

Typology and a Poet

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It is rare that a Ph. D. thesis gets turned into a book so readable and so wide-ranging as this one.¹ That it should be well-written is already remarkable in a work of this kind, but even more so is its width of range and scope. Dr Charity, who now lectures on English at York, was bred as a Methodist, so that I suppose he has the bible in his bones, and in due course he made the contact with Dante's poetry which led to the rather unconventional line of research that bears fruit here. A certain courage, perhaps, was entailed in his virtually staking an academic reputation on a first book addressed to scholars on two quite different fronts, to biblical theologians and to Dantists: the former may be more provoked than disarmed by the author's warning them that he is 'a theologian of a sort only . . . and *pro tem*', while Dante scholars – even such as can spare time for a little theology – are mostly no better disposed than other specialists to the 'amateur'. But the result shows that the risk was very well worth taking. This is a remarkable work in many ways – scholarly, perceptive and intelligent, nearly always closely argued, and, so far as I can judge, original.

Its general subject is typology, and this has to do, of course, with symbolic or figurative meanings, particularly in the Bible; and in the Bible considered precisely as an historical narrative. For typology the meaning of biblical history is always itself historical; it consists, that is, in an interconnexion of the events and actions recorded, in such wise that the discoverable significance is always *itself* an event or action, and so is always, to this extent, concretely historical (even when eschatological) and not merely doctrinal, as would be the case if the bible were to be read merely as 'allegory'. Though the term 'typology' is fairly new, the typological method is as old as the New Testament (cf. 1 Corinthians, 10 1–5) and if an allegorical exegesis was largely practised by the Fathers, under Hellenistic influences, this, so far as it was non-historical, was clearly an aberration, for the bible presents God's dealings with man entirely in historical terms, as a series of acts and events in which what is expected as final, relatively or absolutely, has always had, or will have, a past in time, in the form of 'pre-figuring' promises or warnings. All this is well known but Dr Charity's concise and often brilliant handling of the

¹EVENTS AND THEIR AFTERLIFE: The Dialectics of Christian Typology in the Bible and Dante. By A. C. Charity. Cambridge University Press: 60s.

evidence is nonetheless very useful, if only as a clear and vigorous *mise au point*. It is much indebted, of course, to the work of older scholars, especially British and German. Occasionally the exposition is too rapid to do much more than leave the reader with a suggestive idea and only a sketch of supporting argument – as when the initial conversion of the Hebrew tribes to faith in Yahweh, the God of Moses and the Exodus, is presented as a break-through ‘to existence in *history* from existence interpreted by and in some degree conceived of as *myth*’ (my italics). Where the argument is more fully worked out I find myself, for the most part, pretty fully persuaded; but this is of little importance given my generally meagre acquaintance with the relevant critical discussion. It may however be of interest to readers perhaps no better informed than I am, and it will certainly help me to get my own argument under way, if I mention one recurrent feature of the biblical sections of this work (about three fifths of the whole), before going on to comment briefly on the chapters devoted to Dante.

I refer to Dr Charity’s insistence on the ethical factor in the pattern of ‘type’ and fulfilment which typology sees in the bible – or (if the term can stand for what is seen rather than the seeing) which is the bible’s typology. For Charity this is, essentially, what he calls ‘applied’, i.e. it always involves a summons to a definite choice between forms of ‘existence’ in the concrete. The style, so to say, of God’s self-disclosure in the bible is always both indicative *and* imperative; Israel is always as much called upon to imitate the ‘ways’ of Yahweh as to inherit his blessings. It is a mistake to read the bible either chiefly as a doctrinal allegory, in the manner of many of the Fathers, or as merely the unfolding of certain ‘historical correspondences’ in the manner of many modern typologists. The latter, in Charity’s view, tend to overlook the existential urgency of the bible’s message, and to that extent also – by implication – the possibility of its typology being applied to *post*-biblical history (as it was applied by Dante, for example, as Charity, we shall see, interprets him). As for the medieval exegetes – through whom, of course, our author has to approach the typology of the *Comedy* – their division of the ‘four senses’ of Scripture is open to a similar criticism, in that it separated the typological sense (misleadingly named *allegoricus*) from the *sensus moralis*. Here Charity is undoubtedly right: that usual medieval division was a legacy – pedagogically very convenient, of course – of ways of thinking that were far more Graeco-Roman than Hebrew. On the other hand he is clearly impressed – and was perhaps originally surprised – by Aquinas’ firmly historical understanding of Scripture (at least when speaking as a speculative theologian and not actually ‘doing’ exegesis); by his doctrine, not only that the three ‘spiritual’ senses must be grounded on the literal one, but that those senses themselves must be understood, as we would say, typologically – that properly speaking the spiritual sense of scripture is always an

event or action (never just an idea) and is thus no whit less 'historical' than the literal sense; the only difference being that the event understood as 'spiritual', e.g. the redemptive work of Christ, usually follows and is prefigured by the event understood as 'literal', e.g. Israel's crossing of the Red Sea.

If Dr Charity gives careful attention to St Thomas' theory of typology this is because he is convinced that the *Divine Comedy* is in effect a development of 'potential' contained in it. Moreover, having noted that the exegetical practice of St Thomas was more involved in old-fashioned allegorical procedures than his theory seems to warrant, he makes the interesting suggestion that at that time a development of the theory's typological 'potential' may well have had a better chance of success *outside* the field of biblical exegesis than within it, 'where past habits were ingrained and old interpretations handed on down'. But someone of course had to take the initiative of transferring the application of principles, now at last clearly worked out in theology, from biblical to 'profane' matter, from 'sacred' history to secular. And this, Charity maintains, is just what the great poet did; and, probably, deliberately.

I am very inclined to agree. But if Dante did this – if the structure of the *Comedy* is thoroughly typological in the sense indicated – then he presumably did it with regard to both of the two chief agents, so to call them, in his poem's action: the 'character' Dante and the souls, taken collectively, he meets on his voyage into the afterlife; so that both these 'agents', Dante and the souls, would be found to be figuratively related, in what they do and say, to *other* doings and sayings; and both the doings and sayings taken as 'figuring' and those taken as 'figured', both will have to be reckoned *historical* in some acceptable sense; otherwise they won't exhibit that kind of relationship between sign and thing signified that we have agreed to call typological, where both terms in the relation are envisaged as events in history. Thus to ask whether the *Comedy* is typological is to ask whether the action it narrates can reasonably be said ('reasonably' from the poet's point of view, of course, not necessarily from that of twentieth century man) both to *be* and *signify* history. Now, given that the basic literal sense of the poem is an obviously fictitious journey by a living man into the world of the dead, it might seem that Dr Charity is simply playing with words in answering the question affirmatively. And this is only the most obvious of possible objections to his thesis.

Restrictions of space preclude my discussing in any detail the arguments with which Dr Charity defends his interpretation; so I propose, in conclusion, merely to outline what I take this to amount to in respect of the two main agents in the *Comedy's* action – Dante and the souls he meets in the afterlife – and then indicate briefly why I consider it important. Dante's voyage, then, according to this reading, is a kind of 'acted biographical parable' of Christian life as

a being 'conformed' to the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is already hinted at in the timing of the poem's action at the Paschal *triduum*, in Dante's going down into Hell on the evening of Good Friday, and it becomes clear in the *Paradiso*, particularly in the heaven of Mars (XIV–XVII). And the literal sense which underpins this typology would indeed be the Dante-personage's voyage, but understood simply as a 'figure' of the real Dante's personal life; a 'figure' which retains historicity by the same principle as that which Aquinas applies to metaphors in Scripture: 'the parabolical sense is contained in the literal; for words can signify something both properly and figuratively, and in the latter case *the literal sense is not the figure of speech itself but that which it figures*' (*Summa theol.* 1a, 1, 10 ad 3).

This principle certainly meets the case in point, and certainly too a Christ-typology on these lines is supported by the Pauline epistles and by theology (if we allow for the difference that in the *Comedy* the typological relation would be backwards, from the 'type' (Dante) to Christ, whereas in St Thomas' scheme the relation is only forwards, from Christ to his members, cf. *Quodlibet* VII, vi. 15 ad 5). Nor can there be any doubt that it is present in the *Comedy*, as C. S. Singleton has for long maintained and as Dr Charity now argues afresh, with particular reference to the *Paradiso*. Only I still find myself less sure than he is that the Christ-image is *central* to the poem's whole design. The other figurative connexion that he traces I find, however, entirely convincing. It consists in taking the souls encountered in the afterlife as typologically related – by way of their repeated self-disclosure through reminiscence – to man on earth, living in history and morally responsible by the gift of free will.² It is here moreover, in the creation of this complex pattern of representation and recall that Dante's poetic originality appears more evidently; for here he was working without any direct model in the typological tradition. Yet the effect he achieves here too can be securely related to that tradition (and, in turn, wonderfully illuminated by it, as Charity shows in a couple of brilliant chapters), in so far as the tradition had retained, especially in Aquinas, the biblical sense of man's existence in history – in a history constituted, so to say, by a continuous interrelation between God's call and man's response or failure to respond. It was not the least of Dante's achievements that, using a typology akin to the biblical, he expressed this view of existence in terms of *secular* history. And perhaps it was a profoundly Christian achievement just because it was, in this sense, so 'secularist'.

²The relation may also go in the reverse direction, not backwards but forwards – a damned or saved soul being regarded as the revealed 'meaning' of a given earthly existence which would thus be its 'prefiguration'.