



## Typological Symbolism in Medieval Literature

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# Typological Symbolism in Medieval Literature

In Dante's third heaven, the heaven of Venus, the soul on whom Dante apparently wishes to focus our attention, is introduced to him, by one of her companions, in this manner: "Now, I will satisfy the ultimate desire which this star has suggested to you; you wish to know who is hidden in this light which shines about me like a sunbeam in pure water: this soul is Rahab, and her splendor gives to our ranks the seal of supreme beatitude; she was the first to be received into this heaven when Christ liberated the souls from hell; it was most fitting that she should be in one of the heavens as a trophy of the victory that was won with both hands; and this because she contributed to the first conquest made by Joshua in the holy land, a remembrance which means little to the Pope." And then, the speaker continues with a violent attack against the avarice of the clergy.

This passage is full of problems. Rahab, in the second and sixth chapters of the book of Joshua, is the harlot who hides in her house the two spies sent by Joshua into the town of Jericho—who saves them by deluding their pursuers, declares to them her faith in the God of Israel, helps them to escape by means of a red cord through the window of her house which is on the townwall, and makes them swear that the Jews would spare her and her parents and all her family in the house. The men asked her to bind to the window, as a sign, the scarlet rope by which she had let them down; and thus only Rahab the harlot and her house were spared when all of Jericho, men and women, were put to death by the victorious Jews entering the town.

Now, why does the splendor of this harlot confer on the third heaven the highest degree of beatitude, why is the explanation of her position able to fulfill the ultimate desire which the star of Venus has suggested to Dante, why was Rahab the first to be received in this star when Christ liberated the souls of the old Covenant, what is meant by the victory won with both hands, and what has the avarice of the Pope to do with his forgetting the glory of Joshua in the Holy Land?

All these problems are easily resolved if you consider the figurative or typological interpretation of the book of Joshua which, in a constant tradition, fully developed already in the writings of Tertullian, is explained or alluded to in an infinite number of commentaries, sermons,

hymns, and also in Christian art. The book of Joshua, especially its first chapters has always been one of the most popular objects of figurative interpretation; Joshua was regarded as a figure of Christ (the identity of the names Jesus and Joshua is emphasized as early as Tertullian), and when he leads his people over the Jordan (just like Moses leading his people out of Egypt) he figures Christ leading mankind out of the slavery of sin and perdition into the true Holy Land, the eternal kingdom of God. Concerning Rahab, all ancient commentators consider her as a type of the church; her house alone, with all its inhabitants, escapes perdition, just as the church of the faithful will alone be saved when Christ appears for the last judgment; she found freedom from the fornication of the world by way of the window of confession, to which she bound the scarlet rope, the sign of Christ's blood, *sanguinis Christi signum*. Thus she is *figura Ecclesiae*, and the scarlet rope, like the posts struck with the blood of the Lamb in Exodus, becomes the figure of Christ's redeeming sacrifice. The conceptions of Jericho as eternal perdition was supported by the parable from Luke 10, 30 (a certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves) generally interpreted as a figure of the fall of Man. In the same manner, the victory gained with one and the other hand alludes to Joshua's victory won with the help of Moses' outstretched hands, the figure of the victory of Christ on the cross with his hands outstretched on the *arbor vitae crucifixae*. Thus, Rahab, or the church stands, in our passage of the Paradiso, as a trophy of both victories, that of Joshua, and that of Christ; of the victory of Joshua inasmuch as Joshua prefigures Christ, and of that of Christ inasmuch as Christ is the fulfillment of Joshua (implere); both entities in the figurative relationship are equally real and equally concrete; the figurative sense does not destroy the literal, nor does the literal deprive the figured fact of its status as a real historical event. Obviously, the last sentence of our passage, namely that the Pope has forgotten Joshua's glory in the Holy Land, is also to be understood in a two-fold and figurative manner. It is not only the Holy Land in its concrete and geographical sense which the Pope neglects by fighting against Christians instead of liberating it; he has also, for the sake of the *maledetto fiore*, the golden florin of Florence, lost all memory of the city to come, *eterna Jerusalem*. And now, the meaning of the passage has become completely clear: the first elect soul in the heaven of Venus is Rahab, a figure of the Church, that is of the bride in the Song of Songs, in love of her bridegroom who is Christ—a symbol of the highest form of love—and this view, as Folchetto says, will satisfy the ultimate desire the star of Venus has prompted in Dante's mind.

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The method used here for the interpretation of the first chapters of the book of Joshua does, of course, not apply only to this text, but is part of an entire system which embraces the whole of the Old Testament. When Saint Paul came to the conviction that a man is justified by faith alone, not by action according to the Jewish law, and that God is not the God of the Jews alone, the character of the Old Testament was changed completely—this was no longer the law and the particular history of the Jews, because “all these things happened to them in figura only”: thus the Old Testament became a series of prefigurations of Christ, of his incarnation and passion, and of the foundation of the Christian Church. Saint Paul himself gave a few figurative interpretations (the conception of figurism as such was not unknown to the Jewish tradition), and the whole system developed so rapidly that we find it completely worked out, with an incredible abundance of details, in the earliest patristic literature. You will realize that this method of interpretation involves an approach to human and historical phenomena entirely different from ours. We are apt to consider the events of history and the happenings of every-day life as a continuous development in chronological succession; the figurative interpretation combines two events, causally and chronologically remote from each other, by attributing to them a meaning common to both. Instead of a continuous development, the direction and ultimate result of which is unknown to us, the figurative interpreter purports to know the significance and ultimate result of human history, because this has been revealed to mankind; in this theory, the meaning of history is the fall and redemption of Man, the Last Judgment, and the eternal Kingdom of God. We, on the other hand, are able to explain to a certain extent every single historical fact by its immediate causes and to foresee to a certain extent its immediate consequences, moving so to speak on an horizontal plane; with the figurative approach, on the contrary, in order to explain the significance of a single historical event, the interpreter had to take recourse to a vertical projection of this event on the plane of providential design by which the event is revealed as a prefiguration or a fulfillment or perhaps as an imitation of other events. In view of the facts that education and culture were almost entirely ecclesiastical up to the fourteenth century, that the conception of human history, as taught by the church, was dominated by the interpretation of the scriptures, and that this interpretation was entirely figurative and based on the trilogy fall of man, incarnation of Christ, last judgment—in view of all these facts it is evident that the figurative conception of history had to exert a deep and lasting influence on medieval spiritual life even on laymen. Sermons, religious poetry (lyrical and dramatical), church sculpture, that is to

say the three most important means of popularizing knowledge in the middle ages, were entirely impregnated with figurism. May I draw the attention of my readers to the important difference which obtains between figurism and other similar forms of thinking such as allegorism or symbolism. In these patterns, at least one of the two elements combined is a pure sign, but in a figural relation both the signifying and the signified facts are real and concrete historical events. In an allegory of love or in a religious symbol at least one of the terms does not belong to human history; it is an abstraction or a sign. But in the sacrifice of Isaac considered as a figure of the sacrifice of Christ, it is essential, and has been stressed with great vigor, at least in the occidental tradition, that neither the prefiguring nor the prefigured event lose their literal and historical reality by their figurative meaning and interrelation. This is a very important point.

Dante's mind was deeply rooted in this tradition, and I believe that not only many particular passages in the *Commedia* can be explained in this manner, but that the whole conception of the great poem has to be considered from this angle. It is not difficult to prove that the community of the blessed in the Empire, in which Dante's *Paradiso* culminates, is arranged according to a figurative pattern. Not only the world of the Christian religion, but also the ancient world is included in Dante's figural system; the Roman empire of Augustus is for Dante a figure of God's eternal empire, and the prominent part Virgil plays in Dante's work is based on this assumption. Dante is not the first to subject all the material of human history to the figural conception; biblical history, Jewish and Christian, came to be seen as universal human history, and all pagan historical material had to be inserted and adapted to this framework. Especially Roman history was interpreted by Saint Augustine and other patristic authors as a path of Christian universal history and of the plan of providence. Mediaeval authors followed this tradition, and very often used it for political purposes, in the long struggle between imperium and sacerdotium. So did Dante, and most of his figures taken from Roman history are connected with his political ideas, as the following example shows.

At the foot of the mountain of the Purgatorio, Dante and Virgil meet a venerable old man, who, with severe authority teaches them how to prepare for the ascent, as the guardian who controls access to purification. It is Cato of Utica. The choice of this particular character for such a function is very astonishing. For Cato was a pagan; he was an enemy of Caesar and the monarchy; his allies, Caesar's murderers Brutus and Cassius, are put by Dante in the deepest hell, in Lucifer's mouth by the side of Judas; moreover, Cato committed suicide, a crime for

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which horrible punishment is meted out in another circle of the Inferno. And yet Cato has been appointed as guardian of the Purgatorio! The problem becomes clear to us by the words with which Virgil addresses him: "I pray you, allow my companion to enter; he is in search of liberty, that precious good you know so well—you who have despised life for it; you know it well, because death was not bitter to you in Utica, where you abandoned your body that will be so radiant on the last day." From these words, it becomes obvious, that Cato is a *figura*, or better still, that the historical Cato is a *figura* of the Cato in Dante's Purgatorio. The political and earthly freedom for which he died, was only a shadow, a prefiguration of Christian freedom from evil which leads from the bondage of corruption to true sovereignty over oneself, the *libertas gloriae filiorum Dei*—a freedom which Dante finally attains at the top of the Purgatorio, when Virgil crowns him as master over himself. Cato's choice of voluntary death in order to avoid slavery is obviously considered by Dante not as a crime, but as a *figura* of this liberation. Of course Dante was inspired in the choice of Cato for this part by Virgil's sixth book, where Cato is represented as a judge of the righteous in the netherworld (*secretosque pios, his dantem jura Catonem*) and he was encouraged to treat Cato in a special manner by the universal admiration expressed for him even by authors who were his political opponents. Cato was one of the classical examples of Roman virtue on which Dante based his political ideology of universal Roman monarchy. But the manner in which he introduced Cato and justified his part is independent of Virgil and is clearly figurative. Both forms of Cato are real and concrete, the historical and the eternal form; his function in the beyond presupposes the reality of his historical role. Cato is not an allegory nor a symbol of liberty, but an individual personality: he is raised from his preliminary status, where he considered political freedom as the highest good, to the final perfection of his form, in which civil virtue or law have lost their value, and in which the only thing of importance is the "ben dell'intelletto," the true highest good, the liberty of the immortal soul in the sight of God.

In striking contrast to earlier poets who dealt with the other world, the inhabitants of Dante's three realms have not lost the individual shape and strength of their earthly character; on the contrary, their individual character presents itself with an intensity and concreteness superior to what it was during the various stages of their earthly careers; and this realism in the beyond is allowed to survive in spite of the fact that they have left history for an eternal, and eternally unchanging, situation. This powerful realism is based on Dante's conception, that God's judgment develops and fixes the complete and ultimate form of the individual

—a conception which is in concordance with Thomistic anthropology—and which at the same time is figurative: in that God's judgment endows an earthly figure with its own final and absolute perfection.

Earlier poets never used figurism in such a universal and audacious manner; they confine figurative treatment in most cases to the poetical illustration of sacred history; figurative interpretation of other events or of life in general was mostly unconscious.

From the very beginning of Christian art and poetry, the *figurae* have a tendency to appear in series. These series of figures can be found already on the early Christian sarcophagi; we find for example the liberation of Joseph from the pit, the liberation of Jonah from the belly of the whale (after three days) and the resuscitation of Lazarus (also after three days) represented side by side as figures of Christ's resurrection. But the full development of figurative series in Christian poetry is rather a mediaeval phenomenon than one of late antiquity. So far as I can see, the Latin hymnologists of the Carolingian period, especially the inventor of the sequences, Notker Balbulus, were the first to use this form consciously; and the great master of what I may call figurative eulogies is Adam of St. Victor; the twelfth century is the apogee of figurism and especially of figurative series. The praise of the Virgin, for instance, in many of the sequences of Adam and his imitators, consists of just such series; she is represented successively as Sarah laughing at Isaac's birth, Jacob's ladder the top of which reaches to heaven, Moses' burning bush which is not consumed by the flames, Aaron's rod that budded, Gideon's fleece soaked with dew, the ark of the Covenant that contains the celestial Manna, the throne or the bed of the true Solomon who is Christ, Isaiah's rod coming out of the stem of Jesse, Ezechial's gate looking towards the East which shall be shut because the Lord has entered by it; she is the garden enclosed, the fountain sealed, the fountain of gardens, the well of living waters from the Song of Songs, and so forth.

A student of mediaeval French literature may remember here the figurative series in the mystery plays, especially the most famous of them, the *Jeu d'Adam* with its procession of prophets. These prophets are not prophets in the restricted sense in which we normally use this word, but Old Testamentary personalities in general: besides Isaiah, Daniel and Jeremiah, there appear Abraham and Moses, David and Solomon, Balaam and Nebuchadnezzar and others. Each of them begins with one Latin sentence isolated from the text of the Bible, and then goes on to explain the sentence in French as an announcement of Christ. Isaiah for example will not present the whole of his prophecy concerning the future of Jerusalem and the king of Babylon, but is

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introduced exclusively for the sake of one sentence: *egredietur virga de radice Jesse* etc., which was considered as a prediction of the Virgin and Christ; just as Abraham is introduced for the sake of the promise God made to him, and Aaron for his budding rod. This is pure figurism; as I have mentioned before, the Old Testament becomes a succession of isolated prefigurations, or, if you prefer, figural prophecies of Christ. In this system even Adam may become not only a *figura* but a figural prophet of Christ. His sleep during which Eve, the mother of mankind in the flesh, was created out of one of his ribs, prefigures Christ's death or sleep before his resurrection, when one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water, symbols of the sacraments of the Church, the mother of mankind in the spirit. Adam's sleep is the mystical sleep of contemplation or ecstasy; when he awakens he starts prophesying: "therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh"; this passage has been constantly interpreted as a figure of the union of Christ and the Church. This is one of the most ancient and venerable figures, one of the few introduced by Saint Paul himself (Eph: 5, 29-32): "*sacramentum hoc magnum est, ego autem dico in Christo et in ecclesia.*" This interpretation of Adam as a figurative prophet predicting Christ and the Church has become an unbroken tradition. I became aware of it for the first time when reading a sermon of Saint Bernard, the second in Septuagesima. The *Jeu d'Adam*, it is true, does not present Adam in the procession of the prophets, but in another passage of the play he outspokenly predicts Christ. After his fall, when he gives himself up to despair and long-winded self-accusations, he sees one ray of hope: "There will be no salvation for me except by the son who will be born of the virgin—"Deus . . . ne me ferat ja nul aïe, fors le fils qu' istra de Marie." In his deepest despair, he becomes conscious of the future redemption; he has knowledge of the future. This blithe anticipation of the future may appear to us as mediaeval naiveté, as a lack of historical perspective—the same historical naiveté with which Adam and Eve or in other plays other biblical personalities are realistically depicted as Frenchmen of the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries. And, of course, there is indeed implied, in such phenomena, a naiveté and lack of historical perspective; but such an evaluation would not be exhaustive. The figurative interpretation, in spite of its stress on historical completeness derives its inspiration from the eternal wisdom of God, in whose mind there does not exist a difference of time. In His sight, what happens here and now, has happened from the very beginning, and may recur at any moment in the flow of time. At any time, at any place, Adam falls, Christ



sacrifices himself, and humanity, the bride of the Song of Songs, faithful, hopeful, and loving, searches for Him. A personality who is a *figura Christi*, as Adam is, has knowledge of the providential future—Christ knew that Judas would betray him, just as another figure of Christ, Charlemagne, “Charles li reis, nostre emperere maignes,” in the *Chanson de Roland*, knows from the very beginning that Ganelon is a traitor. The eternal coexistence in God’s mind of all historical events is a conception best expressed by Saint Augustine’s doctrine that God keeps present in his mind all things past and future in their true reality—that therefore it is not correct to speak of God’s fore-knowledge, but simply of his knowledge—“scientia Dei non praesentia sed tantum scientia dici potest.” Figurism gives the basis for the mediaeval fusion of realistic naïveté and other-worldly wisdom.