Notes on Erich Auerbach's *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*

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Figura enim praeterit, non natura: thus ends a gloss by St. Augustine (*De Civitate Dei*, 20, 14) to a passage from I. Cor. 7:31. Auerbach, in the lead essay of this reissue of his more "methodological" studies, edited with a foreword by P. Valesio (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984), reports the citation as part of his charting the semantic history of the word/concept *figura* from its earliest appearance in Terence, then through Roman rhetoric and on to the Christian era transformations it underwent, culminating with Dante. The question *not* asked by the great scholar is what exactly is it that legitimates an assertion of this type, "the fashion [*figura*] goes away, not the nature" (37; Manheim trans.), above and beyond the fact that the explication of the New Testament requires some hermeneutical turns not always easy to decipher. The use Augustine makes of the word figure, which is broad and not without the coloring of his own conception of allegory, is at first like that of a dual system, a two-pronged schema of which the first is historical fact and the second fulfillment. In the wake of Tertullian's influential designation, fulfillment is closely related to *veritas*, and the figure is thus easily conceived as an image [*imago*], or—crucial alternative—as a shadow [*umbra*], one step removed from Truth. Fulfillment as the coming into being of a truth not yet here was often pointed forward in history—which was Augustine's and in general the Christian era's concern: foreseeing events, like Christ's reincarnation, in the Bible—and, at the same time, presupposed a direct connection with the concrete event:

both shadow and truth are abstract only in reference to the meaning first concealed, then revealed; they are concrete in reference to the things or persons which appear as vehicles of the meaning. (34)

Unlike allegory, the figure must have a concrete, historical referent which propels the sign-function (as icon, metaphor, stylized type, etc.) forward in time. In the two-pronged conception, the past image it made up of history as it actually manifested itself in a *before*, and it therefore *pre*figures the fulfillment which is actualized in the present *now*. Where of course one is subject to the risk of interpreting an image for a shadow—where, in short, the question of an immutable “nature” arises tacitly once again. For Augustine, then, what was necessary to achieve was the legitimization of yet another term, the day of Final Judgment; and he does this by merely including it as the unknown variable in future time which still relied upon the two terms of the *figura*: “do not look upon as telling of the past, but rather as foretelling the future” (43). The temporal (historical) unity of the Old Testament needed therefore to be split up to account for a supratemporal, eternal time, thus justifying God’s knowledge of future events for all time and man’s limited knowledge concerning the concrete, historical past only. The problem must have been a formidable one, and major attempts to solve it can be found from Boethius to Valla.

Auerbach goes on to demonstrate how this semantic expansion in the history of the word/concept made possible manifold developments. For example, Christian exegesis recovered the more purely “rhetorical” origins of *figura* as the difference between *figura verborum* and *figurae rerum*, as derived from Quintilian (45). It also posited a new opposition between *figura* and *historia*. At one point, however, there emerges—but for brief moments—a triadic scheme, *historia-figura-littera*, evidencing the possibility that indeed the *figura* could couch a third term, a *necessary, other* referent which stands in-between the semantic function or category, on the one side, and the material signifying ground, or a concrete alterity (we might even say, textuality), on the other. Auerbach continues his analysis insisting on the two-sided, dichotomous definition of *figura*, so that when it is set into motion (in the creative and the interpretive instances of production and re-production), it pushes the *relation*—“a middle term between *littera-historia* and *veritas*,” (47)—into the background, foregrounding a dualism typical of the rationalistic idealism that informs it:

Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or per-

sons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The two poles of the figures are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical time. (53)

Distinguishing it carefully from the occasional overlap with allegory, doubling it in order to account for the possible coexistence of the four levels of meaning in the Scriptures (and eventually in *The Divine Comedy*), Auerbach charts an evolution which is already pointed toward "method," beginning that migration from the realm of rhetoric (of existential, actual, body-mind presencing) to that of logic (or Medieval dialectics at first and Thomism later on), thus consigning the figura to repetition of the Same. As he writes in the same essay:

Whereas in the modern view the event is always self-sufficient and secure, while the interpretation is fundamentally incomplete, in the figural interpretation the fact is subordinated to an interpretation which is fully secured to begin with: the event is enacted according to an ideal model which is a prototype situated in the future and thus far only promised. (59)

But what is here considered the future as the achieved or fulfilled prefiguration in Augustine, a temporally eternal telos, is in reality a linguistic, human filter that requires a concrete living being in order to locate it and activate it. Not God out there and waiting at the end of all time, a fulfillment forever deferred yet determining in the present, but the linguistic intervention of the interpreter/performer between the past and the future, the givenness of a being-there around and about which all predications, all re-presentations rotate. Perhaps it was a matter, on Auerbach's part, of seeing how Augustine's tripartition of the *figura* was an attempt to work out not only a theological need, but a linguistic and ontological one as well. Auerbach, in fact, does not seem interested in developing one of his own insights, namely, that his model "point[s] to something which is in need of interpretation" (59), or, in other words, that the figura will reclaim, rebound off, or send as destining (*Geschick* in Heidegger's sense of the term) other figuras, other re-presentations of a historical event, whether fulfilled or not. And from the point of view of the interpreter in his/her experiential time relating to a text that in its turn relates—i.e.: tells, or says again, in the form of its linguistic fulfillment—a historical fact or event, this entails entering the interpretive circle fully cognizant of a third referent or frame, a dynamic

locus actively *co*involved in establishing a workable stance with the other two terms (past, real event, *and* present-future actualization or coming into being). The figura, then, calls for another point which is represented by the actualizing presence of the interpreter, who is the one doing the "figuring" toward the completion of fulfilled or realized meaning (and where the pre-figures, projected future prototype *need not be* a theological axiom). Of the existential-historical-linguistic moment of the interpreter there are almost no traces in this collection of essays, as there are, for instance, in *Mimesis*, as Edward Said once pointed out.

Unlike Spitzer (and, before him, Vossler) whose historical semantics was conducted on the basis of precise linguistic-stylistic analyses meant to connect between *Wort und Werk*, thus establishing a profound bond between linguistics and literary criticism, Auerbach attempts cultural criticism on a grand scale. His strategy consists in following a word/concept through its textual concretizations, locating the semantic spaces it occupies and the claims, which include world views, it makes in its historical unfolding. Auerbach will thus amass erudite and authorial sources, stake out the confines of applicability of the given work, isolate a dominant sense, deploy it as an axiom, trace how it sways from its original signification, finally deduce an evaluation and test it out on a broad corpus. This "method" is of course applied in a magisterial way to the "New" interpretation of *The Divine Comedy*, initiating an important and influential critical current among Dante scholars, especially in the United States. The approach works also when studying the use made by a particular author of a specific work or phrase, as for instance *justice* and *force* in Pascal (101–29), or when charting the first steps of a newborn social construct, *la court et la ville* (133–79). One is reminded here of how a later generation seems to have assimilated this interdisciplinary and socially conscious criticism, both here and in Europe.

At the same time, however, one cannot but feel the distance that separates this "precursor" from our present day theories and methodologies. As Della Terza noted in the introduction to the Italian edition of the collected *Dante Studies*, with Auerbach it is the final result that really counts, not the actual application of his "figural method." Historically, with the decline of the linguistics of the *parole* and the criticism of the *Stilkritik*, the linguistics of the *code*, or of the *langue*,

prevailed, especially in the post-WWII period (de Saussure, Bally, Jakobson). Not fully equipped to develop into a literary hermeneutics (of which there are some premises in his work, as well as in that of Spitzer, and Terracini), Auerbach's style was either eclipsed, or was watered down by academic pedagogy. We have since, moreover, witnessed the appearance and partial disappearance of various other approaches or "fashions," among which I'll cite phenomenology, structuralism, semiotics, deconstruction, not to mention the epistemological and ontological problems raised by Marxism, Lukacs, Benjamin and Adorno in particular. It should come as no surprise, then, that certain turns of phrase, or esthetic judgments, do indeed appear "dated." Except in one respect. As Paolo Valesio quite appropriately points out in the prefatory essay to the book, bringing out this collection of studies by Auerbach constitutes "an overdue rediscovery of the essay as a form of critical exploration, and of the cultural values to which such a form gives expression" (xxi). As such their significance resides in that spirit (a word that ought to be engaged without the horror of its theo-rhetoric roots), that willingness to risk even the potentially disturbing conclusion (i.e.: "The Triumph of Evil in Pascal," original English essay title later changed to a more bland "On the Political Theory of Pascal"), transcending glossarianism and the structures of Methodology (method as an *a priori* given, not method as derived from the actual textual exegesis, which is Auerbach's way).

However, though Auerbach certainly moves beyond the *littera* in his sociological, "historist" semantics, whether textual, infratextual, or contextual, it can be asserted that at bottom he still predicates his argument along the unseen and centering tracks of a dualistic interpretive reason: as hinted above, the "essence" remains and the *figura*, as a theoretically empty set, can only yield meanings, or images, that pass away or are swallowed up by historical time. At this juncture, it can be said that the other possible meanings of the word/concept *figura* as *imitatio veritatis* (44) proposed by Gaudentius, or the more common and discounted view as "deception" or *figurata similitudine* (stemming from Ovid [23]) are indeed exerting a deconstructive tug at the wholesale application of a figural method of interpretation. For these other possible significations are only temporarily eclipsed throughout the Christian era development

of the word, or else are subsumed, construed as exceptions that prove the norm, or as erroneous deployment, but they are there in absentia to expose and explode the *figura* as Auerbach understands it for saying what it says *and* for saying its opposite as negation: thus comes to light the presence/absence metaphysical dichotomy we heard so much about in recent criticism. But by the same token, the question of “undecideability” which recent deconstructivist criticism hailed as the ultimate consequence in the chasm between the discourse of the text and the rhetoric of criticism, is unveiled as having indeed a concrete, decideable factor, the political one, the aspect of Power which precipitates the either/or logical dialectic of any affirmation into the concrete social/interpretive scene. Augustine’s elaboration of the notion of figural interpretation is but one example of how a text can be forced toward an appropriation, and therefore control, of a series of extremely influential forms of discourse, those of New Testament exegesis. And Auerbach’s interpretation of Augustine’s interpretation follows in the same pattern. The possibility, inherent in the word/concept right from the beginning, that *figura* can not only represent a concretely derived event (fact-fulfillment), but that it can also serve as a “copy” or “simulacre” makes it hermeneutically versatile yet highly unstable, bearing along its luminous imprint (in Cicero, figures of speech are called *formae et lumina orationis*) the prospect of its groundlessness, its self annihilation: *figura* in fact also meant, as an attested synonym that belies the conceptual opposition, *umbra*, shadow or what is not readily visible, that is, legible or understandable (though Auerbach is quick to clarify that this usage became a “metaphoric turn” rather than a “direct designation.”) No matter, the great scholar’s definition displays and legitimates two registers: “*figura*: the creative, formative principle, change amid the enduring essence, the shades of meaning between copy and archetype” (49).

It follows then that only as essays, in the light of their particular approach to the topic in question, as prime examples of what the “old fashioned” historical and stylistic criticism was capable of achieving, can these essays be considered timely, interesting, important especially to younger scholars and graduate students. It is unquestionably refreshing to read one of the most synthetic, clear and illuminating essays in the book, “Vico and Aesthetic Historism,” and come away feeling both more learned and gratified for the inevitable tour de

force. Though of course several points can be challenged. But ultimately it is not the heuristic, but the eristic aspect of his work that gives Auerbach currency, its capacity to stage ("scenes" as appropriately used in the title within the larger "drama" of European culture) a socially conscious discourse amidst heterogeneous linguistic infrastructures, or its being stylistically uneven, "creative" in the sense in which the author's "I" and the author's social definition of his "role" are in dynamic tension, even when he himself essays to ignore the "missing" third element of the epistemological triangle figural interpretation entails. It is a great book to teach critical writing and to deploy for all sorts of metacritical exercises, beginning perhaps with the mildly grotesque exhumation suggested by the figure of Lazarus and ending with a radical critique of the vague humanist ideals it endorses.

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