

SIR ISRAEL GOLLANCZ MEMORIAL LECTURE
MEDIEVAL POETRY AND THE FIGURAL
VIEW OF REALITY

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IN the Gollancz Memorial Lecture for 1944,¹ Professor Nevill Coghill gave new direction and impetus to our study of Langland's poetry. Without minimizing the difficulty, for the modern reader, of receiving the 'serial and simultaneous voices'² of an allegorical composition, he described the rewards of our effort with such exhilaration that many of us made our dedication to *Piers Plowman* largely on the strength of his assurances, and have never been disillusioned.

This paper is also offered as 'an investigation of poetry',³ but less, perhaps, as a redirection of ideas and responses than as a redefinition. If it attempts to question and supplement our view of 'allegory' in some medieval English verse—and particularly in *Piers Plowman*—it is not prepared to question the truth of the observation that *Piers Plowman* is a 'great and single vision made of many visions, held and harmonized in the mind of the revising poet, and written down so that we can hold it in the same way'.⁴ For by such large imaginative claims Professor Coghill ensured that the rich complexities of Langland's art and meaning would never long be ignored. The voices of those who might have been tempted to reinstate some of Isaac D'Israeli's opinions—

A voluminous allegory is the rudest and the most insupportable of all poetic fictions. . . . A genius of the highest order alone could lead us through a single perusal of such a poem, by the charm of vivifying details, which enables us to forget the allegory altogether . . .⁵

have sounded thinly since 1944. Recommendations of a literal rather than an allegorical reading of the poem can still be found⁶

¹ 'The Pardon of Piers Plowman', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, xxx (London, 1944), 303–57.

² *Ibid.*, p. 353.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 355.

⁵ I. D'Israeli, *Amenities of Literature* (London, 1884), p. 100.

⁶ R. W. Frank, *Piers Plowman and the Scheme of Salvation*, Yale Studies in English, no. 136 (New Haven, 1957), p. 2.

and Langland's 'realism' is more often admired than precisely described.¹ There are few, however, who would now praise without qualification the 'veracious simplicity' of Langland's vision of the world.

But we have heard, over the past twenty years, the voices of the 'allegorists' strengthen and sharpen. 'Allegorical thinking needs practice', Professor Coghill told us:² he could hardly have foreseen how many supervisors would appear to guide our exploration of deeper meaning in texts vibrant with allegorical promise, and in others quite innocent of allegorical design. It is a matter for regret that invitations to 'practise allegorical thinking', first issued with such persuasive gaiety,³ were accepted with such sobriety and followed by sterner prescriptions, ordering, for instance, the application of the techniques of biblical exegesis to the understanding of religious poetry.⁴ It would be particularly regrettable if a process which originally involved the imagination and the sensibility were supplanted by a rigorous intellectual discipline, numbing to poetic response. Not surprisingly, the resistance to these methods has always been active. But there are dangers here, too, for resistance can lead to over-simplification. We may not, any longer, debate in overt terms 'realism or allegory', 'literal or spiritual': they are, however, issues which work powerfully in our critical discussions of medieval religious verse, and still affect our judgements.⁵

For the debate—whether open or concealed—is illusory. It hardly needs demonstrating that the 'realism' of Langland's presentation of his world—the beans and baked apples, the leaking church roofs, the quiet cloisters, the plague-ridden

¹ See, for instance, J. A. Yunck, *The Lineage of Lady Meed*, University of Notre Dame Publications in Medieval Studies, no. 17 (University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), pp. 303–6.

² 'The Pardon of Piers Plowman', *op. cit.*, p. 313.

³ Not only by Nevill Coghill, on behalf of *Piers Plowman*, but also by C. S. Lewis, on behalf of secular allegory, in *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford, 1936).

⁴ See Chapter I, 'The Method', of *Piers Plowman and Scriptural Tradition*, by D. W. Robertson and B. F. Huppé (Princeton, 1951), which significantly equates (p. 5) 'the medieval student of theology' and 'the poet'.

⁵ Determined resistance to the 'fourfold method' of interpretation seems to result in a narrow reading of *Piers Plowman*: see, for instance, some of the conclusions reached by Frank, *op. cit.*, pp. 117–18, and, more recently, by D. R. Howard, in *The Three Temptations* (Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 163 f. On the other hand, the exegetical approach is still not yielding literary fruit: see B. H. Smith, *Traditional Imagery of Charity in Piers Plowman* (The Hague, 1966).

cities—exist, so to speak, in spiritual solution. And so does the ‘realism’ of the *Pearl* poet’s presentation of his world: the August heat, the precise, unnerving sounds of summer

Quen corne is coruen wyth crokeȝ kene¹

press home a pain which, in its unbearable substance, demands spiritual resetting.

Neither does it need much demonstration that *Piers Plowman* and *Pearl* are badly served by subjection to precise and thoroughgoing analysis in terms of allegory, and especially in terms of fourfold allegory, the ‘allegory of the theologians’.² The tissue of the poetry is torn by such clinical handling.

There is, of course, no reason why the choice of procedure should ever have been so difficult and so limited. As early as 1944, Erich Auerbach’s brilliant essay, ‘Figura’,³ illuminated what, indeed, had always been open to discovery in the writings of the Church Fathers: that, from the beginning, Christian exegetical tradition, drawing upon both Hebrew and Greek sources, recognized typology and allegory, or, in other words, figural and allegorical methods of interpretation. The allegorical method of handling the sacred text, with its revelation of successive and deepening levels of divine meaning, might well have encouraged a simple polarity of values for the literal and the spiritual: if not inimical to ‘the letter’ it could lead to the devaluation of the letter.⁴ A divorce of history and faith, and of history and ethics is a risk that allegorical study of the Bible constantly took, and when we read some of the more extreme interpretations of early Alexandrian commentators, it is easy to understand why the most distinguished of Western medieval theologians were concerned to modify, compromise, and supplement. Allegorical

¹ *Pearl*, ed. E. V. Gordon (Oxford, 1958), l. 40.

² To support such analysis by Dante’s famous *Letter to Can Grande* about the ‘many meanings’ of the *Divine Comedy* is to raise rather than solve problems. (See M. W. Bloomfield, ‘Symbolism in Medieval Literature’, *Modern Philology* lvi (1958), 73–81.) It is still worth stressing, however, that the *Letter* writes more sympathetically about ‘alternate meanings’ than we sometimes assume, describing their operation as ‘play’ or ‘revolution’ around the subject of the poem: ‘circa quod currant alterni sensus’, ‘around which the alternate meanings play’.

³ *Neue Dantestudien* (Istanbul, 1944), pp. 11–71: trans. R. Manheim, in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (New York, 1959).

⁴ See B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1952), p. 2: ‘The spiritually minded commentator will accept the letter, but treat it ascetically, as the good religious treats his flesh, in order to devote himself to the spirit.’

procedures and attitudes were not undisputed or even dominant in the Western formulation of God's truth, as it was contained in the Scriptures.¹

Much more continuously influential was the typological or figural method, which did not deal so much in distinctions and polarities as in relationships. Based firmly upon the stated connections between the Old and New Testaments, and, in essence, designed to illustrate prophecy and fulfilment of prophecy in the course of events from Creation to Last Judgement, it was convinced of the historicity of an act, or person, or speech and equally convinced of its larger significance, to be revealed within Christian history:

Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. . . . Both . . . are within time, within the stream of historical life . . . the understanding of the two persons or events is a spiritual act, but this spiritual act deals with concrete events whether past, present, or future, and not with concepts or abstractions; these are quite secondary, since promise and fulfillment are real historical events, which have either happened in the incarnation of the Word, or will happen in the second coming. . . . Figural interpretation . . . differs from most of the allegorical forms known to us by the historicity both of the sign and what it signifies.²

It would not be appropriate to discuss here the complex ways in which figural or typological and allegorical methods are opposed, interact, and are reconciled in the theory and practice of medieval exegesis. That they could be reconciled is important to accept, for this may clarify our understanding of the greatest of all medieval English poems, *Piers Plowman*, as it does our understanding of the *Divine Comedy*.³ But it is also important to distinguish them, for their operation in medieval literature and in medieval art was sometimes as distinctive as it was strong.⁴

¹ See J. Daniélou, S. J., *From Shadows to Reality. Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers*, trans. W. Hibberd (London, 1960).

² Auerbach, 'Figura', pp. 53-4.

³ See A. C. Charity, *Events and their Afterlife* (Cambridge University Press, 1966), pp. 247-9.

⁴ See Daniélou, *op. cit.*, p. 64: 'typology is a legitimate extension of the literal sense, while moral allegory is something entirely alien. . . . Origen was the first to bring together these two interpretations in a forceful synthesis. But they are in reality two distinct approaches, artificially put side by side.' For a useful brief account of allegory and typology in medieval exegesis, see

In 'Figura', and, later, in *Mimesis*,¹ Auerbach proposed that, whatever the usefulness of allegory as a weapon for biblical scholars, and whatever the attractions of allegory as a descriptive mode for writers and artists, typological or figural attitudes permeated medieval thought. Medieval views of history, concepts of time and timelessness, concepts of reality were based figurally upon a philosophy of promise and fulfilment, most completely described and illustrated by the Scriptures, but discernible as a constant rhythm in every part of Christian experience, past, present, and to come. An awareness of its existence and its power is 'indispensable for an understanding of the mixture of spirituality and sense of reality which characterizes the European Middle Ages.'²

It is certainly indispensable for an understanding of medieval Christian literature, for here, I believe, typology offered richer rewards to the imagination than allegory. It accepted earthly life, in its concrete historical truth, but it saw that it was endlessly, and miraculously, capable of fulfilment—'endlessly', that is, until the end of time, and the coming of the kingdom of God. Nothing could, surely, be more stirring for the creative artist than the knowledge that 'the figural structure preserves the historical event while interpreting it as revelation; and must preserve it in order to interpret it'.³

Auerbach's treatment of figural composition in the *Divine Comedy* was exemplary, and it is all the more remarkable that we have taken so long to test the relevance of his theories and methods for medieval English poetry.⁴ English poets of the fourteenth century were as familiar as Dante with that basic text of figural, typological truth—the Bible: some of them were also familiar

C. Donahue, in 'Patristic Exegesis: Summation', *Critical Approaches to Medieval Literature*, ed. D. Bethurum (Columbia University Press, 1960), pp. 61–82.

¹ *Mimesis*, trans. W. R. Trask (New York, 1957), pp. 169 ff.

² 'Figura', p. 61.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 68. Boccaccio's frequent association of Scriptural and poetic composition may be significant here: see, in particular, *De Casibus Illustrium Virorum*, facsimile reproduction of the 1520 edition, with introduction by L. B. Hall (Gainesville, Florida, 1962), Liber Tertius, fo. xxxii, in which Boccaccio claims that poetry 'sola quantum humane imbecillitati possibile est sancte pagine vestigia sequi conata. Nam prout illa divine mentis arcana prophetis futuraque sub figuratum tegmine referavit: Sic et haec celsos suorum preceptus sub figmentorum velamine tradere orsa est.'

⁴ A beginning was made in Charles Donahue's essay 'Patristic Exegesis: Summation', *op. cit.*, p. 81, in which he suggested that typological forms of thought might 'turn imaginative writers to realism rather than allegory', and mentioned medieval drama as well as Langland.

with Dante. It is possible that many of the fiery critical arguments about literal or allegorical readings of *Pearl* and of *Piers Plowman* could have been quenched far earlier if we had been willing to work not simply with concepts of 'dramatic realism' and 'spiritual application', with 'drama' and 'allegory', but also with the far more flexible concept of typology, or the figural mode. *Piers Plowman* studies could have benefited much more than in fact they did from Auerbach's definitive statements about the comprehensive nature of a work such as the *Divine Comedy*, in which figural, allegorical, and symbolic forms occur—'but . . . basically it is the figural forms which predominate and determine the whole structure of the poem'.¹ We could well have taken early note, when discussing the Pearl maiden, or Piers the Plowman, of Auerbach's remarks about Dante's characters—Cato, Virgil, and, above all, Beatrice: 'the historical reality is not annulled, but confirmed and fulfilled by the deeper meaning.'²

Perhaps it is understandable that the English Miracle Play cycles have been first to receive adequate treatment as examples of typological, figural literature. They demand such attention since their very principles of selection are typological. The basic structure of the cycles is dictated by the fulfilment of the events, characters, and words of the Old Testament in those of the New, and the promise of ultimate fulfilment beyond Judgement Day:

All þat euere I saide schulde be
Is nowe fulfillid thurgh prophicie,
Ther-fore nowe is it tyme to me
To make endyng of mannes folie.³

The formal satisfaction we derive from the arrangement of material in these cycles is comparable to our satisfaction with the typological art of the Middle Ages: the Kennet Ciborium, for instance, which completes or 'fulfils' the Old Testament scenes on the base of the cup by matching New Testament scenes on the lid, thus identifying functional and typological truth: or the Alton Tower Triptych, in which the Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Harrowing of Hell are flanked by parallel events from the Old Testament, and yet *all* events are grouped about the central act of Redemption, Christ crucified.⁴ The structure of

¹ 'Figura', p. 64.

² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

³ 'The Judgement Play', *York Plays*, ed. L. T. Smith (Oxford, 1885), pp. 498–9.

⁴ Both the Ciborium and the Triptych are in the Victoria and Albert Museum: see plates 447–50 and 423 in H. Swarzenski, *Monuments of Romanesque Art* (London, 1967).

this splendid example of twelfth-century art, equally rich in material substance and in meaning, recalls what has been written very recently about the Miracle Plays: 'the shape of the drama is a linear progression. . . but the metaphysic of its structure is centrifugal'.¹ For in all typological or figural art, the acts to which all else must be referred are the acts of Christ's life; while they do not in any sense destroy the linear narrative of history, they have the power to supersede it, by showing how that narrative can be reordered about Christ's birth, death, and resurrection.

We might be tempted to judge the English Miracle Plays a rather simple version of figural art, were it not that in the hands of the best dramatists the 'structural potential (of the figures) becomes real', and, 'like recurring chords in music, the figures and their fulfillment discover singleness in diversity. Form and meaning become one'.²

And this, surely, is the crux of the matter for our study of medieval poetry: the multifarious ways in which the 'potential' of the figural view of reality could be 'realized' by the creative mind. In the case of the Miracle Plays, what could have been only a somewhat mechanical exercise in forecast and recapitulation became a study in historical and spiritual resonance.

In the case of the dream-poem, *Pearl*, such 'potential' is realized in a strikingly different manner. It now seems extraordinary that critical comment upon this poem should have concerned itself so much with discussion of 'allegory or elegy', 'the spiritual manifesto, or the personal document'. Auerbach wrote, in a similar context, 'there is no reality in such a choice'. And, in almost every respect, his description of the nature and role of Beatrice in the *Divine Comedy* is directly applicable to the nature and role of the Pearl maiden:

she is no *intellectus separatus*, no angel, but a blessed human being who will rise again in the flesh at the Last Judgement . . . there is no dogmatic concept that would wholly describe her . . . she is precisely an incarnation of divine revelation and not revelation pure and simple.³

It may, however, be objected that in the *Divine Comedy*, as in the Miracle Plays and in the Scriptures, there is a very clear

¹ V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (London, 1966), p. 119. I would suggest that 'centripetal' is a better term than 'centrifugal' for this passage, which describes how 'the relationship between Noah and Abraham exists in God.'

² *Ibid.*, p. 84.

³ 'Figura', pp. 74-5.

assurance of the historical truth in which the literal narrative is grounded. The figural demands, as starting-point, a belief in the historicity of the events and persons which it then proceeds to complete, in their fullest significance. The 'figures' of Abraham, Moses, and Jonah in the Old Testament, of Adam and Abel in the Miracle Plays, of Virgil and Cato in the *Divine Comedy* are acknowledged parts of a historical tradition: Beatrice herself is drawn first from the known 'history' of Dante's experience.

With poems such as *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman* we have no independent proof of the grounding of the literal narrative in historical truth. We have no means of knowing whether Pearl, in fact, lived, and was loved by the dreamer-poet, died, and was extravagantly lamented. So, too, we have only slender means of verifying the earthly, historical existence of a poet, William Langland, who lived on Cornhill, with a wife and daughter, and whose life is recorded, in his poetry, as a series of turbulent encounters with sin, temptation, love, and God.

And yet those earlier writers on *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman*, who eagerly set about reconstructing for us the 'real' biography, of which the poems are a version, were not so insensitive as later writers, who saw only literary projections of experience, or, even less, only allegorical inventions. For at least they discerned, though they certainly misused, what the poets were attempting to provide for us—an imitation of history, a construction of literal, historical truth, which can be accepted in its own right, like the literal, historical truth of the Scriptures.¹ This imitation was successful. But of course the poets envisaged that, like the Scriptures, like all recorded, continuing, and promised history, their literal narratives were *capable of*, and *in need of*, fulfilment.

So that here we have examples of figural composition of a secondary type, if we must make such distinctions: secondary, in that such poems invite us to accept as 'historical reality' what cannot ever be susceptible of total proof; but figural indeed, in that they combine a passionate belief in the reality of earthly life, the 'reality of the flesh into which the Logos entered',² with the strongest conviction of the divine reality which encompasses and completes it.

This is a crucial point for *Pearl*. The poem is lavish in expressive

¹ So Sir Israel Gollancz in his edition of *Pearl* (London, 1921), and A. H. Bright in *New Light on Piers Plowman* (Oxford, 1928) produced far-fetched 'biographies' for the *Pearl* poet and Langland: they were, however, responding to strong suggestions of personal identity and experience in the poetry itself.

² 'Figura', p. 72.

methods: its clustered symbolism of great visual splendour, its light but sophisticated allusions to the familiar medieval allegories of will, reason, and delight,¹ its dazzling display of verbal expertise, setting sound and meaning to ring insistent changes against each other. All these work towards the 'gret dyuersite of undirstondyng' which a medieval sermonist found in the language of the Scriptures, and described in an image most fitting for *Pearl*—that of refracted light: ' . . . and if we taken heede of dyuerse precieuse stoones, how þei shinen, now with oo colour and now anoþer, we moun þe more liztli undirstonde þis gret vertu. . . .'²

But the central power of the poem draws upon essentially figural concepts: upon an acceptance of the reality of an earthly relationship between dreamer and Pearl maiden, which is not rejected but fulfilled in spiritual terms, as the fragile human emotions of love-longing, tenderness, and self-pity are subsumed and transformed into charity, compassion, and self-knowledge.

The *Pearl* poet very deliberately establishes for us the substance of the earthly situation: both dreamer and maiden refer to it, and we are right to react strongly to that moment in the vision when the dreamer *recognizes* his Pearl:

I knew hyr wel, I hade sen hyr ere.
As glysande golde þat man con schere,
So schon þat schene an-vnder shore.
On lenghe I loked to hyr þere;
þe lenger, I knew hyr more and more.³

The vision does not deny the earlier existence—it simply completes it. So the poem deals much in images of transformation and continuity. What was lost was a creature 'smal' and 'smothe' as a pearl: she reappears, fulfilled in nature as a heavenly pearl, but remains

þat gracios gay wythouten galle,
So smope, so smal, so seme slyzt . . .⁴

Similarly, although Pearl describes her earthly self as

. . . a rose
þat flowred and fayled as kynde hyt gef,

she is still, in her transfigured state,

. . . so ryche a reken rose, . . . that luffy flor.⁵

¹ *Pearl*, ll. 52–56, 1129, 1153, etc.

² British Museum Harleian MS. 2276, f. 122^b.

³ *Pearl*, ll. 164–9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, ll. 189–90.

⁵ *Ibid.*, ll. 269–70, 906, 962.

Certainly the dreamer's joy at recognition has to be freed from its earthly consequences, and redirected, but it is that same closeness of relationship, put into a different and spiritual context, which qualifies and enables him to see, to learn, and to accept.¹ Whatever her spiritual stature, Pearl is recognizably 'my littel quene' to the end of the vision.

To say that Pearl is *no more* than her transfigured self is not to limit the meaning of the whole poem: she is also *no less* than her transfigured self. As a figure or embodiment of revelation, she has the power to teach the dreamer all he needs to know about justice, fortitude, and love: she interprets death to life. But she is also the embodiment of a miracle—the miracle of grace 'whereby men are raised above other earthly creatures', and in the fulfilment of their natures, witness to salvation.

Our last sight of Pearl shows the spontaneous gaiety of a child transformed, but not destroyed—transformed into spiritual delight:

Lorde, much of mirþe wat3 þat ho made
Among her fere3 þat wat3 so quyrt!²

The potential of the 'figure' has, in all senses, been realized.³

The latest study of *Pearl* strengthens the probability that 'the poet could have found in the *Divina Commedia* a precedent for the treatment of figures as part allegorical, part humanly individual. . . . it is, indeed, hard to see where else he could have acquired this blend of the modes of realistic and symbolical writing'.⁴

We could, I think, use terms a little more precise than this, and describe these particular creations of Dante and the *Pearl* poet as 'figural', rather than 'part allegorical, part humanly individual'. For there is no division of functions, such as this might imply. The absolute authority of Pearl over her dreamer depends as much upon the fact that she had been, on earth, the 'ground of all his bliss', as it does upon the fact that, as bride of Christ, she is now fully 'grounded in bliss'.⁵ Earthly love and pain are now fulfilled in that larger pattern of redemptive love which reconciled, once and for all, suffering and joy.

¹ See, for comparison, E. Gilson, *Dante and Philosophy*, trans. D. Moore (New York, 1963), p. 79: 'on the strength of the love that he bore her, Beatrice is exclusively marked out to be his intercessor with God' (my italics).

² *Pearl*, ll. 1149–50.

³ So also the poem displays the New Jerusalem as a 'fulfilment' of the Old: a striking piece of typological presentation. See ll. 937–60.

⁴ P. M. Kean, *Pearl: An Interpretation* (London, 1967), pp. 120 and 138.

⁵ *Pearl*, ll. 372, 408, and 420.

So the dreamer marvels at his vision of the Lamb, bleeding, but content:

The Lombe delyt non lyste to wene.
þa3 he were hurt and wounde hade,
In his sembelaunt wat3 neuer sene,
So wern his glente3 gloryous glade.¹

At the same time, we could widen our perspectives, and see *Pearl* indebted not only, in a special literary way, to the *Divine Comedy*, but also to the figural or typological view of reality, as it was presented to the Middle Ages, in the Bible itself, and as it was re-presented, by the Middle Ages, in varied forms of art and literature.

This widening of perspectives is certainly necessary for a whole view of *Piers Plowman*: we cannot be at all sure that Langland knew the *Divine Comedy*. We can be sure, however, that he knew the Bible, and that he was familiar with a great deal of learned and popular religious writing, which displayed to a receptive public how 'god schewed of olde tyme / be figuratif lyknesse'² his entire plan for the present and for the future of the world. Langland tells us, more than once, of this familiarity:

Lawe of loue oure lorde wrot . longeer Crist were,
And Crist cam and confermede. . .³

It has been rightly remarked that the setting of *Piers Plowman* as a 'dream-poem' has often led us to associate it, over-exclusively, with certain kinds of medieval poetry. So, although some of its early dream-prologues remind us of the *Romance of the Rose* and personification allegory, it is not a particularly helpful reminder when we come to reading *Piers Plowman* and judging Langland's intentions. We can, I hope, agree that personification is only one of the many methods which Langland adopts, first to pursue, and then to express, his meaning. By describing the poem as a 'personification allegory', we fail to capture some of Langland's most characteristic procedures and, even further, some of his most profound thoughts.⁴

¹ *Ibid.*, ll. 1141-4.

² *The Miroure of Mans Saluacionne*, ed. A. H. Huth (Roxburghe Club, 1888), p. 2: a fifteenth-century translation of the very popular early fourteenth-century *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, which presented, in visual and literary form, New Testament history with its Old Testament prefigurations (ed. J. Lutz and P. Perdrizet, Mulhouse, 1907, 2 vols.).

³ *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman*, ed. W. W. Skeat (Oxford, 1886), repr. 1954: C. xv. 38-39. All quotations are made from this edition.

⁴ For such reasons, the categories proposed by R. W. Frank, in 'The Art of Reading Medieval Personification—Allegory', *E.L.H.* xx (1953), 237-50, are

If, on the other hand, we take Langland's obviously wide knowledge of the Bible to mean that he was devoted to biblical exegesis of one particular sort—the fourfold 'allegory of the theologians'—and intended that his poetry should demonstrate this, then we are only partly in touch with medieval attitudes to the Bible, and with *Piers Plowman*. If *Piers Plowman* is an allegory, it is like no other extant literary allegory: comparisons with the *Romance of the Rose*, the *Desert of Religion*, the *Faery Queene*, and *Pilgrim's Progress* all miss the point of comparison. Again, if it is an allegory, it is quite unlike a theologian's exposition of multiple significance.

Since it is, I believe, the most comprehensive work of the English Middle Ages, it touches most literary forms and methods: like that most comprehensive work of the Italian Middle Ages, the *Divine Comedy*, it utilizes allegory (in many forms), symbolism (although not greatly), and typology, the figural mode. And it could be said that we have too often tried to describe as 'allegorical' features of *Piers Plowman* which are much better described as 'figural' or 'typological'. We have sometimes been at a disadvantage in our mappings of the poem, because our equipment has been deficient.

To suggest that in *Piers Plowman*, as in the *Divine Comedy*, it is the 'figural [or typological] forms which predominate'¹ is not to suggest that multiple meaning, personification allegory, and realism of a startling, dramatic quality are not all present in the poem. It is simply to say that Langland's understanding of his material was strongly—although not exclusively—figural, and that figural concepts bear rich and various fruit in his poetry.

We cannot restate too often the fact that the most pervasive single influence upon *Piers Plowman* was that of the Bible. And whatever Christian scholars have made of the biblical text, whatever systems they have devised as plummets to sound its truth, the Bible itself asks, explicitly, to be regarded as a figural or typological document. Its subject is 'those matters which have been fulfilled among us' (Luke 1:1)² and which will take their ultimate fulfilment in 'a new heaven, and a new earth'.

Typology is an integral and a practical element in biblical writing: it is not simply used as a way of elucidating the history

not entirely satisfactory. But the view of personification as the 'obvious technique' of *Piers Plowman* (Bloomfield, op. cit., p. 78) goes largely unquestioned.

¹ 'Figura', p. 64.

² 'Quae in nobis completae sunt rerum.'

of the world, and man's destiny, but also as a way of involving the particular Christian reader in the redemptive processes it describes. A great amount of New Testament teaching is concerned with relating the past and the future to the present life of the aspiring Christian. Christ is frequently called upon, as is Holy Church in *Piers Plowman*, to deal with the question 'how may I be saved?'.¹ And the lives of the apostles and saints give practical demonstration of the truth of his answers. In a very conscious, deliberate fashion, Christ's life is presented as the fulfilment of a divine purpose, dimly perceived and partially exemplified by Old Testament lives and words—

Lawe of loue oure lorde wrot . longe er Crist were. . . :

it is also presented as a model for all present and future lives, as we move on to the final revelation: 'typology stays with us even in the new dispensation, in the Church's and the believer's commitment to the "imitation" of Christ'.²

It is clear, I think, that, apart from providing Langland with a traditional framework of correspondences, a 'structural potential', the Bible also provided him with a vast, patterned, and creative view of history, as urgently relevant to the choices which faced fourteenth-century man as it had been to those facing Paul or Augustine, and as it would be to the choices of all men

Til the vendage valle . in the vale of Iosaphat . . .³

The essential messages of *Piers Plowman* are conveyed at their greatest intensity by figural or typological means, as are those of the Bible.

And here, because the figural must be set firmly into history ('it differs from most of the allegorical forms known to us by the historicity both of the sign and what it signifies'), we must reaffirm what was earlier said of *Pearl*: that Langland asks us to accept as 'historically real' what cannot be historically verified. *Piers Plowman* is a far more complex poem than *Pearl*, but it, too, draws a good deal of its power from its insistence upon a personal, historical, autobiographical grounding. The life of the poet-dreamer may, in fact, be illusion, but it is presented vividly, as if it were real. There is, on reflection, a vast difference between Langland and Chaucer in their treatment of the dreamer's life and its relevance to the dream-vision; if Langland's dreamer

¹ *Piers Plowman*, C. ii. 79–80.

² See Charity, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

³ *Piers Plowman*, C. xxi. 414.

is a fiction, a *persona* only, he plays a part more nearly comparable to that of the 'I' of Revelation than to that of the agreeably diverted narrator of the *Parliament of Fowls* or the *House of Fame*.

Much of the pressure we feel when reading *Piers Plowman*, our sense of close engagement with the meaning of the poem, is derived from a persuasion of the historical reality of the dreamer's own life—a life which was perhaps Langland's,¹ a frank record of aspiration, rejection, temptation, and reconciliation. From its uneven, often precarious, vantage points the reader is invited to view and compare the patterns of lives which are more, and less, satisfactory: the lives of Hawkin, *activa-vita*, of Trajan, of Piers Plowman, of the patriarchs and prophets, and of Christ himself. Or, to change the metaphor, another glass is held before us—one of many in *Piers Plowman*—in whose flawed and cloudy depths we glimpse, fleetingly, and 'darkly', the image of Christ.

A belief in the 'reality' of the dreamer is, of course, a belief in 'figural reality', for he functions in the poem as both living historical creature, and sign. His painful humiliation, within and without the dream, is set against his admission, as a witness, to Christ's death and resurrection:² this is not only humanly moving, but revelatory of the truth that 'the grace of God is great enough'. The message that he gasps out, with relief, to his wife and daughter, when he wakes in a peal of triumphant bells

Arys, and go reuerence . godes resurreccioun,
And creop on kneos to the croys . and cusse hit for a Iuwel . . .
For godes blesside body . hit bar for oure bote,
And hit a-fereth the feonde . for such is the myghte,
May no gryslliche gost . glyde ther hit shadeweth³

is a moment of great dramatic poignancy, but it is also, in single focus, a sign to be read, and understood, telling of the efficacy of the gospel in reforming the life of sinful man.⁴

¹ See the important chapter, 'Signatures', by G. Kane, *Piers Plowman: The Evidence for Authorship* (University of London, Athlone Press, 1965), in which the identification of poet and narrator in medieval dream narratives is discussed: '... the greater likelihood is that the concept of the wholly fictitious first-person narrator in a fourteenth-century poem is anachronistic' (p. 58).

² *Piers Plowman*, C. xxi 35 ff.

³ *Ibid.*, 474-5, 477-9.

⁴ See Charity, *op. cit.*, p. 168: '... the biblical tradition of typology fastens on an event of conversion with the aim of effecting another.'

Similarly, 'characters' such as Piers the Plowman, and the Good Samaritan, are brought before us as if they existed in the same kind of historical tradition as Abraham, Moses, and Trajan: they are rooted in historical life, and in time. Fresh from the field, the plough, or from horseback, they break into the poem with as much dramatic force as the Canon and his Yeoman into the Canterbury Pilgrimage at 'Boghton under Blee'. And this is immensely important for Langland's purpose. Piers Plowman and the Good Samaritan, like Abraham, Moses, and Trajan, must be historically secure in the reader's mind, for they are to illustrate, even more significantly than the Old Testament prophets and the Roman Emperor, the working of divine providence in the actual earthly life of man. They must be 'thoroughly real, with the reality of the flesh into which the Logos entered'.

But this, again, is figural, not literal and limited realism. Both Piers Plowman and the Good Samaritan reveal themselves as 'figures', in the precise sense of the word, as well as recognizable dramatic 'characters': Piers, by his immediate and confident exposition of a spiritual mystery, which will only much later be fulfilled, in himself—the discovery of divinity within, 'Treuthe sytte in thy selue herte. . .':¹ the Good Samaritan, by an increasing number of interesting and, in a way, disturbing details, which gradually convince us that 'the situation is only in part perceptual'.²

So, the 'syttynge on a mule', the haste to reach Jerusalem, the 'wilde wilderness'³ of the setting remind us that this is not simply a story of a good human being, but a foreshadowing of the earthly journey of Christ. These indications of further meaning are not, however, indications of allegory: neither Piers nor the Good Samaritan are presented as allegorical characters—they are incarnations or figurations of charity, of divine truth immanent.

In reusing the parable of the Good Samaritan, Langland was of course fully aware of its traditional allegorical interpretation

¹ *Piers Plowman*, C. viii. 255. See E. Zeeman (Salter), 'Piers Plowman and the Pilgrimage to Truth', *Essays and Studies*, xi, n.s. (1958), 1–16.

² I. T. Ramsay, *Religious Language* (London, 1957), p. 147.

³ *The Miroure of Mans Saluacionne*, p. 18, has 'and in desert commyng/ he fell in theves hande'. No doubt here we are meant to remember also Christ's temptation in the wilderness ('et agebatur in Spiritu in desertum diebus quadraginta et temtabatur a diabolo', Luke 4: 1–2), for this was, typologically, both a fulfilment and a prophecy of universal human experience. The echoic nature of typological presentation could not be better illustrated.

as the story of the redemption of man.¹ But he did not so much coalesce or overlay the allegorical interpretation with the figural, as choose, very deliberately, to allow the figural view fullest extension.² Thus what is predominant in our reading of the episode is the gradual, strengthening conviction of the 'imago Christi' in the Good Samaritan, a fulfilling of the man in the image of Christ, as he rides 'the righte wey to Jerusalem' (C. xx. 77) and expounds to the dreamer the meaning of the redemption and the operation of the Trinity.

There is, then, in *Piers Plowman*, a strong movement to establish a historical base for the 'characters' who are to carry the main messages of the poem. But this is no simple movement towards what is often spoken of as Langland's 'dramatic realism'. Abraham's human aspect, 'a man . on Mydlentens Soneday/As hor as a hawethorn', his conversational warmth as he talks to the dreamer:

'Hauest thou seyen this?' ich seide . 'alle thre, and o god?'
'In a somer ich seyh hym,' quath he . 'as ich sat in my porche,
Where god cam goynge a-thre . ryght by my gate',³

are not meant only to delight and relax us: familiar moments in a rare religious context. They are meant to bring before us, with some urgency, the substance and force of faith, as it sustained man before the days of Christ. Salvation by faith is solidly embodied for us in Abraham.

Even the structure and procedures of *Piers Plowman* can be more precisely described, if we admit the presence of typological, or figural elements. In 'The Pardon of Piers Plowman', Professor Coghill spoke of the 'levels of reality' in the poem, and of the 'parallel thinking' characteristic of allegory.⁴ But he also pointed to 'foretastes and echoes', the 'technique of anticipation' in *Piers Plowman* as a part of allegorical thinking.⁵ I should like to distinguish here particularly between allegorical and typological thinking: even if these foretastes and echoes were not 'placed where they are to suit an exact theory of composition',⁶ they are a very clearly recognizable feature of typological or figural

¹ Clearly analysed by B. H. Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 74 f.

² Here, I believe, it is not quite accurate to say that 'Allegory has resolved argument' (Coghill, *op. cit.*, p. 350): we are working in a figural mode.

³ *Piers Plowman*, C. xix. 241-3.

⁴ Coghill, *op. cit.*, p. 351.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 312 and 335 ff.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

composition. The Bible is the prime example. It is not simply a matter of 'historical resonances', although these are important in the Bible and in *Piers Plowman*, as the particular moment is suffused with memories of the past, premonitions of the future. A speech such as that of Christ, after the Harrowing of Hell—

For ich am lord of lyf . loue is my drynke,
And for that drynke todaye . deyede, as hit semede¹

is patterned with verbal 'foretastes and echoes'. This has been recognized,² but it cannot be stressed too emphatically that the verbal knitting of strands which occurs here is dependent upon an essentially figural or typological view of truth. Christ's speech fulfills, verbally, all the language of the poem which has hinted at this moment, and suggests language yet to be used, just as the Harrowing of Hell fulfills, doctrinally, the promise of redemption and looks forward to that final act of the drama, when Christ will 'haue out of helle . alle menne soules' (C. xxi. 417). There are many similar speeches in *Piers Plowman*, though none quite so centrally placed, nor so harmonious to the imagination.³

We can go further, and enlarge upon the idea of 'foretastes and echoes' as it applies to the typological structure of *Piers Plowman*. The poem has frequently been criticized for its failure to solve its formal problems: for its habit of loose repetition, the merging of one similar episode or character into another. But its incremental repetitions are not a sign of confusion. Like those of the biblical narratives, they are often deliberately set to recall each other, in a way which is allusive but not accidental. It is a way which is typological: 'one thing does not mean another in typology: it involves it, or has inferences for it, or suggests it.'⁴

This cannot be better illustrated than in Langland's use of the motif of travelling in *Piers Plowman*. The pilgrimage, the search and the journey are variations upon that great constant theme of the poem—movement towards a goal. The searches for St. Truth, for Dowel, for Charity, for Perfection, and for Piers Plowman unfold from each other, in a rhythm of repetition and change. There is a sense of perpetually renewed action, a driving

¹ *Piers Plowman*, C. xxi. 406 f.

² See A. C. Spearing, *Criticism and Medieval Poetry* (London, 1964), p. 90, and E. Salter, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction* (Oxford, 1963), pp. 49–52.

³ So, the choice implied in the remark that 'the Jousting at Jerusalem and the Harrowing of Hell present themselves not as figure but as fact' (John Lawlor, *Piers Plowman: An Essay in Criticism*, London, 1962, p. 253) is really non-existent: both episodes are powerfully, and equally, 'figure' and 'fact'.

⁴ Charity, p. 199.

forward to something infinitely desirable, which may be variously defined as a place, a state, an event, or a person, but which, over the course of the poem, is revealed as the attainment of salvation through Christ.

Thus the repetitiveness of the journeys, their overlapping and echoing nature are not due to indecision in Langland, but rather to a belief in divine repetitions—the continuous pattern of search and fulfilment traced for medieval man by the Bible itself.

The biblical—and typological—background is particularly evident in Langland's treatment of journeying at the climax of the poem, when Abraham, Moses, the Good Samaritan, and the dreamer are hurrying to Jerusalem for the tournament with death. All earlier images of journeying are gathered up into this tense narrative—Piers as a pilgrim to Truth, Christ as a wayfarer, the dreamer as a 'seeker after ways'.¹ All paths converge here, upon Jerusalem, as indeed they should, for the battle with sin and death, imperfectly fought before this moment, with imperfect weapons, will now be achieved perfectly, and will serve as model for all future conflicts in the life of the individual Christian. We cannot help but be reminded of Christ's words and actions, as he moves towards the goal of his earthly journey—Jerusalem:

And taking the twelve, he said to them, 'Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written of the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished'. (Luke 18:31.)

The language is echoic: it harks back to earlier moments, in the Gospel of St. Luke:

He went on his way, through towns and villages, teaching and journeying towards Jerusalem. (Luke 13:22.)

Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem. (Luke 13:33.)

and it forecasts later moments, when Paul takes up that same journey, and hastens² to re-enact the sacrifice of Christ:

And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem bound in the spirit, not knowing what shall befall me there. . . (Acts 20:22.)³

¹ *Piers Plowman*, C. xv. 157.

² Acts 20:16, 'Festinabat enim. . . .'

³ All English quotations from *The Holy Bible and Apocrypha*, Revised Standard Version (London, 1965).

... I am ready ... even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. (Acts 21:13.)

Much remains to be said and done if we are to explore thoroughly the significance of typological structure and the figural view of reality in *Piers Plowman*. The range of investigation is wide; it covers Langland's universally praised and often misunderstood 'realism': his sense of the past inseparable from, and active in, the present, the present active in the future;¹ his dealings with Christ's representatives in all ages—that perfect representative, Piers Plowman, that errant and stumbling representative, the dreamer, who is still learning how to 'fulfil' God's image in himself, at the very end of the poem:

'Consailleth me, Kynde,' quath ich . 'what crafte be best to leere?'
'Lerne to loue,' quath Kynde . 'and lef alle other thynges.'²

Thus, characteristically, Langland leaves for our wry comfort an admission that to see and understand God's act of redemption does not guarantee an easy process of transformation. Unlike Dante, the dreamer is not saved by the end of the poem, although he knows what to do to be saved: his conscience is alive, and stirring.

But it is in the creation of Piers the Plowman that Langland's debt to figural habits of thought is most satisfactorily—that is, most imaginatively—repaid. For not only do we see in him, as in the Good Samaritan, a 'type' of Christ, and an active illustration of how 'Christ has . . . by passing through them, sanctified every aspect of human existence'.³ And not only do we see in him, as in Pearl and Beatrice, the crowned fulfilment of divine promise—the 'miracle whereby men are raised above other earthly creatures' and reveal divine truth. We see also part of the *process* of that miracle: the gradual conforming of a Christian life, which we meet first when it is instructed but inexperienced, to the pattern of Christ's life. And this conformation is so complete that Piers suffers the 'jousting at Jerusalem' with Christ. The echoing of Christ's words, sometimes their virtual

¹ Langland's time-concepts are essentially figural or typological: his treatment of the Good Samaritan and Piers Plowman as 'figures' of Christ should make this clear. Both are meant to be strikingly reminiscent of Christ, in doctrine and action, almost to the point of identification: but both are presented as existing before the Incarnation (see *Piers Plowman*, B. xvi, and B. xvii. 90 ff., C. xx. 81 ff.). In fact, Christ's existence is supra-temporal, and the 'figures' display this by refusing to conceive of time as an 'unbroken horizontal process' ('Figura', p. 59).

² *Piers Plowman*, C. xxiii. 207–8.

³ Quoted from Irenaeus by Daniélou, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

paraphrase, by the words of Piers,¹ the sharing, by Piers, in Christ's actions—

. . . this Iesus of hus gentrise . shal Iouste in Peers armes,
In hus helme and in hus haberion . *humana natura* . . .²

vividly recall the narrative of Christ's own life, and, at the same time, the lives of apostles and saints such as Paul and Stephen who strove to reflect as faithfully as possible—or in more technical language, to 'post-figure'—the pattern of that ideal life of sacrifice and love.³

So repetition is at the very heart of Langland's poem, as it is at the heart of his faith: form and meaning are, indeed, one, as lives, persons, journeys, questions and answers echo and prompt each other in unceasing creative flow.

As for fourfold allegory: a typological work, dealing as it must with man's past and future, his life, death, and salvation, is of itself most wealthy in significance. Although it does not require a multiple allegorical system to demonstrate this, it cannot be permanently injured by such treatment. By its very nature it is Christocentric, and moral and mystical truths are not inappropriately discovered in the presentation of the human search to know 'how I may save my soul'.

¹ Throughout the poem, but strikingly in C. xvi. 138 ff., Piers operates in this scene—the Feast of Clergye—very much as a 'figure' or 'type' of Christ, bringing, at l. 138, a fulfilment of the words of the Psalmist and a repetition of Christ's words on meekness and love.

² *Piers Plowman*, C. xxi. 21–2.

³ Because I believe that *Piers Plowman* is concerned centrally with the transformation of the self in Christ's image, and only peripherally with an imminent, apocalyptic revelation of truth, I would prefer not to describe it as an 'apocalyptic work'. See M. Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth Century Apocalypse* (Rutgers University Press, 1963). Any medieval work which deals with the history of mankind is committed to medieval Christian eschatology. But the last words of the poem do not touch upon death and judgement: they touch upon regeneration and, in a truly figural way, call us back through Piers the Plowman to God's redemptive act in Christ.