* (Istanbul, 1944), pp. 11–71 and again in his *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur romanischen Philologie* (Berlin, 1967), pp. 55–92. The first English translation was by Ralph Manheim in Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature: Six Essays* (New York, 1959), pp. 11–76. I will be citing the most recent English translation, which appears in *Time, History, and Literature: Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach*, trans. Jane O. Newman, ed. James I. Porter (Princeton, N.J., 2016), pp. 65–113; hereafter abbreviated "*F.*" On Auerbach's exile in Turkey, see Martin Vialon, "The Scars of Exile: Paralipomena Concerning the Relationship between History, Literature, and Politics—Demonstrated in the Examples of Erich Auerbach, Traugott Fuchs, and Their Circle in Istanbul," *Yeditepe'de felsefe* 1, no. 2 (2003): 191–246, and Kader Konuk, *East West Mimesis: Auerbach in Turkey* (Stanford, Calif., 2010).

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original form and equipped with as many learned footnotes, it takes a single word, *figura*, and studies the transformations in its meaning from its earliest occurrences in Latin literature down to its final deployment by Dante Alighieri, who, as so often with Auerbach, occupies a culminating moment in literary history on the cusp of secular modernity. Appearances notwithstanding, Auerbach's main interest is not lexical or even literary but rather conceptual, cultural, and historical. "*Figura*" traces the seismic shifts that occurred in the passage from pagan to Christian antiquity, and it does so by attending to the language in which reality was represented on each side of this historical divide.

Auerbach's essay made an enormous if uneven impact on subsequent scholarship. In religious studies, "*Figura*" contributed to a literary appreciation of the exegetical practices of Christian interpreters of the scriptures from late antiquity into the Middle Ages and, indirectly, in later periods, practices that are collectively known as typological or figural reading.[2] But it was primarily his contrastive analysis of Homer and the Bible in the opening chapter of *Mimesis*, which makes only limited use of typological protocols, that helped to usher in a literary approach to reading the Bible.[3] Whether "*Figura*" made any impact in nonliterary areas of religious studies, for instance by extending or redirecting the so-called higher criticism that originated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and that was shaped by Protestant Reformation thinkers who sought to defend the literal sense of scripture and indicted spiritual allegorism, is another matter but doubtful. In any event, it appears that the field has moved on and that Auerbach has become a part of its history rather than a part of its current

2. Examples include Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, Conn., 1974); David Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley, 2002), hereafter abbreviated *CFR*; and Volker Hartmann, *Religiosität als Intertextualität: Studien zum Problem der literarischen Typologie im Werk Franz Werfels* (Tübingen, 1998).

3. See Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), pp. 4, 23, and J. W. Rogerson, "Old Testament," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, ed. Rogerson and Judith Lieu (Oxford, 2006), pp. 5–25, esp. pp. 16–17.

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working models.[4] Among critics and theorists moved by the linguistic turn, Auerbach's essay was welcomed for celebrating the figurative powers of language over its capacities for historical reference.[5] More recently, in what might be called a theological turn in literary theory, Auerbach has been read as a proponent of a "secret theology" and a "theological figuralism" that seeks to recuperate "messianic eschatology" in an enlarged vision of the world as an earthly sphere.[6]

Wherever one looks one finds a consensus among scholars that Auerbach's vision of literary history can be read through the lens of figural reading, as though he had adopted this interpretive technique and made it his own, not only in "*Figura*," where Auerbach is giving a historical account without endorsing a thing, but also in *Mimesis*, whether in his reading of the Hebrew Bible in the famous first chapter of that work[7] or even in later chapters where his analysis concerns secular and no longer Jewish or Chris-

4. Auerbach appears to have been superseded by later scholarship, in some cases almost immediately. He is not mentioned, for example, in Jean Daniélou, *Origène* (Paris, 1948); Friedrich Ohly, "Typologie als Denkform der Geschichtsbetrachtung," *Ausgewählte und neue Schriften zur Literaturgeschichte und zur Bedeutungsforschung* (Stuttgart, 1995), pp. 445–72; John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York, 1983); Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley, Calif., 1994); Peter W. Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life* (New York, 2012); and Judith M. Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century* (New York, 2015). And he is gently nudged aside as somewhat dated and romanticizing in, for example, *Interpretation and Allegory: Antiquity to the Modern Period*, ed. Jon Whitman (Boston, 2003), pp. 42, 291, 295 n. 125, and 440. The one prominent exception is *CFR*, which seeks to rehabilitate Auerbach's theory (see below).

5. For example, see Timothy Bahti, "Auerbach's *Mimesis*: Figural Structure and Historical Narrative," in *After Strange Texts: The Role of Theory in the Study of Literature*, ed. Gregory S. Jay and David L. Miller (University, Ala., 1985), pp. 124–45, and Hayden White, "Auerbach's Literary History: Figural Causation and Modern Historicism," in *Literary History and the Challenge of Philology: The Legacy of Erich Auerbach*, ed. Seth Lerer (Stanford, Calif., 1996), pp. 124–39.

6. Emily Apter, "Auerbach's *Welt*-Theology," *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London, 2013), pp. 202, 199, and 197. Similarly, Galili Shahar, "Auerbach's Scars: Judaism and the Question of Literature," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 101, no. 4 (2011): 604–30, esp. pp. 610–11, and Jane O. Newman, "Auerbach's Dante: Poetical Theology as a Point of Departure for World Literature," in *Approaches to World Literature*, ed. Joachim Küpper (Berlin, 2013), pp. 39–58. Contrast Helmut Kuhn, "Literaturgeschichte als Geschichtsphilosophie," *Philosophische Rundschau* 11, no. 3–4 (1963): 222–48, esp. p. 248, quoted in Porter, *Time, History, and Literature*, p. xxxvi n. 43; David Damrosch, "Auerbach in Exile," *Comparative Literature* 47, no. 2 (1995): 97–117, esp. pp. 108–9; and Stephen G. Nichols, "Erich Auerbach: History, Literature, and Jewish Philosophy," *Romanistisches Jahrbuch* 58, no. 7 (2008): 161–85.

7. See Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, p. 3; Jesse M. Gellrich, "*Figura*, Allegory, and the Question of History," in *Literary History and the Challenge of Philology*, pp. 107–23, hereafter abbreviated "FAQ"; and Edward Said, introduction to Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, N.J., 2003), p. xii, hereafter abbreviated *M*; and *CFR*, chap. 4.

tian writing.[8] At another extreme, it can be asserted that history is grasped by Auerbach as itself a figural mechanism under the sign of *mimesis*.[9] *Figura* here becomes something like a master trope in Auerbach's conceptual arsenal, and it threatens to overwhelm the whole of his thinking. Can the figure of *figura* bear so much meaning?

I doubt that it can. A closer look at the role of *figura* in Auerbach's writings will bring out some of the intricacies of this concept and will show that *figura* functions for him more as a vanishing mediator than as a master trope, much as late antiquity was in Auerbach's mind a watershed but also a passing moment in the history of Western culture. Auerbach had a keen sense of the direction that history had taken, and his writings demand that we situate him within this perspective.

In what follows, I will begin by focusing on the essay "*Figura*." I will then turn to other related writings and will conclude by reappraising the role of *figura* in *Mimesis* and in his largest views about the representation of reality. All told, I believe we can say that Auerbach's theory of *figura* contributes to a reassessment of the transition from pagan antiquity to the Christian Middle Ages, inasmuch as it repositions that historical epoch in a fundamentally new and provocative fashion. But if so, then it does this by responding to the particular circumstances in which Auerbach found himself as a German Jew living and working in the Weimar Republic, then under Fascism, and finally in a state of exile. To recall what Auerbach says in his "Epilegomena to *Mimesis*" from 1953: "*Mimesis* is quite consciously a book that a particular person, in a particular situation, wrote at the beginning of the 1940s" (*M*, p. 574). The same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for his other writings, including "*Figura*." No reading of that essay or its later elaborations can afford to ignore Auerbach's immediate historical context.

1. "*Figura*"

"*Figura*" is the story of rupture and supersession along four axes: that of the supersession of antiquity by Christianity, of rhetoric by theology, of the Hebrew Bible by Christianizing typological interpretation, and finally of all of these by secular modernity. Within this trajectory, *figura* plays a

8. See White, "Auerbach's Literary History"; *CFR*, pp. 111–12; Shahar, "Auerbach's Scars," p. 616; and Jacob Hovind, "Figural Interpretation as Modernist Hermeneutics: The Rhetoric of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*," *Comparative Literature* 64, no. 3 (2012): 258–69.

9. See White, "Auerbach's Literary History," esp. pp. 131–33 and *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore, 1999). In "Figural Interpretation as Modernist Hermeneutics," p. 259, Hovind writes, "like Augustine, Auerbach essentially interprets history figuratively," which has unfortunate decontextualizing consequences. The most extreme version of this trajectory is found in Bahti, "Auerbach's *Mimesis*," for example, p. 144: "historical reality [for Auerbach] is cancelled or annihilated in its fulfillment in literature."

specific role. Supplying a thread of continuity, it resists some of the movements towards rupture and supersession while also to a degree facilitating them.

The current consensus around "*Figura*" takes it as a given that Auerbach privileges *figura* over other typological modes of reading (chiefly, symbol and allegory) precisely because figural reading appears to resist these tendencies; it roots the validity of literal meaning in historical reality, in particular that of the Hebrew Bible, whereas its counterparts eschew the literal and historical dimensions of meaning and reality and instead embrace the abstract, atemporal, and spiritually transcendent nature of revealed Christian truth.[10] The picture is decidedly more complicated than this. And although Auerbach's allegiances to the historical and the concrete never waver, his allegiances to *figura* are in fact paper thin. This, at least, is what I hope to demonstrate in what follows.

Auerbach opens his essay with a survey of the term's history, which for him has a significant contour. *Figura* begins its life as a translation into Latin of the Greek vocabulary for shape, which was originally numerous, colorful, and powerfully imagistic. In Latin, this vocabulary is quickly reduced both in number and in concreteness. This trajectory will prove to be fateful. Of the five original Greek equivalents for outward plastic shape and form singled out by Auerbach (*morphē, eidos*, *schēma, typos, plasis*), Latin reduces the number to two: *figura* and *forma* ("*F*," p. 67). *Figura* soon assumes a high level of abstraction in grammatical and rhetorical discourse, ousting *forma* as the term of choice for denominating linguistic morphology or rhetorical figures, both of which categories of usage, Auerbach complains, are *ganz unplastisch* ("completely non-three-dimensional"; "*F*," p. 66; trans. mod.). This tension in the word's semantics, which vacillates between the material (the richly concrete) and the immaterial (the reductively abstract), will accompany its development into later antiquity; *figura* will retain both its dimensional and its visual qualities on the one hand—its connotations point to the sensuous and the concrete but also to movement and transformation (see "*F*," pp. 67–74)—and its capacity for abstraction on the other. The two connotations produce an internal antagonism within the word, and it is this antagonism that draws Auerbach to *figura* even more than the durability of the term over the centuries. Abstraction

10. This is the view of, for example, "FAQ," p. 123 ("resisting"); *CFR*, pp. 97, 103 ("resist"); and Shahar, "Auerbach's Scars," p. 611 ("a sense of resistance"). See also Avihu Zakai and David Weinstein, "Erich Auerbach and His '*Figura*': An Apology for the Old Testament in an Age of Aryan Philology," *Religions* 3, no. 3 (2012): 320–38. An early predecessor is Daniélou, *Origène*, p. 155, who, however, points out that the figure's resistance to spiritual meaning ("[le] refus de la figure") is the standard operating premise of Christian typological exegesis.

will eventually give way to spiritualization, but *figura* will never lose its connotations of lively and sensuous movement, transformation, and reality. The two tendencies remain locked in a dynamic and irresolvable tension to the end.[11] As we shall see, although Auerbach's sympathies are firmly grounded in the camp of the real and the concrete, he never loses sight of the symptomatic quality of the tension, which for him is both constitutive of the way figuralism operates and valuable as an index of the claims that historical reality makes or fails to make on those who resort to figural interpretation.

Complicating the term's semantics is the unexpected contribution from the side of ancient atomism, to which Auerbach devotes a startling two pages (see "*F*," pp. 69–70). Lucretius represents the most powerful but least realized exponent of the term's range of meanings in classical antiquity, a lamentable outcome in Auerbach's eyes. Innovating on the tradition, Lucretius uses *figura* to capture the material atom—its shape, its motion, and its substance—but also its evanescent appearances ("dream-image," "figment of the imagination," "shadow of the dead"). Auerbach gushes with complete admiration for atomism in its ancient forms (Democritean, Epicurean, and Lucretian): atoms "careen about in the void, first joining with and then repelling one another, in a dance of figures." (His language is identical to that which is used by other admirers of ancient atomism, notably Friedrich Nietzsche and Henri Bergson.)[12] The more troubling connotations of appearances, shadows, and imaginary constructs, coupled with a vestigial materialism, will haunt the development of *figura* in a subtle and subliminal fashion in the rest of Auerbach's essay when it turns to later phases in the word's history.

The classical tradition is but a prelude to the real drama of "*Figura*." The system of tropes and figures that was Rome's greatest contribution to the meaning of *figura* achieved, over time, a level of complexity that Auerbach calls "incomprehensible, strange, and often downright absurd" ("*F*," p. 77; trans. mod.). The classical system culminated in unwieldy abstraction. With the arrival of the Christian fathers in the second and third centuries, *figura* was rejuvenated; new life coursed through the word's veins, though

11. For example: "In the first example [from Tertullian's *Against Marcion*], it appears to be the simile, in the second, the abstraction that endows the figure with a lesser degree of reality. Yet there is no shortage of examples in which the figure seems to be more concrete" ("*F*," p. 82).

12. For Nietzsche, see Porter, *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future* (Stanford, Calif., 2000), p. 84. For Bergson, see Porter, "Lucretius and the Poetics of Void," in *Le Jardin romain: Épicurisme et poésie à Rome: Mélanges offerts à Mayotte Bollack*, ed. Annick Monet (Villeneuve d'Ascq, 2003), p. 217 n. 61.

the tendency to abstraction remained a threat even here, which brought in its train another, darker tendency.

Tertullian's diatribe *Against Marcion* (207–8 CE) is Auerbach's point of departure, a telling choice. Marcion had famously sought to exclude the Jewish Bible from the canon of holy scriptures in the second century. Tertullian rejected Marcion's arguments, and in doing so he became the spearhead of a movement to preserve the unity of scripture by insisting on the "distinction between the Old and New Testaments, and within that distinction a subordination of the Old to the New," which could then be enforced by demonstrating how the old dispensation prefigured the new—a possibility to which Marcion remained as blind as the Jews he was attacking.[13]

It is here that Auerbach develops his famous account of *figura* as an approach to unpacking the meaning of the Bible. *Figura*, in presaging events from the Old Testament that are realized in the New Testament, may be subordinated spiritually to its fulfillment, but it asserts its own historical reality in a way that rivals that of its spiritual counterpart: "*Figura* is something real and historical that represents and proclaims in advance something else that is also real and historical." Both elements "are historically real in equal measure" ("*F*," pp. 79, 80).

By insisting on what is "historically real," Auerbach is accomplishing two things. First, he is ensuring that the figural process will be embedded in time and place, not in language, "*in factis*, not *in dictis*."[14] Second, he is underscoring the fact that spiritual meaning can only be asserted if it is grounded in events that take place in the here and now of human history. It must be *incarnated* to be true at all ("*F*," p. 83: *carnaliter adimpleri*). In the process, meaning, which is spiritual and not material, is made contingent upon this kind of authorization by reality, which it can in no way negate. Thus, blood is understood by Tertullian both tropologically, as a figure, and literally, as a real test of the flesh (see "*F*," p. 81). Likewise, Moses may be the prefiguration of Christ, but he is "no less historical and real" than Christ, who in turn is "not an abstract idea, but is rather immanently historical and concrete," insofar as he underwent incarnation and entered into human history ("*F*," p. 83; trans. mod.). *Figura* thus resumes its earliest connotations, which are now infused with new theological meaning: as-

13. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism*, p. 161. See "*F*," p. 81, quoting Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 4.40.3: "For he [namely, Marcion] did not understand." Compare Lieu, *Marcion*, pp. 77, 78, the latter citing Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 3.7.1: "the blind [namely, Marcion] borrowing from the blind [namely, the Jews]" *("caecus de caeco").*

14. Ohly, "Typologie als Denkform der Geschichtsbetrachtung," p. 451.

suming "its most basic sense of 'shape,'" it points back to the realm of "substance" and can be "equat[ed] . . . with the flesh" ("*F*," p. 80). Marcion's rejection of the Old Testament can thereby be turned on its head; it denies reality. Such is the force of Tertullian's "emphatic realism" ("*F*," p. 80) and of his commitment to "historical concreteness" ("*F*," p. 81; trans. mod.).

Reading Tertullian in this way permits Auerbach to expand his findings across a much larger canvas. He sets up a contrast between two kinds of interpretive schemes, those that affirm historical realities and in the process preserve the integrity of the Bible, and those that look outside of history and create spiritualized, abstract meanings at the cost of robbing the Jewish traditions of their reality. Auerbach places the former under the rubric of *figura*, the latter under allegory. Tertullian inaugurates the figural method of prophetic reading (*Realprophetie*), which grounds historical transformations in real events that occur within time. He is followed by Augustine, whose "spirituality was much too alive and situated in history for him to have been content with anything that was allegorical in a purely abstract way" ("*F*," p. 85). On the other side, representing the allegorical and moralizing approach, stands Origen first and foremost, who openly challenged the historicity of the Hebrew Bible ("*F*," p. 84).[15]

That said, Tertullian's revindication of the Bible was not exactly unqualified. The Old Testament could be brought back into the fold but only if it was subordinated to the New Testament. There were further problems. The refutation of Marcion did nothing to lessen the anti-Judaistic rhetoric that ran through early Christianity, and in some ways it merely inflamed this rhetoric, bringing it dangerously close to anti-Semitism—a term that is absent in Auerbach's essay, though he is perfectly aware of the *adversus Iudaeos* traditions and of their absolute relevance to the study of *figura*. After all, Tertullian was the author of one such tract (*Adversus Iudaeos*, or *Against the Jews*). Not only does Tertullian recycle parts of this earlier work in his writing *Against Marcion*, which allows Auerbach to compare both works ("*F*," p. 80), but Tertullian "most probably inherited a number of his arguments about scriptural prophecy and prefiguration from an earlier 'against the Jews' tradition."[16] The Bible had to be reclaimed but also appropriated. And so while the apologists, Tertullian included, did much to undermine Marcion's and others' denigrations of the Jewish Bible, their

15. The distinction is loosely anticipated by Quintilian's distinction between figures, which are grounded in literal and proper meaning, and tropes, which allow for nonliteral substitutions (see "*F*," p. 76).

16. Lieu, *Marcion*, p. 59. See further ibid., p. 78 and Paula Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism* (New Haven, Conn., 2010), p. 224.

responses remained integral to a long-standing tradition of just such denigrations. Clearly, "the retention of the Jewish Bible had its price."[17]

The contrast between the two seemingly opposed approaches to the Old Testament symbolized by "Tertullian's more worldly, historical, and realistic way of interpreting and Origen's more allegorical and moral approach" is significant but not in the way that it is usually made out to be. Early Christianity was riven by this "conflict" ("*F*," p. 84), but the conflict is by no means limited to that which Auerbach stages between *figura* and allegory. It is constitutive of those traditions themselves. And although we are told that the tendency that acknowledged the historical reality of the Hebrew Bible emerged in the West as "the unqualified victor" ("*F*," p. 84), we are also told that the conflict within Christianity never subsided. Not even Augustine could free himself from it. Despite rejecting allegorism, "[Augustine] nevertheless continues to endorse a kind of idealism"—a kind of "Platonizing," Auerbach later adds ("*F*," p. 100)—"that removes the concrete event from time as *figura* . . . and places it into the perspective of timeless eternity" ("*F*," p. 88)—inevitably so, given the nature of Christian revelation and its ultimate eschatological premises: all of Christian theology depends on the transcendence of historical reality. *Figura* is the prophetic expression of this salvific promise. The collapsing of temporality is written into the very substance of figural reading: "what is to come is represented figuratively as having already happened" ("*F*," p. 88), and "this eternity is already figured in the figures, so to speak" ("*F*," p. 101). Such is the contradictory mission of figures: they announce the truth of events that take place in time, but only within a framework that rejects temporality; figures are "timeless" because they belong "to all times" ("*F*," p. 89). This atemporal framework endows figures with the only truth they have, which is ultimately a spiritual, not a historical, truth (see "*F*," pp. 89–90).

The point is an important one to make because it is too easily lost in discussions of Auerbach's thesis. When he states that the "tendency" that emerged in the West was "the unqualified victor," he is not saying that it was figural prophetic realism that triumphed in the long run. He is giving an account of the emergence of a commitment to historical reality—the desire "to maintain its [that is, the Old Testament's] concrete historicity" ("*F*," p. 84). The desire for historical authenticity prevails, not the figurative mechanism that gave it only partial expression. Figural reading was a passing phase, not an enduring monument. It crucially enabled historical

17. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism*, p. 161; compare ibid., pp. 163–64, further citing David P. Efroymson, "Tertullian's Anti-Judaism and Its Role in His Theology" (PhD diss., Temple University, 1976).

consciousness in the West. But its role was itself historically circumscribed, as is Auerbach's own analysis of this mode of interpreting reality. Secular realism triumphs, not figuralism, which is itself marked by the "conflict" between history and prophecy that runs deeply through the Christian tradition and that ultimately led to its undoing (see *M*, pp. 75–76). But this is not all that marked the figural tradition and that made it a partner rather than an adversary of allegorism. Nor does it spell out the full extent of the divisions that permeate Christianity for Auerbach.

One of the more unfortunate but inevitable consequences of the prophetic approach, which reads Jewish realities as prefiguring a Christian spiritual truth, was its anti-Judaic tenor. Jews were not privy to the truths that their earliest history foretold. Worse, they resisted them. "In their stubborn blindness, the Jews of his day—and in these words we hear the strains of a polemic against the Jews that runs through all later arguments of this sort—resisted recognizing that this was the case," namely recognizing that the Jewish law in its carnal sense and in "its earthly promises" is but a figure "of heavenly things" ("*F*," p. 87). Auerbach is speaking here not of Tertullian, whether in his tract *Against Marcion* or in his earlier tract *Against the Jews*, but of Augustine.

As we saw, the conflict that accompanies the early Christian traditions is not limited to the conflict that Auerbach stages between *figura* and allegory. The attempts to harmonize the biblical texts through exegesis are merely symptoms of a deeper problem: the need both to construe reality and to harmonize the experience of time with the conditions of a release from time altogether proved to be an intractable proposition (*M*, pp. 75–76). As Auerbach notes both in his earlier book on Dante, significantly titled *Dante: Poet of the Secular World* (1929), and later in *Mimesis*, Christianity was troubled by an antinomy at its core: it required both historical reality and its transcendence. Indeed each was the proof of the other's possibility but not of the other's reality, which could never be "fully actualized" in this world but only in a projected and forever postponed Beyond.[18] The most concentrated form of this paradox lay in its founding "myth" (Auerbach's term) and primary scene: the Incarnation of godhead in Christ (*D*, p. 19; see pp. 13–15). This was the "historical kernel" that eternally chafed against the spiritual aspirations of the faith, consisting of a man, Christ, embodying God, and the terrible clash between these two poles (*D*, p. 11; trans. mod.). In "*Figura*," Auerbach observes that these antinomies are directly written into the idea of the Incarnation ("such ideas were implicit in

18. Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. Manheim (Chicago, 1961), p. 13; hereafter abbreviated *D*.

the very fact of the Incarnation"; "*F*," p. 88). In *Mimesis*, he characterizes the problem more broadly as residing in "the antagonism between sensory appearance and meaning, an antagonism which permeates the early, and indeed the whole, Christian view of reality" (*M*, p. 49).[19]

Christianity rose and fell on the rock of this antagonism, which troubled the very heart of its figural recuperations of history, of Judaism, and of earthly life itself. Indeed, figural reading "figures" this antagonism. Forever short on spiritual reality and forever in need of historical reality, figures re-enact the founding gesture of Truth's descent upon the world—its literal incarnation—in a kind of repetition compulsion that continuously assures itself of its own validity. Adam prefigures Christ (see "*F*," pp. 80, 92, and so on), but so does Moses ("*F*," pp. 82–83, 85, and so on), Joshua ("*F*," p. 79), and Saul.[20] Not only does the Old Testament prefigure Christ by giving his "prehistory" ("*F*," p. 94), but even Christ prefigures in the flesh his own spiritual truth: "The sufferings of Christ *non fuerunt inania*, *sed habuerunt figuram et significationem magnam* [were not meaningless, but rather were powerful figures and had great significance]," writes Lactantius (quoted in "*F*," p. 83).

The problem with figural reading is evident in its sheer power. What cannot be made into a figure of a future prophetic reality? The question troubled the most adept of biblical interpreters, including Tertullian, who wonders aloud in his polemic against Marcion, "Yet how can Christ be the Passover except that the Passover is a figure of Christ because of the similitude between the saving blood of the (paschal) lamb and of Christ?" ("*F*," p. 79). Auerbach's comment is wry and noteworthy: "Shadowy similarities in the structure of events or in the circumstances that accompany them are often enough to make the *figura* recognizable, but it took a commitment to a certain will to interpretation *(ein bestimmter Interpretationswille)* to discover it in each and every case" ("*F*," pp. 79–80; trans. mod.). As the list goes on, the readings seem more improbable—less the result of self-evident spiritual truth having been detected than the result of a genuine "will to interpretation." Augustine's writings proliferate the possibilities of figures with astonishing "abundance" ("*F*," p. 85): Noah's ark is a prefiguration of the church, Moses is a figure of Christ (and "in several different ways"), the priesthood of Aaron is a shadow and figure of eternal priest-

19. Auerbach is not exposing a rift between the two forms of Christian biblical exegesis here, namely, *figura* and allegory (see Boyarin, "By Way of Apology," p. 188). He is exposing what he takes to be the core of Christianity's most basic and fragile stance towards the world, "the whole Christian view of reality" (*M*, 48).

20. Saul is added to the list in Auerbach, "Saul's Pride (*Purg.* XX. 40–42)," *Modern Language Notes* 64, no. 4 (1949): 267–69.

hood, Hagar the slave is a figure of the Old Testament, Sarah of the New Testament, Saul's pride figures "the arrogant hearts (*superbia corda*) of the Jews who reject [Christ's] message," except when Saul is himself a figure of Christ.[21] But when are Saul—or Moses, or Aaron, or Hagar, and so on—ever *themselves*?

The similarities can indeed be "shadowy" at times. With this word Auerbach is gesturing at the common designation of *figura* as the *umbra* ("shadow") of the *veritas* that it announces and predicts or else promises (*quod per illas umbras figurate promittebatur*; "*F*," p. 86). But he is also thinking of the pejorative sense that *umbra* can have. *Umbra* inherits this connotation from the earlier understanding of *figura* in classical rhetoric, where the term was haunted by suspicions of contamination, inauthenticity, and insubstantiality. Some of this underlay of meaning derived from the connotations of material and outer "shape" or "form" that were inherited from the Greek word *schēma*. Thanks to this heritage

> the idea of *schēma*, as it was associated with metaphorical and rhetorical periphrasis, dissemblance, change, and even deception in the pre-Christian poetic and rhetorical traditions, immediately became part of the mix. The opposition between *figura* and *veritas*, between the interpretation (*exponere*) and unveiling (*aperire*, *revelare*) of figures on the one hand, and the equation of *figura* and *umbra* and *sub figura* with *sub umbra* ["under the guise" or "cover of"] on the other (for example *ciborum* [of food] or more generally *legis* [of the law], by which it is understood that it is "beneath" the *figura* that something else—something that will happen in the future—lies hidden)—all of these examples reveal that the metaphorical and rhetorical use of *figura* lived on in the new concept of *figura* as "shape" or "form," which is now a *praefiguratio*. ["*F*," p. 90]

21. Compare Augustine, *Against Faustus* 22.94: "The Bible everywhere speaks of Christ," with the result that *both* Abraham and Isaac can be said to prefigure Christ, each differently, in a single reading (quoted in Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews*, p. 241; see also Augustine, *Against Faustus*, 12.25). The example of Saul and the quotation are from Auerbach, "Saul's Pride," p. 268. The other examples are from "*F*," pp. 85–86, citing various works by Augustine. Auerbach's litany of prefigurations recalls another, one that he may well have known, from Friedrich Nietzsche's *Daybreak*. There Nietzsche rails against "Christian philology" and its extravagant attempts to de-Judaize the Old Testament ("the attempt to pull the Old Testament out from under the feet of the Jews"): "wherever a piece of wood, a rod, a ladder, a twig, a tree, a willow, a staff is mentioned, it is supposed to be a prophetic allusion to the wood of the Cross; . . . even Moses spreading his arms in prayer, *even* the spits on which the Passover lamb was roasted—all allusions to the Cross and as it were preludes to it! Has anyone who asserted this ever *believed* it?" (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter [New York, 1997], §84, pp. 84–85).

Other synonyms in Latin for *figura* beyond *umbra* included *effigies* (appearance, copy), *imago* (image), *species* (appearance), and *ambages* (obscure circumlocution, evasion, obliquity) ("*F*," p. 92). And *figura* itself could carry connotations of "deception" or "deceptive shape," "pretense," and "empty" or "deceptive mode of speaking" ("*F*," p. 91). Figural reading can never seem to get entirely free of its own rhetorical foundations or, rather, of the suspicions that these naturally spawn and that, in the new climate of Christian spiritualism, take on an entirely new meaning. But we should not be too distracted by the reference to rhetoric, because it is here that the early Lucretian contribution to the Latin lexicon makes itself felt again (Auerbach after all is conjuring up the entire "pre-Christian poetic and rhetorical traditions"), not least in the unsettling tension between matter and the immaterial that threatens to undo both poles ("*F*," p. 90). While perfectly cognizant of this unsavory potential, Auerbach is equally aware of the kind of work that *figura* had now come to perform: "the Old Testament was transformed as a result of figural interpretation from a book of laws and a national history of Israel into a series of figures of Christ and of Redemption" ("*F*," p. 95). The Hebrew Bible was made, quite literally, into a shadow of its former self.

This new role of *figura* was not the invention of Tertullian. Auerbach traces its origins to Paul and his mission to the gentiles. Paul's epistles, as is well known, are already imbued with a notion of figural interpretation. The famous dictum, "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6), announces the general principle that informs Paul's reading of the Jewish Bible and allows him to translate the letter of the Hebrew Bible into the flesh and spirit of the Christian faith and to suggest, for example, that the veil that Moses puts over his face to address the Jewish people in Exodus 34:33 points to a spiritual blindness, while its removal points to Christian revelation (2 Corinthians 3:7–18). Whether Paul's method is allegorical or figural or just typological (these distinctions may not have been available to him; they are in any case not hard and fast ones)[22] and what its exact implications for Judaism amount to are both highly controverted matters.[23] Auerbach, at least, is certain that Pauline interpretation rests on a figural understanding of scripture, just as he is certain of its implications: "those passages of the Epistles that contain figural interpretations were almost all . . . intended to strip the Old Testament of its normative status and

22. Paul speaks of "allegory" in Galatians 4:24 and *typos* in other places (for example, 1 Corinthians 10:6). But the terms are subject to endless academic stipulation (here, the letter really does kill). See Peter W. Martens, "Revisiting the Allegory/Typology Distinction: The Case of Origen," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16, no. 3 (2008): 283–317, for a good summary.

23. See Boyarin, *A Radical Jew*, and *CFR* for a recent debate.

to interpret it as a mere shadow of things to come. . . . The old Law is suspended and replaced, it is merely a shadow, a *typos*" ("*F*," p. 94); "Christ resurrected simultaneously fulfills and annuls (*aufhebt*) the work of his predecessor [sc., Moses, the Jewish Messiah]" ("*F*," p. 95). As a result, in the wake of Paul and for nearly a millennium, "the national history and the national character of the Jews were eclipsed" ("*F*," p. 95). It was not until the Reformation that "the Old Testament came alive to European Christianity as Jewish history and Jewish Law" once again ("*F*," p. 96).

At this point one has to wonder whether the two tendencies in scriptural interpretation, *figura* and allegory, are as fundamentally opposed as Auerbach would seemingly have us believe. Though they "remained in constant competition" ("*F*," p. 97), in their historical impact they are virtually indistinguishable. We will want to revisit this question in a moment. The more pressing question is why he paints the picture that he does. The standard answer is that Auerbach introduces the contrast in order to champion figural reading over allegorical reading. *Figura* preserves the ties to history that allegory undoes; once the text of the Jewish Bible was run through the spiritualizing machinery of allegory, that text "was deprived of its sensuous power and was emptied of its historical qualities" ("*F*," p. 98; trans. mod.). *Figura* thus honors the historical precedence of the Jewish traditions that allegory effaces. As Dawson remarks in his commentary on this last passage from Auerbach's essay, "Auerbach's distinction between shadow/truth as abstract only with reference to meaning, but concrete with reference to figure and fulfillment is, in effect, a plea for readers to resist the power of meaning to dominate, and ultimately supplant, that of which it is the meaning" (*CFR*, p. 97).[24] On this view figural reading evades the supersessionist implications of Christian allegoresis of the Bible. It disallows the gesture made by Justin Martyr in a reply to the fictionalized rabbinic Jew Trypho: foreshadowings of Christianity "are contained in your Scriptures, or rather not yours, but ours," and hence "we are the true spiritual Israel, and the descendants of Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham."[25]

Or so it might seem. While it is tempting to recuperate *figura* in this fashion, there are a number of roadblocks standing in the way, the most obvious being the unalterable fact that according to Auerbach both interpretive methods, figural and allegorical, effaced the Jewish character of the Hebrew Bible and the distinctive character of the Jewish traditions that is recorded and enshrined in that work: "The spiritualist approach [that is,

24. "*Figura* is [Auerbach's] alternative to the exhaustion of allegory" ("FAQ," p. 121)". See also n. 10 above.

25. Justin Martyr, *The Dialogue with Trypho*, trans. Thomas B. Falls, ed. Michael Slusser (Washington, D.C., 2003), pp. 44, 21.

of allegory] *also* transforms the Old Testament, causing the Law and history of Israel to lose their national character" ("*F*," p. 98). It did so to the exact same degree as the Pauline figural approach did and for identical reasons: it served the immediate historical goal of both executing and palliating "the separation of Christianity from Judaism" ("*F*," p. 98).

For "separation" the German original has "die Ablösung," which carries all the connotations of extricating, replacing, and superseding, just as it does a few pages earlier where Auerbach describes the effects of the Pauline figural interpretation of the Jewish Bible: "the old Law is suspended and replaced [namely, superseded] *(ist aufgehoben und abgelöst)*" and to obey it is "pointless, even harmful" ("*F*," p. 94). Furthermore, figural reading has spiritualizing traits very like those of allegory; *figura* too spirits away what it finds in the text.[26] Spiritual meaning is what confers legitimacy on the entire enterprise of figural recuperation, which after all is a matter of conviction and faith and not a matter of dispassionate historical inquiry. The church fathers were in no way aiming to be historians. And so, when Auerbach states that "only the act of understanding is spiritual, the *intellectus spiritalis*, which recognizes the figure in its fulfillment" ("*F*," p. 81; trans. mod.; the claim is repeated on p. 96 and elsewhere), the emphasis falls not on "only" but on "recognizes." Without this recognition, figural reading could never get off the ground. And so, too, when he states that according to the methods of prophetic biblical reading "the historically real figures are to be interpreted spiritually *(spiritaliter interpretari)*" ("*F*," p. 83), what he means is that the spiritual reading retroactively confers historical reality on those figures: "at this moment, the truth has become history." So Auerbach claims that "*figura* . . . means approximately the same thing as *spiritus* or *intellectus spiritalis*" ("*F*," p. 91). The three elements—figure, fulfillment, and meaning or understanding—are mutually confirming and cannot exist in isolation.

It is perverse to argue otherwise and to claim, as David Dawson does, that "the Jewish character of the text [of the Old Testament] endured, preserved through figural reading" (*CFR*, p. 110).[27] On the contrary, the Jewish character of the text endured *despite* figural reading. Paula Fredrik-

26. On Paul's role in this tradition, see Boyarin, *A Radical Jew*, whose revisionist account brings out nuances that were not available to Auerbach, but who agrees that "from a Jewish perspective [Paul's] theology is nevertheless supersessionist"; it is premised on a "devaluation of Jewish difference" and on an abrogation of the literal and historical meaning of the Jewish Bible—whence Paul's reading is "profoundly allegorical after all" (Boyarin, *A Radical Jew*, pp. 202, 104). See also *CFR*, p. 250 n. 73, and Nichols, "Erich Auerbach," p. 184.

27. This is the general thesis of *CFR*, which wants to make *figura* proof against any kind of supersessionist ideology. Frei's theory likewise presupposes a Christian reader. See *CFR*, p. 156–57, and Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 36–37. Imagining a *Jewish* reader lies

sen explains how the historicism of *figura* does not guarantee any final validation of history (here, in the case of Paul's reading of Exodus in 1 Cor 10:1–11): "While the biblical story-line remains intact—Moses and the tribes still travel from Egypt to Canaan—its fundamental significance has [been] altered" by Paul beyond all recognition.[28] Augustine can present a kindlier view of the Old Testament, at least some of the time, but the basic presuppositions remain the same,[29] as Auerbach knows full well: "we hear the strains of a polemic against the Jews that runs through all later arguments of this sort," which is to say, of the sort that we find in Augustine's *Commentaries on Psalm 39* or in his *De civitate* and wherever else he derides "the stubborn blindness" of the Jews ("*F*," p. 87). A footnote to the same page fills out the meaning of "later arguments." It quotes an anti-Jewish Shrovetide play from around 1500 that repeats nearly verbatim the earlier accusations of the *contra Iudaeos* tradition and that begins with the shrill apostrophe, "*Hör Jud . . .*": "Listen, Jew, remember this and understand that the whole history of the old covenant, together with all of the sayings of the Prophets too, are nothing more than a figure of the new covenant" ("*F*," p. 87 n. 28). This is the product of the figural and not the allegorical tradition of exegesis. It was the achievement of post-Reformation Europe to have rediscovered the laws and history of the Jewish people in the Hebrew Bible. Such a perspective "lay completely outside the frame of reference and thinking of the first apostles to the gentiles and the Church Fathers": it was, accordingly, "possible only in retrospect" ("*F*," p. 96). We are its most recent beneficiaries.

But there is more. Appearances notwithstanding, *figura* cannot be radically distinguished from allegory. It is itself, after all, a species of allegory ("it belongs, broadly speaking, to the allegorical forms of representation"), and in it "purely spiritual elements are also involved" ("*F*," p. 96). Auerbach is perfectly clear about this fact. The formal differences between *figura* and allegory are just that: formal differences. "The boundaries [between the two interpretive modes] are nevertheless fluid, for both *figura* and *figuraliter* often also exceed the domain of real prophecy," a fact that is reflected in usage: Tertullian "often uses *allegoria* as nearly synonymous with *figura*" ("*F*," p. 92). We have already seen why this is the case. *Figura* does not simply point to historical reality. It necessarily points to what lies be-

beyond the reach of both approaches. See the next section below on the restoration of that missing perspective in *Mimesis*.

28. Fredriksen, "Allegory and Reading God's Book: Paul and Augustine on the Destiny of Israel," in *Interpretation and Allegory*, p. 131.

29. See ibid., pp. 144–47. See also Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews*, pp. 193, 280–82.

yond and outside of history. For this reason, *figura* remains strangely enigmatic: it has "something provisional and incomplete" about it. For all its apparent concreteness, the event—that which happens at either end of the figural process, in the *figura* and in its fulfillment—"also remains, in spite of its powerful facticity [literally, "its sensuous power"], *no more than an allegory (Gleichnis)*, veiled and in need of interpretation *(verhüllt und deutungsbedürftig)*, even if the general sense and direction of this interpretation are given by faith" ("*F*," p. 100).[30] For its meaning is at bottom not historical and immanent but spiritual, theological, and transcendental ("*F*," p. 96). And, correspondingly, what it promises likewise remains incomplete and provisional, a promise that is not yet the final fulfillment. *Figura* not only connects these two events, it also suspends them in an unresolved tension, which is the tension between time and the intemporal beyond.

Why then does Auerbach underscore the historicizing values of *figura*? Not because figural reading seeks to honor the historical contents of the Hebrew Bible as historical contents, but only because it inadvertently does so. In order to gain access to a truth that was veiled to the Jews themselves, Christian interpreters must, willy-nilly, avert to the history of the Jews and to their historically situated condition. Figural readers look back at the past in order to look forward into the future and into a world beyond. It is this Janus-faced stance that Auerbach notices when he writes: "On the one hand, [figural prophecy] is youthful, newborn, and sure of its purpose as a concrete interpretation of world history capable of giving that history form. On the other hand, it is ancient, the late interpretation of a venerable text that is freighted with history and that has matured over hundreds of years" ("*F*," p. 99). Figural reading had to wrest the Hebrew Bible, first out of the hands of its detractors who sought "to drain it of its meaning" ("*F*," p. 95), then out the hands of the Jews, and finally out of history. Tertullian is the hero of this story in his opposition to Marcion and the Marcionites, who in this sense (and only in this sense) are the worthy ancestors of the later allegorists, who likewise sought to void the Old Testament of its surface meaning. But this did not stop Tertullian from writing *Against the Jews* or from incorporating Marcion's own anti-Semitism into his refutation of Marcion.

30. This does not give us Auerbach's definition of history ("Auerbach [here] generalizes a definition of 'history' out of his formulation of *figura*" ["FAQ," p. 119]). Auerbach is describing an event in time, a *Geschehen*, as this is viewed from the Christian perspective of figural interpretation. For the Jewish perspective, see below.

Figural interpretation, in Auerbach's eyes, obliges the reader to gaze upon a deep past, one that is hoary, somewhat blurred and inaccessible, and pregnant with mystery. Figuralism is "the product of late cultures" ("*F*," p. 99), not only in the Hegelian sense that critical reflection is an endowment that comes with historical maturity, but more importantly in the sense that simply to look back on the past for meaning is to cultivate an awareness of one's own historical situatedness and, inevitably, one's own belatedness as well; the act of searching in the past *produces* a culture that can consider itself to be late and, so too, young and on the verge of new possibilities. In another of Auerbach's idioms, figural meaning produces a sense of historical consciousness, even if this was not the intention but was merely an accidental by-product of the effort to construe the present and the future. Figural reading obliges a world historical perspective to the extent that time is understood in human and not in divine terms, as it was for Tertullian whenever he peered into the image of "the wilderness of [this] world, the land of promise, flowing with milk and honey" and sought in this image an anticipation of "the inheritance of eternal life" (quoted in "*F*," p. 79).

Straining to construe the deep past, Tertullian developed a sense never before imagined of the world as a historical entity—never, that is, before the Jewish Bible itself.[31] He began thinking in terms of "world history" ("*F*," p. 96). But the world that he saw stood before him not in the full sunlight of bright self-evidence but as a dark mystery. It looked "oddly enigmatic" ("*F*," p. 99); its meaning was veiled and "in need of interpretation." This conception of the world was communicated to the newly converted Christians and future denizens of Europe,[32] producing the seeds of a new historical consciousness that would eventually supplant the Christian vision of world history. Dante stood on the threshold of this newly emergent vision, which the figural construction of reality, already divided against itself, both resists and renders possible. This development gave rise to the very perspective from which Auerbach, the historian and philological scholar, gazes upon the past both in "*Figura*" and in the remainder of his output.[33]

31. That Auerbach locates the origins of Western historical consciousness in the Hebrew Bible is part of the argument of Porter, "Old Testament Realism in the Writings of Erich Auerbach," in *Jews and the Ends of Theory*, ed. Shai Ginsburg and Jonathan Boyarin (forthcoming).

32. Figural interpretation, presented as "historically real prophecy *(Realprophetie)*" and as "the prehistory of Christ," gave new Christian converts "a sense of the basic concept of world history" and of historically rooted ("concrete") reality ("*F*," p. 96).

33. Compare Auerbach, *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, trans. Manheim (New York, 1965), p. 52: "But the Bible is written history; it was

Figural hermeneutics is not a timeless method of reading.[34] It comes into existence at some point in the first century CE, and it survives for a millennium and a half, after which it is remembered as a historical entity that produced certain conceptual transformations and then ceded these to secular modernity ("*F*," p. 113). Furthermore, we need to recognize that Auerbach's own perspective is not that of a practitioner of figural reading. It is that of a historian of language and culture—a philologist in the largest sense of the word, in Giambattista Vico's expansive understanding of this vocation, which informed Auerbach's own self-understanding—whose interest lies first in "a purely semantic consideration of *figura*" and then in an analysis of "its historical significance and influence" ("*F*," p. 93). These findings are confirmed by Auerbach's next and in some sense his grandest project of literary history, *Mimesis*, to which we may now turn.

2. *Figura* in *Mimesis*

Auerbach began composing *Mimesis* as early as 1942, and he dated its completion to April of 1945, only weeks before the Germans finally surrendered to the Allies.[35] This later work, Auerbach's most famous, is emphatically not an application of the figural method of reading to literature before and after Dante. The terms *figura* or *figural* appear in that work nowhere else than in the context of early and medieval Christian interpretation. Once Auerbach arrives at modernity in the central chapters of the book, his attention shifts entirely to the realm of meaning that, he argues, *figura* in its defections made visible and palpable, if not fully valid, for the Christian and post-Christian world: earthly, concrete, materially sensuous and individuated reality. He calls the model that eclipses figural interpretation in *Mimesis* tragic realism. It is buttressed by a theory of the radical mixing of low and high styles *(Stilmischung)*, which is to say the detachment of the classical canons of style from the capacity of literary writing to represent reality, a concern that is notably absent from "*Figura*." The question of levels of style was already present in Auerbach's book on Dante nearly twenty years previous. Tragic realism was articulated along with the theory of styles starting with the essay "Romanticism and Realism," which appeared in 1933.[36]

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read or listened to by the vast majority of Christians. It shaped their view of history, their ethical and esthetic conceptions."

34. For the opposite view, see Bahti, "Auerbach's *Mimesis*"; White, "Auerbach's Literary History"; and Hovind, "Figural Interpretation as Modernist Hermeneutics."

35. On the date, which is that of the opening chapter, see Porter, "Judaizing of Philology," pp. 119–20. The conception for the book itself goes back to around 1940; see *M*, p. 563.

36. For discussion of this concept, see my introduction to *Time, History, and Literature*. "Romanticism and Realism" appears as chapter 12 of that same volume.

The absence of both themes from "*Figura*" is a sign of the narrow and closely circumscribed focus of that essay. Of limited scope and reach, "*Figura*" barely scratches the surface of Auerbach's thinking.

Mimesis in some respects adds completing touches to the "*Figura*" essay and its theory of figural reading, though it may simply be that the later work brings to the fore what was already presupposed in 1938. The most striking way in which *Mimesis* completes "*Figura*" is through its inversion of the historical framework of the earlier essay, particularly in the opening chapter, "Odysseus' Scar." Where "*Figura*" looks at the rise of Christian figural interpretations of the Old Testament, "Odysseus' Scar" starts at the other end of things; it looks at the source of this figural impulse within the Jewish Bible itself. That source turns on a single word that binds the two essays together like an umbilical cord: *deutungsbedürftig*, "in need of interpretation." We have already seen how the term, as it appears in "*Figura*," captures the irresolvable leftover that drives *figura* in the direction of allegory, spiritual meaning, and timeless ahistoricity: "In spite of its powerful facticity," *figura* "remains no more than an allegory, veiled and in need of interpretation *(verhüllt und deutungsbedürftig)*, even if the general sense and direction of this interpretation are given by faith" ("*F*," p. 100). The point is not that *figura* is driven off-course into allegorism by the obscure but seductively beckoning truths that lie beneath the surface of historical events in the distant past, but that it is this very obscurity that sets *figura* off in search of its own mission and that drives its operations at their core. *Figura* is indeed a conflicted project. It is not merely one protagonist in the antagonism that divides early and later Christian thought (the conflict between this-worldly and otherworldly reality). *Figura* is itself constitutively divided by this antagonism, uncertain whether it wants to be figural or allegorical, that is, whether it wants to locate reality in history or outside of history in a spiritual beyond. When we turn to *Mimesis*, we learn that *figura* and the conflicted desires that it embodies, whenever it fastens onto the Jewish Bible in the hope of quenching its yearnings, is doing no more than falling into a trap that was sprung, so to speak, by the Jewish Bible itself.

Consider how Auerbach springs this trap in the opening chapter of *Mimesis*:

> Let no one object that this [namely, Auerbach's reading of the Bible's claim "to be a historically true reality" and its insistence that "it is the only real world [and] destined for autocracy *(Alleinherrschaft)*"] goes too far, that it is not the stories but only the religious doctrine that raises the claim to absolute authority *(Herrschaftsanspruch)*. For the stories [of the Jewish Bible] are not, like Homer's, simply narrated

"reality." Doctrine and promise are incarnate in them and inseparable from them; for that very reason they are fraught with "background" and mysterious, containing a second, concealed meaning. In the story of Isaac, it is not only God's intervention at the beginning and the end, but even the factual and psychological elements which come between, that are mysterious, merely touched upon, fraught with background; and therefore they require deep and subtle investigation and interpretation—they call for this. <"That God makes terrible trial of even the most pious of individuals, that unconditional obedience is the only attitude one can adopt towards Him, that his promise is unalterably fixed, however much his decision is liable to incite doubt and despair—these are the most significant of the teachings that are contained in the story of Isaac. But owing to these same teachings, the story is rendered so heavy and so freighted with content, and is shown to contain so many hints about God's nature and about the attitude of the pious, that the believer feels compelled to immerse himself in the text again and again and to search through every single detail for the illumination that might be concealed from him."[37]>Since so much in the story is dark and incomplete, and since the reader knows that God is a hidden God, his effort to interpret it constantly finds something new to feed upon. Doctrine and the search for enlightenment are inextricably connected with the sensuous aspects of the narrative. The latter are more than simple "reality." Indeed they are in constant danger of losing their own reality, as very soon happened when interpretation reached such proportions that the real disintegrated altogether *(daß sich das Wirkliche zersetzte)*.

If the text of the Biblical narrative, then, is so greatly in need of interpretation *(deutungsbedürftig)* on the basis of its own content, its claim to absolute authority *(Herrschaftsanspruch)* forces it still further in the same direction. Far from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, it seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, to feel ourselves to be elements of its universal historical structure. This becomes increasingly difficult the further our world of experience *(unsere Lebenswelt)* is removed from that of the Biblical Scriptures. And if the Biblical

37. Auerbach, *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeitinder abendländischen Literatur* (Bern, 1964), p. 17. These sentences appear in every German edition of *Mimesis*. They are inexplicably omitted from the translation by Trask. This is not the only instance of its kind in *Mimesis*, which is to say evidence of either negligence or silent editorial intervention, whether by Trask alone or at the bidding of Auerbach. For further examples and discussion, see Porter, "Judaizing of Philology," p. 120 n. 7 and "Old Testament Realism in the Writings of Erich Auerbach," n. 22.

> world nevertheless manages to maintain its own claim to authority, it is inevitable that it must accommodate itself [to the world of the present] through interpretative transformation. This was for a long time comparatively easy; as late as the European Middle Ages it was possible to represent Biblical events as ordinary phenomena of contemporary life, the methods of interpretation themselves forming the basis for such a treatment. But when, through too great a change in environment and through the awakening of a critical consciousness, this becomes impossible, the Biblical claim to absolute authority is jeopardized; the method of interpretation is scorned and rejected, the Biblical stories become ancient legends, and the teachings they had contained, now dissevered from them, become a disembodied image.
>
> As a result of this claim to absolute authority, the method of interpretation spread to traditions other than the Jewish. [*M*, pp. 15–16; trans. mod.]

In this astonishing passage Auerbach explains just how it could happen that the Jewish Bible could exert such a tyrannical grip on later Christian readers. It was perfectly calculated to do so. Dark, incomplete, and hidden from sight, the reality of the Bible, like the Jewish God himself, is an enigma that *provokes* the search for meaning, but ultimately does not reward it; much like a novel by Franz Kafka, biblical reality forecloses on this possibility for the simple reason that meaning of this kind cannot be extracted from the text either by divination or by force. Demonstrating this was, after all, the thrust of Auerbach's close reading of the binding of Isaac episode. That episode defeats rational and indeed all understanding because it exposes the sheer imperatival ("tyrannical") force of Yaweh: "The Bible's claim to truth is not only far more urgent than Homer's, it is tyrannical (*tyrannisch*)—it excludes all other claims. The world of the stories of the Scriptures . . . insists that it is the only real world, that it is destined for autocracy *(Alleinherrschaft)*" (*M*, pp. 14–15; trans. mod.). By the same token, on this kind of reading the Bible affirms the real, concrete, and individual reality of each of the actors whose lives it narrates in all their psychological complexity and depth, each of them deeply etched with time, from Adam and Noah to Sarah and Hagar, to Abraham and Isaac, David, Joab, Absalom, and the rest, none of whom is a stand-in for something else because all of them just are *themselves* (see *M*, pp. 12–14, 17–18).[38]

38. In contrast to the flat and legendary figures of Homer, "Adam is really cast down, Jacob really a refugee, Joseph really in the pit and then a slave to be bought and sold," and each individual bears the "personal stamp which is recognized as the product of a rich existence, a rich development," and "a historical character" (*M*, p. 18; compare p. 20). As a re-

Here, Auerbach is reinstating not a Christian but a Jewish hermeneutic, one that is reducible neither to figural nor to allegorical reading, and not even to literal reading, because this latter exists only as the binary other of nonliteral meaning. In the place of levels of meaning, Auerbach proposes a different category altogether, what he calls realism. Realism is not in the first instance a literary category but rather an experiential one; it marks the violent registration and seizure by human consciousness of its own conditions, historical and other. Another word for this capacity is *Wirklichkeitsauffassung*, which designates a way of "comprehending," if not quite ever fully grasping, "reality" (*M*, p. 16). It is the double-edged and literally "tyrannical" insistence of the Hebrew Bible on both the existence of an irrefragable reality (its *dargestellte Wirklichkeit*) and on its recessive nature that gives the Bible of the Jews its special character and its foundational place in history for Auerbach.[39] In contrast to the Christian *modus operandi* of scriptural exegesis, the Jewish perspective on the Bible is diametrically opposed to locating, let alone supplying, definitive answers.[40] Instead, it invites endless interpretation and speculation even as it frustrates the interpreter, who must either submit to the conditions that regulate the biblical interpretive language-game and to God's imperious "claim to absolute authority" or else seek out other interpretive rules to follow, for instance, by imposing final (teleological) meanings on a recalcitrant text.[41]

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sult, the biblical characters are irreducibly complex. They are "entangled and stratified *(geschichet)*"—the word itself implies "history" *(Geschichte)*—and "abyssal" *(abgründig).* Their contours are "suggested rather than expressed" (*M*, p. 12; trans. mod). The model combines the precision of a GPS-tagging system with the elusiveness of a particular that has no ultimate index beyond that of reality. What is indexed is, instead, absolute particularity itself. All of this complexity and particularity must be stripped away if the biblical material is to be slotted into a scheme of prophecy and fulfillment. Auerbach's close readings and his rigorous analysis of the Bible constantly remind us of this fact.

39. Needless to say, "*dargestellte Wirklichkeit*" designates the theme of *Mimesis* and supplies its subtitle. But the concept runs through all of Auerbach's writings. See further Porter, "Old Testament Realism in the Writings of Erich Auerbach."

40. Compare the midrashic eschewing, not only of allegory, but also of "'interpretation' altogether"—that is, all final interpretation—in the name of deep imponderabilities and endlessly irresolvable meanings because "there is no transcendental signified" (Boyarin, "By Way of Apology," p. 215). So understood, midrashic interpretation resonates closely with Auerbach's reading of the Bible in *Mimesis*, especially chapters 1 and 20. Compare *M*, p. 48: "a method rooted in Jewish tradition, the method of revisional interpretation," by which Auerbach does not mean the figural method of interpreting the Bible, but rather the one just described. This point is rarely grasped. Notable exceptions include Nichols, "Erich Auerbach"; Robert Alter, "Literature," in *Reading Genesis: Ten Methods*, ed. Ronald Hendel (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 16–17; Hendel, *The Book of Genesis: A Biography* (Princeton, N.J., 2010), pp. 5, 229–41; and Kitty Millet, "Our Sabbatian Future," in *"Scholar and Kabbalist": The Life and Work of Gershom Scholem*, ed. Mirjam Zadoff and Noam Zadoff (forthcoming).

41. The frustrations that this method was bound to produce in a Christian context are well described in *M*, pp. 75–76 (to be quoted below). It is a mistake to confuse the biblical

This is exactly what the Christian interpreters of the Bible did. Applying their "will to interpretation" and all the resourcefulness of a new hermeneutic, they overran the biblical text with newfound meaning. Events that gestured enticingly to a recessive reality were now made into figures that foreshadowed their own fulfillment in a new dispensation. "The Biblical stories become ancient legends, and the teachings they had contained, now dissevered from them, become a disembodied image." The "claim to absolute authority" of scripture was realigned with new interpretive imperatives: an originally recalcitrant text that was reluctant to surrender meaning was transformed into an obliging text that licensed a full-blown operation of mining and recovering sought-for meanings. The very texture of the text was loosened. Its sensory character suffered with the repeated decontextualizations that the Bible was forced to undergo. The narrated events were "in constant danger of losing [their own reality], as very soon happened when interpretation reached such proportions [literally, "became so overgrown"] that the real disintegrated" and vanished *(das Wirkliche sich zersetzte)* (*M*, p. 15; cf. *M*, 21: "shatters the framework of historical composition and completely overruns it with prophecy"). Auerbach is warning against the perils of *figura*:

> An adaptation of the [biblical] message to the preconceptions of a far wider audience, its detachment from the specific preconceptions of Judaism, became a necessity . . . . The Old Testament was devalued *(entwertet)* as the history of a people and as the law of the Jews, and it assumed the appearance of a series of "figures," that is, of prophetic announcements and anticipations of the coming of Jesus and all that was implied in this event . . . . The total content of the sacred writings was placed in an exegetical context that often removed the narrated events far from their sensuous foundations, as the reader or hearer was forced to turn his attention away from the sensuous course of events and towards their meaning. [*M*, p. 48; trans. mod.]

To claim, as Edward Said does in his introduction to the 2003 reprint of *Mimesis*, that biblical background meanings "can only be recovered by a

episodes as read by Auerbach with "the condition of *figura* itself" ("FAQ," p. 118; similarly, *CFR*, p. 103). They have nothing in common. Homeric epic, by contrast, neither invites nor rewards allegorical interpretation. Homer "resists any such treatment" because his texts provide no more than a slippery surface without any inviting footholds. As a result, later allegorizations of Homer are "to no avail," and consequently they "do not crystallize into a unified doctrine" (*M*, pp. 13–14). Christian allegoresis of the Bible *does* crystallize into a unified doctrine (we might count this a success of sorts), but it too is ultimately of no avail. It fails as an interpretative method precisely *because* of this very crystallization of meaning around doctrine.

very particular act of interpretation," one that Auerbach "described as figural interpretation," is to get hold of the matter from the wrong end (*M*, p. xii).[42] Figural readings do not "recover" meaning from the Hebrew Bible; they foist meaning on what was never meant to be grasped. Indeed, figural reading is nothing other than a desperate response to this perplexity of the Jewish faith and an inherently destructive one at that; it is destructive, not only of Jewish reality (see *M*, pp. 116 and 119), but also of the Christian idea of reality as well. Figural reading is an act of disfiguration and disvaluation that offends in two ways: it is a force of dehistoricization, and it is antipathetic to Jewish identity.

If four years earlier Auerbach appeared willing to endorse *figura* over allegory for the opposite reasons—on the grounds that *figura* seemed to respect the historical reality of the Jewish Bible—this is no longer the case in 1942 at the time when he was composing "Odysseus' Scar." None of the mitigating qualifications that might, on a superficial reading of "*Figura*," be thought to soften the critique of figural exegesis and to show how figuralism, if not a perfect mechanism, was at least less deleterious to the Jewish Bible than allegorism, are being marshaled now in 1942. One might speculate that changed circumstances were partly responsible for this shift in emphasis. The war was well under way, Auerbach was in the throes of exile, and the Fascist realities were all too disturbingly in view. "Odysseus' Scar" is marked, even scarred, by those historical indices, and Auerbach is more than ready to make these explicit, as he does when, for instance, he speaks of "the rise of National Socialism in Germany" with a degree of frankness that is utterly rare in academic writing from the time (*M*, p. 19).[43] Other factors may have played a contributing role. There were the attempts by the pro-fascist Evangelical German Christians to eradicate the Hebrew Bible and its Jewish identity from the Holy Writ. Their revival of Marcionite arguments was doubtless fanned by the theologian Adolf von Harnack, who in his 1924 study of Marcion urged the decanonization

42. See also *CFR*, p. 110; quoted at n. 27 above. Dawson further states that figural reading for Auerbach does not "inevitably dissolve the sensible character of figure" and its validity (*CFR*, p. 91). Both of their claims are wrong. Simply to create a "figure" out of an Old Testament narrative element is to hypostasize and devaluate that element. See further "*F*," pp. 94–95.

43. See Porter, "Judaizing of Philology." For essential background, see Susannah Heschel, "Nazifying Christian Theology: Walter Grundmann and the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life," *Church History* 63, no. 4 (1994): 587–605; Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996); Uriel Tal, "On Modern Lutheranism and the Jews," *Religion, Politics, and Ideology in the Third Reich: Selected Essays* (London, 2004), pp. 191–203; and Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton, N.J., 2008).

of the Old Testament.[44] Not even the more moderate Catholic response was free of contamination, as the example of Cardinal Michael von Faulhaber demonstrates.

Where the German Christians wanted to ban the teaching of the Old Testament from the schools and the pulpit, Faulhaber took a different path. He was happy to save the Old Testament, but only under the auspices of a figural recuperation. The first of five public lectures delivered in St. Michael's Church of Munich at the end of 1933 is titled "The Religious Values of the Old Testament and Their Fulfillment (*Erfüllung*) in Christianity." And while Faulhaber insisted that it was a mistake to "remove the Bible altogether from the schools," despite its many blemishes and occasional "realism" ("a shadow lies on individual morally repugnant stories and passages of the books of the Old Testament," which is filled with thoughts of violence, hatred, and revenge), his arguments predictably led to the following conclusion: "These books were not composed by Jews; they are inspired by the Holy Ghost, and therefore they are the word of God, they are God's books."[45] The figural character of the Old Testament is the proof.[46] So does the latter-day Tertullian refute the latter-day Marcionites. Elsewhere the results were nearly identical. The Protestant theologian Gerhard von Rad, appointed to the theological faculty at the University of Jena in 1934, likewise defended the Old Testament against attempts at its elimination by treating it as a document of Christian scripture: "*The extremely difficult question concerning the Old Testament—Does it belong to the Jews or does it belong to the Church?—finds a decisive answer in Christ alone*."[47] Here, de-Judaization is countered with Christianization. Sadly, the differences amount to very little in the end.[48] But one did not have to

44. See Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott: Eine Monographie zur Geschichte der Grundlegung der katholischen Kirche* (Leipzig, 1924).

45. Michael von Faulhaber, *Judaism, Christianity, and Germany: Advent Sermons Preached in St. Michael's, Munich in 1933*, trans. George D. Smith (London, 1934), pp. 38–39, 37, 14; compare pp. 41, 46; hereafter abbreviated *JCG;* trans. mod.

46. "From the tents of the Patriarchs, those hills on the horizon of antiquity, from the scrolls of the prophets, from the messianic types, from the Psalms, from the whole liturgy of the early Bible comes a greeting and a foreshadowing *(grüßt es und winkt es)* of the Lord's Anointed" (*JCG*, p. 73).

47. Gerhard von Rad, "Das Ergebnis," in Albrecht Alt, Joachim Begrich, and Gerhard von Rad, *Führung zum Christentum durch das Alte Textament: Drei Vörtrage* (Leipzig, 1934), p. 70.

48. See von Rad, "Grundproblemen einer biblischen Theologie des Alten Testaments," *Theologische Literaturzeitung: Monatsschrift für das gesamte Gebiet der Theologie und Religionswissenschaft* 68, no. 9–10 (1943): 225–33, esp. pp. 231–32, vindicating the figural method of interpreting the Old Testament that was being revived by academic theologians during the 1930s and 1940s. See further Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus*, p. 216; Bernard M. Levinson and Douglas Dance, "The Metamorphosis of Law into Gospel: Gerhard von Rad's Attempt to Reclaim the Old Testament for the Church," in *Recht und Ethik im Alten Testament*, ed. Levinson and Eck-

turn to the theologians to recognize that the deepest logic of figure and fulfillment was very much alive in the 1930s. The political and racist implications of this logic had long been absorbed into the evangelical and messianic rhetoric of the Third Reich, a fact that was transparent to even the most detached spectator.[49]

Auerbach's decision to organize chapter 1 of *Mimesis*, and in some sense the whole of that work, around a prominent figural motif, the binding of Isaac, is not innocent of these developments. Conventionally read as a prefiguration of the Crucifixion, this much-loathed reminder of Jewish perfidy was one of the many biblical passages that was being explicitly banned from German schools and churches at the time. There was nothing secret about this effort. Faulhaber knows about it, too: "I am aware of the objections which are made against the God of the Old Testament: God, it is said, commanded Abraham to offer human sacrifice" (*JCG*, p. 10). But despite the fact that chapter 1 of *Mimesis* turns on the binding of Isaac episode, Auerbach does not so much as even hint at its relevance to the figural tradition there, though he does spell this out several pages later in chapter 3. Why not in chapter 1? The answer is surely complex.

Auerbach most certainly was familiar with this contemporary background. He also knew how controversial any defense of the Bible that took as its center this disturbing episode would be. In "*Figura*" he simply notes that the episode "is usually considered one of the most famous examples of realistic figural interpretation" ("*F*," p. 84). He might have supported the claim with a reference to Tertullian *Against the Jews* 10 or *Against Marcion* 3.18, to Augustine's *City of God* 16.32, or to *Hebrews* 11:17–19, for that matter, where Isaac is read as a figure for the suffering Christ, though he does not. He remarks on this connection again in chapter 3 of *Mimesis*, where he introduces the same episode as a star instance of figural reading: "For example, if an occurrence like the sacrifice of Isaac is interpreted as prefiguring the sacrifice of Christ, . . . (the technical term is *figuram implere*)."

art Otto (Münster, 2004), pp. 83–110. On Faulhaber's supersessionism and its connections with figuralism, see *CFR*, pp. 1–4. See also Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus*, p. 5, and Ulrike Ehret, *Church, Nation, and Race: Catholics and Anti-Semitism in Germany and England, 1918–1945* (Manchester, 2012).

49. To take just three examples of admittedly less than detached spectators, see Ernst Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit: Erweiterte Ausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main, 1985), pp. 63–65, 132–40, where Bloch, writing in 1930 and 1937 and citing Origen and other patristic exponents of biblical typology, sounds uncannily like Auerbach; Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich: LTI, Lingua Tertii Imperii: A Philologist's Notebook*, trans. Martin Brady (1947; London, 2000), pp. 35–36, 103–11; and Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Gunzlein Schmid Noerr (1944; Stanford, Calif., 2002), pp. 144–45, 152.

He then adds that on this kind of reading "a connection is established between two events which are linked neither temporally nor causally," a pregnant denial (*M*, p. 73).[50] He prefaces the remark thus: "This type of interpretation obviously introduces an entirely new and alien element into the antique conception of history"—and, to be sure, into the Hebrew Bible (*M*, p. 73).

Simply to defend the Jewishness of the Bible on its own terms as Auerbach did in the opening chapter of *Mimesis* was to make a loud counterstatement against the developments that had been brewing in Germany since the mid-1930s and that had now reached crisis proportions. To foreground one of the most controversial episodes of the Old Testament at the time and to oblige the reader to relive it in all of its haunting and excruciating detail was quite another thing altogether. Viewed against this background, *Mimesis* reads more like an act of civil disobedience than an act of literary criticism. But that is not all. His relative silence on the controversies surrounding the binding of Isaac episode in chapter 1 has a perfectly defensible logic. The Jewish Bible had no use for figural readings. It merely prompted these, in part through its enigmatic character and in part through the Jewish Messianic traditions of either an earlier or a later date ("*F*," pp. 94–95).[51] This is at the heart of what makes Auerbach's reading of the Abraham and Isaac episode so inherently provocative. The Old Testament does not need figural reading to establish its claims to historical validity. Those claims are built into the Bible by divine decree. They are part of its tyrannical mission (its "*Alleinherrschaft*") and its claims to "world-historical" validity.[52] Indeed, the reference to *Alleinherrschaft* already ges-

50. See also Auerbach, "Typological Symbolism in Medieval Literature" (1952), *Time, History, and Literature*, p. 117: "But in the sacrifice of Isaac considered as a figure of the sacrifice of Christ."

51. The question whether the Jewish traditions inspired or mimicked Christian messianic aspirations is hotly debated. See Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York, 2012) and Peter Schäfer, *The Jewish Jesus: How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other* (Princeton, N.J., 2012) for two opposing views. Auerbach's brief mention of the problem might support either view. The upshot of his thinking, however, is that Paul "managed to transform the Jewish idea of the resurrection of Moses," whenever that idea arose, by injecting it into a quite alien "system of historically real prophecy," which brought with it drastic supersessionist implications ("*F*," pp. 94–95).

52. "The claim of the Old Testament stories to represent world history, their insistent relation . . . to a single and hidden God, who yet shows himself and who guides world history by promise and exaction, gives these stories an entirely different perspective from any the Homeric poems can possess"—and any, for that matter, that the New Testament, read as the fulfillment of the Old Testament, could possess (*M*, pp. 16–17). The sequel reads almost like a reproach: as various as they may be, "the individual stories [of the Old Testament] all belong to a single world-historical context and world-historical interpretation," right where they are found, in this world and its history, and not in some other figural context ("*F*," p. 18;

tures at the proud, even truculent self-sufficiency of the Jewish Bible. And the Bible in *Mimesis* chapter 1 is emphatically a Jewish document written by "Jewish writers" (*M*, p. 13).[53] It may even be that Auerbach is reinscribing into his picture of Judaism the enigmatic, puzzling, and entirely pejorative quality of the figure of the Jew in the modern racialized imaginary; it serves as a kind of Lacanian *Che vuoi*? that forever defies rational explanation yet endlessly chafes against the rules of reason. If the Bible is a cipher for Christian readers, then the Jews qua Jews are this to an even greater extent and most pressingly in the Germany of the 1940s. The negativity of the Jews thus appears in inverted form as a positive "secret" or "treasure" that is lodged deeply, and inviolably, at the core of Jewish identity on Auerbach's account.[54] Be this as it may, by foregrounding the binding of Isaac episode Auerbach is advertising it. By refusing to read it figuratively he is reclaiming it and then allowing it to body forth in all of its haunting and disturbing irresolvability.

A further factor in Auerbach's mind is historical. In "*Figura*," Auerbach indicates that the essay's titular trope played a decisive role in history. He firmly believes this to have been the case. The impetus that Paul imparted to phenomenal prophecy by means of *figura* "had a task in history," and it enjoyed the urgency of meaning that it did only "owing to the specific historical situation out of which it had emerged": Christianity must break itself off from Judaism ("*F*," p. 98; compare *M*, p. 16). Auerbach is giving a decidedly historical reading of a theological phenomenon. And, in doing so, he suggests that *figura* paved the way for a new embracement of historical awareness in the West. Could this evolution have occurred in any other way? Theoretically, it could have done so. Indeed, all the ingredients favoring the rise of historical consciousness were already available in the Hebrew Bible. That is one of the findings of "Odysseus' Scar." But history had to take a detour in order for history finally to triumph again. It had to undergo an emancipation. The emergence of Christian figural consciousness was one of the way stations that led to this result. And it took a German Jew, trained in Vico and G. W. F. Hegel and banished from a virulently Christian Europe to the newly risen secular state of Turkey during World War II, to embrace this conclusion for himself. The path of his understanding is still wrapped up in confusions today.

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trans. mod.). Their meaning, such as it can be grasped, is completed within the Old Testament, which is self-contained.

53. "For how is the Jewish concept of God to be explained?" (*M*, p. 8), and "the original Jewish-Israelite realm of reality" (*M*, p. 16; trans. mod).

54. Thanks to Jaś Elsner for insisting, via private communication, that it is additionally the enigmatic *Jew* who is always "in need of interpretation" and never more so than in Auerbach's present.

Auerbach's endorsement of *figura* in the essay from 1938 is only apparent, and in *Mimesis* it is nonexistent. Above, we saw that *figura* is valuable to Auerbach to the precise extent that it animates a sense of historical depth. It is truly a vanishing mediator en route to the secular traditions in the West that it facilitates. And according to the picture that Auerbach draws, these later developments inherit from the Judaeo-Christian traditions (but not the classical traditions) a profound interest in historical depth and scope—the notion that the world, from its creation to the present, encompasses a history, a "world history"—combined with a moral or ethical sense of purpose that is immanent to and literally incarnated in reality, and that in turn gives reality a powerful sense of multidimensionality, a sense that it encompasses not only linear (horizontal) passages through time but also foreground and background dimensions as well as vertical heights and depths. Auerbach charts the rise and fall of figural meaning with the sober eye of a philologist and a historian but also with the keen vision of a humanist living in the twentieth century.

In *Mimesis*, the extent to which he follows the decline of figural reading is matched only by the attention he gives to what its demise makes possible. The figural tradition, he writes there, contributes to a "rigid, narrow, and unproblematic schematization" of reality that eventually "dissolved" the content of reality itself, reducing it to a "dogma[tic]" meaning alone, from which civilization would eventually "emancipate" itself (*M*, p. 119). A statement like the following captures in miniature the force of Auerbach's grasp of history as a process:

> The hiddenness of God and finally his *parousia*, his incarnation in the common form of an ordinary life, these concepts—we tried to show—brought about a dynamic movement in the basic conception of life, a swing of the pendulum in the realms of morals and sociology, which went far beyond the classical antique norm for the imitation of real life and living growth. [*M*, p. 119]

Auerbach speaks of "morals and sociology," not of "religion and eschatology." His allegiances are to the secular world, but to a secular world that is understood in a particular way. It is the reality of people and peoples, of individuals and nations, but not of the elite (as in classical antiquity)[55] or the elect (as in both the Jewish and Christian traditions). It is the earthly reality of the here and now, not the Beyond. It is the reality of everyday life, which has depths of its own, and not the reality of the holiday, the Day of Judgment, or the afterlife:

55. See chapter 2 of *M*, "*Fortunata.*"

> If the literature of antiquity was unable to represent everyday life seriously, that is, in full appreciation of its problems and with an eye for its historical background; if it could represent it only in the low style, comically or at best idyllically, statically and ahistorically, the implication is that these things mark the limits not only of the realism of antiquity but of its historical consciousness as well. *For it is precisely in the intellectual and economic conditions of everyday life that those forces are revealed which underlie historical movements;* these, whether military, diplomatic, or related to the inner constitution of the state, are only the product, the final result, *of variations in the depths of everyday life.* [*M*, p. 33; my emphasis]

Reality, so viewed, inheres in life. This is the only incarnation it knows. Incarnation in the sense of embodiment, of humanity and individuality, of characters who are individuated by their vicissitudes, their choices, and their acts is a value that was inherited from the Jewish Bible—"doctrine and promise are incarnate *(inkarniert sich)* in [the narrative's stories and their inherent realism] and inseparable from them"; "the sublime influence of God here reaches so deeply into the everyday that the two realms of the sublime and the everyday are not only actually unseparated but basically inseparable" (*M*, pp. 15, 22–23)—and was then transmitted by Christianity and was finally rediscovered in secular modernity.[56]

Promise, not fulfillment. The difference is crucial for Auerbach. The value he assigns to embodied reality is premised on a further consideration. Historical consciousness, in Auerbach's view, rests on a sense that time and the truth that it reveals are contingent and open-ended, never closed and final (see "*F*," p. 100); they are embedded in human circumstances, "*for only in history do human beings appear before us in the fullness of their lives.*"[57] Ethical value depends upon this premise.[58] To the extent

56. For Auerbach, these markers of the real, at once powerful and compelling, originated in the Hebrew Bible and were only later appropriated by the Christian homiletic tradition of *sermo humilis*. See Porter, "Old Testament Realism," for arguments.

57. Auerbach, "The Philology of World Literature," *Time, History, and Literature*, p. 255; my emphasis.

58. It is in this context that Auerbach's notion of concreteness needs to be understood. What it describes is not an inert materiality but a this-worldly process of concretion (Auerbach frequently expresses this with the verb *konkretisieren* or the noun *Konkretion*); with every passage through time, objects and especially individuals become freighted—virtually etched—with accreted, complex, and contradictory meaning that can never be truly effaced. Myth, legend, and figures work to simplify, reductively, this historical complexity. An ethical posture for Auerbach resists this kind of reduction. Hence, too, mentions by Auerbach of "incarnation" in Christian contexts are meant to remind readers of this feature of lived historical experience. Compare his emphatic remark from 1938, which serves as the epigraph to

that *figura* remains "provisional and incomplete," promising but not guaranteeing fulfillment, it too is mired in the contingencies of human temporality. Christianity took the concept of the incarnation and immanence of truth in a different direction. But it could never overcome the antagonistic kernel that lay at its core. When the figural tradition culminated with Dante around 1300, so too did its antagonistic elements. The culmination marks the undoing of the Christian framework of reality. In Dante, "the indestructibility of the whole historical and individual man turns *against* [the divine] order . . . and obscures it. The image of man eclipses the image of God. Dante's work realized the Christian-figural essence of man, and destroyed it in the very process of realizing it."

So writes Auerbach in *Mimesis* (*M*, p. 202; trans. mod.). But he is merely repeating a claim from his Dante book, where we read how in Dante and in his aftermath "history as such—the life of the human being as this is given and in its earthly character—underwent a vitalization and acquired a new value." Almost immediately and as a consequence,

> the historical realm becomes a fully earthly and autonomous entity, and from there the fecundating stream of sensuous and historical evidence spills forth over Europe—to all appearances utterly removed from its eschatological origins, and yet secretly connected to these by the bonds that hold man fast to his concrete and historical destiny. [*D*, p. 178.]

The secret connections alluded to here do not indicate any sort of disavowed or half-avowed theology on Auerbach's part but only a historical affiliation and a genealogy in the sequence of the world's events that are shared by the Christian world, too, not least because the threads of these developments can be traced back to the Hebrew Bible itself. *Figura* helped to usher in this new way of thinking history concretely. But it did so at the expense of its redemptive character, which finally had to be left behind. History knows only promise. It knows no fulfillment and no *eschaton* for Auerbach. This is the source of its deepest ethical burden for humanity, which must come to terms with its "contingent and particular" destiny, its place in time and in history. As the ethical imperative replaced the vertical axis of meaning from above, depths were now discovered (or rediscovered) within and not outside of human existence, which was henceforth understood in its "earthly," worldly, and not otherworldly character.

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the present essay: "Miracles occur *on earth* and the Incarnation is a *thing of the flesh*" ("*F*," p. 112; my emphasis).

And so the life of *figura* comes to an end, at least in the form that Auerbach has been tracing it up to this point: "In the course of the sixteenth century, the Christian-figural schema lost its hold in almost all parts of Europe," and realism took its place (*M*, p. 318).[59] Itself one more historical phenomenon, figural reading and interpretation cease to hold any interest for Auerbach after Dante's *Divine Comedy*. *Figura*'s failing was its inability to harmonize, finally, history and its figural understanding. History was too diverse, too chaotic, and too fluid to be accounted for in a satisfactory manner. Ironically, this impulse to master the contingent was itself part of the original impetus of figural interpretation, with its "constant endeavor to fill the lacunae of the Biblical account, to supplement it by other passages from the Bible and by [the interpreter's] original considerations, to establish a continuous connection of events, and in general to give the highest measure of rational plausibility to an intrinsically irrational interpretation." And so, Auerbach continues,

> all these efforts notwithstanding, the figural interpretation of history . . . was no fully adequate substitute for the lost comprehension of rational, continuous, earthly connections between things, for it could not be applied to any random occurrence, although there was of course no dearth of attempts to submit everything that happened to an interpretation directly from above. *Such attempts were bound to falter* upon the multiplicity of events and the unfathomableness of the divine councils. And so vast regions of events remained without any principle by which they might be classified and comprehended—especially after the fall of the Roman Empire. [*M*, pp. 75–76; trans. mod.; my emphasis]

Mimesis charts the history of the sequel, without the contribution of *figura*—the concept nowhere appears in that work after the chapters on Dante, except retrospectively—but with a bold and bracing principle of human reality and its representation in Western literature and a subtle yet powerful plea for religious toleration.[60]

59. Presumably, Auerbach is thinking of changes that were made in the wake of Luther, whose theology was based on a doctrinal rejection of figuralism and an embracement of literalism.

60. The Old Testament "in its original form," understood "as a book of laws and as the history of such a foreign and distant nation, . . . would have remained inaccessible" to all Christians in later antiquity; this was not the case for the "early pagan converts [who] lived among the Jews of the Diaspora" and who were "part of a Hellenistic population that was extremely well disposed to accept religious experiences of any sort." For these latter "had already long since acquainted themselves with Jewish history and the Jewish religion." Then

Auerbach's insistence on the historical demise of *figura*, which is repeated in his student Hans Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, is striking. Given the persistence of the *adversus Iudaeos* tradition in the Germany of the 1930s and '40s on biblical grounds and its underlying supersessionist logic, his pronouncements might seem premature. In fact, his thinking is polemical and oppositional, and an "untimely" provocation; it expresses a futurity that has not yet entirely come to pass.[61] Clearly, Auerbach wants to believe that history triumphs over history's denial. But there is nothing triumphalist about his position. His notion of history may be partial, but it is not blind. It is staked on hope and promise but not on any guarantees of fulfillment. As Auerbach said in the years after the war, reiterating statements he had made in his earlier writings, time is not a condition that we can ever escape, nor should we ever wish to do so, "for only in history do human beings appear before us in the fullness of their lives." And because that is the case, "it is better to be consciously rather than unconsciously time-bound" (*M*, pp. 573–74).

comes a fateful sentence: "But this perspective is no less important for being possible only in retrospect" ("*F*," pp. 95–96).

61. Typological readings of the Hebrew Bible never seem to go away. For a recent example, see Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York, 1982). Frye's approach was roundly criticized for reasons that Auerbach would have shared. See, for example, Robert Alter, "Northrop Frye, entre archétype et typologie," *Recherches de sciences religieuses* 89, no. 3 (2001): 403–17.