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‘Délimiter un sujet,’ writes the Jesuit scholar Henri de Lubac,1 ‘c’est abstraire’; and to sum up one’s delimitation is to refine the process still further. In these introductory pages clarity demands that I set down no more than the bare bones of this work’s whole intention, and leave it to the essay itself to give these bones sinews and flesh.

‘Typology’ is my subject, and the first task is that word’s definition. But even for the present purposes it would be an unnecessarily astringent process of abstraction to reduce the various usages which the word has in practice to a single quite unequivocal definition. For its senses are not wholly distinct, and a degree of peaceful (if tense) co-existence between current meanings has attendant advantages, strategic and diplomatic. It provides a condition which, because it necessitates some account of the usages’ interrelations, facilitates, too, an approach to a more basic question, about the broader relations between this whole subject and others. It is right to raise this matter here; for to delimit is also to set in a context, and the route round the boundaries gives new views of the neighbouring fields.

The discussion revolves, however, for the most part around only two definitions, neither of which applies commonly to the use of the word in non-theological writing. Typology, in the first of these senses, may be defined as either the broad study, or any particular presentation, of the quasi-symbolic relations which one event may appear to bear to another—especially, but not exclusively, when these relations are the analogical ones existing between events which are taken to be one another’s ‘prefiguration’ and ‘fulfilment’. The second definition is a comparatively dogmatic and idealistic one, intended to apply only to Christian typology, though, with only the last two words omitted, it might serve the same dogmatic purpose for the Old Testament as for the New: according to this definition, Christian typology is ‘the science of history’s relations to its fulfilment in Christ’.

Clearly, of these definitions, the first is the more non-committal

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and more comprehensive. It is by the same token perhaps less suggestive and less optimistic, certainly less directly related to the formulation of theological statements. In the present work, most often, it is the actual presentation of the idea of prefiguration in biblical and non-biblical literature, rather than the discursive theoretical study of this idea, that I intend to characterize by it. In this sense we may usefully speak, without implying any dogmatic or evaluative bias, of the ‘use’ of typology in both testaments and outside them: wherever, in fact, a writer has attributed significance to an apprehended analogy between different events. And, though it lies outside the main scope of this study, ‘typology’ as thus defined may be taken to include also the practice of those forms of exegesis which are commonly called ‘typological’: for example, the Epistle of Barnabas’s discovery of a prefiguration of Christ’s crucifixion in Exod. 17. 8–11, where it tells how when Israel fought the Amalekites Moses stretched out his arms—‘and whenever Moses held out his hands, Israel prevailed’;¹ or the no less amazing and no less traditional interpretation of the harlot Rahab’s scarlet cord, which, having originally guaranteed the safety of her household at the fall of Jericho, represents already in I Clement (early in the second century) the blood of Christ which ensures salvation to the Church.² In such interpretations as these at least the interpreter, if only he, regards the Old Testament event as a ‘type’ or ‘prefiguration’ of what was to come, and his exegetical labours must therefore fall within the general scope of typology as my first definition describes it.

No less clearly, the second definition will not fit these examples. Possibly they purport, though by implication alone, to make manifest their particular story’s relation to its fulfilment in Christ; but their manner of doing so cannot be called ‘scientific’. J. R. Darbyshire, therefore, in his article on typology in the Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, though he too defines typology first of all as a ‘science’, wisely and warily adds, ‘or rather, only too often, the curious art...’.³

¹ Barnabas 12. 2–5. ² I Clement 12. 7; cf. Josh. 2. 18. ³ Reflections of this kind cause J. D. Smart to doubt the propriety of using the word ‘typology’ for those features in the term’s area of reference which we, in our day, can accept, for ‘once anything that goes by (this name) is vindicated, the impression is created that typology...has been at least in some measure validated as an exegetical method’ (The Interpretation of Scripture, p. 98). But the objection
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Typological exegesis, then, even in its most arbitrary forms, falls under only one, but at any rate one, of our definitions of ‘typology’. Nevertheless typology as an exegetical process or system, either ancient or modern, is only occasionally and marginally our concern in this study. Today it should go without saying that as a process generally applicable to biblical or other texts such exegesis is illegitimate; and only in so far as the texts themselves can be reasonably viewed as expressing, or involving, or presenting, in agreement with their author’s intentions, a typological concept, that is, a concept of prefiguration and fulfilment, are they the real subject-matter of this essay.

But the comprehensive character of the first definition gives it other, less dubious, advantages than that of including the idea of a typological exegesis. For though it does comprehend virtually everything that is properly called ‘typology’ in the biblical and Christian traditions, the apparently arbitrary as well as the genuinely suggestive, there is no categorical necessity for it to comprehend only the Christian and the biblical, and the concept may be used, I hope profitably, as a basis for conversation between the Christian and the ‘humanist’ writer or scholar. I make mention here of only two ways.

Alan Richardson suggests one such conversational starting-point in his book, History, Sacred and Profane. He invokes the case of the secular historian who, finding something in common between a number of events which brings them together in his mind, uses, to express this relation and as a vital part of his interpretative task, an essentially analogical term, such as ‘revolution’—and attempts thereby to make the infinite particularity of the historical order susceptible to treatment in the necessarily general and conceptual order of thought.¹ The idea of ‘prefiguration’ and ‘fulfilment’ is usually absent here.² But does not seem to me very serious. There is enough similarity, I believe, between our objectives and those of the Fathers for us to be sure that we and they are both concerned to clarify the principles of ‘fulfilment’. And if, in this same pursuit, the later age disagrees even very profoundly with the assumptions, methods and conclusions of the earlier age, as would (let us say) modern with Aristotelian physics, there is no reason why we should cease to call the pursuit by the same name, ‘typology’, just as we call physics ‘physics’.

¹ See A. Richardson, History, Sacred and Profane, pp. 185–7.
² But cf. ibid, pp. 175–89 and 221 f.; ‘All historical interpretation, and therefore all historical writing as such, necessarily involves the seeing of the significance of the beginning from the end. This is the very character of the biblical writings as historical documents; the NT itself is a viewing of Israel’s story in the light of
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It would be worth asking whether the borrowing of such concepts for one event from another (in so far as the terms applied to historical happening derive from historical happenings) may imply that certain seminal or climactic events acquire, in the historian’s mind, a kind of semantic status which is comparable as such, though distinguishable in other ways, to the status of the climactic events of ‘salvation history’ (Heilsgeschichte) in the mind of Hebrew or Christian man. In this case, and I must put it tentatively, the secular historian may be said to have his own form of ‘typology’ in constant use.

G. von Rad and others have also pointed in connection with biblical typology to the fundamental analogical process in poetry whereby, in the most everyday things, ‘in the passing of the years and the days, in the most elementary relationships of man with man, in simple mechanical performances—in everything regularity “reveals” itself’ to the poet, ‘and hints at an order that dwells deep within things’.¹ It is with reference to aspects of this process that the literary critic most often uses the word ‘typology’, in a sense quite different from the theologian’s meaning, or mine, to denote, according to O.E.D., ‘symbolic significance, representation, or treatment’.

At first sight it is doubtful whether a comparison between the specifically historical typology of the Bible and so general and multiform a phenomenon as the element of representativeness in literature would prove very pointed or fruitful if carried on only or mainly in general terms. In any case there are reasons for believing that a more direct and more generally useful comparison with ‘typology’ in its literary-critical sense exists in the field of primitive religion, in the archetypal fictions of mythology. But there is, at least, in all three spheres (literary, mythological, biblical) a common empirical basis in human experience, and in all three spheres an act of faith raises from its experience of the individual happening an affirmation of some

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kind of normativeness. Nevertheless, the relating of the uncontrollable multiplicity of particular happenings to the comparatively or absolutely normal or normative is only one function of biblical typology—a fact which, one suspects, differentiates it too from the kind of typology involved in the historian’s employment of analogical concepts. This study should amply confirm the at present somewhat mysterious statement that it is exactly with the locating of an absolute existential norm in the idea of an event of historical fulfilment—and subsequently with faith’s affirmation that it has discovered such an event—that biblical typology is concerned. This concern distinguishes it from all other forms of typology. And this, indeed, is part of what is meant by the more ‘dogmatic’ definition of Christian typology which I offered just now—history’s relations to its fulfilment in Christ—or by the corresponding definition which would apply to Old Testament typology, where the norm is still qualified, rather than absolute, but envisaged, still as ‘event’: history’s relations to the Old Testament’s vision of its promised fulfilment. For in both Testaments, and in contradistinction to the literary sense of ‘typology’, the norm is taken to be not a general idea but an event, in history, and indeed in history at its apparently least general and least representative moment: that is, at the moment which stands in relief for the witnesses as that of an act of God. To God’s acts, or at least to his fulfilling act, whether promised or past, Christianity claims, all events are related and related historically. They have the same ultimate causes as it, and they all share together with it in the one order of contingent cause and effect, in the same history of act and response. For its part, the event of fulfilment is regarded as their perfecting and judging, the consummation in history of all God does and all that man does.

Now such considerations as these, necessarily contracted and rationalized here as they are, are relevant at this stage essentially, for the sake of something more than the search for a basis of conversation between different ‘humanities’. For it is our aim to show in the essay itself how what falls, in the Bible, empirically, under the head of the first definition of typology, through its connection with just these features (normativeness, action, response, fulfilment and judgement), points by and large, in the biblical faith, to the justice of the second. It
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is this aim which determines the structure and method of our study: the case virtually presented itself in its present form, a comparatively detailed literary-critical analysis of representative passages and relevant motifs being incorporated in a framework largely controlled by the process of discursive argument.¹

But the scope, as distinct from the method and form, needs a little more explanation. So far as its subject-matter is concerned, all I have mentioned would conventionally fall within the province of theology, and a theologian (of a sort only, I fear, and pro tem.), almost despite myself, I have, to the best of my ability, had to be. But it is fair and right to point out that I am, in my own capacity and by training, more properly a literary critic; and as such come to the subject also with aims and an interest similar to those with which I believe we should approach any ‘humane’, any ‘secular’ literature—with the care that the word should be heard, and heard rightly; and with the desire to allow it, or in the case of a word that is at first alien, as a critic to help it, to be heard rightly, that it may do whatever work its creator had summoned it for, and do it on us, in our generation. My excursion into the Bible may still seem, and be, over-ambitious, but in the context of this task it is not incongruous. So far as the word of the poet is, as it is in the Bible intensely, in its task existential, spoken, that is to say, out of human experience and to it, the hermeneutical task is the same for both literary critic and theologian: to assist the word to be heard, still today, existentially.

These reflections, of course, are not equally relevant for every literary work. Nor do they directly concern every labour of criticism. If they are more relevant here than elsewhere, this is because of the character of the texts we are studying, both of which, Bible and Comedy, imply an intrinsic pro nobis within the events they record, and confront us with this pro nobis almost wherever we turn. This fact, which in the case of the Bible at least may be said to be generally recognized, virtually creates and controls—and this, by and large, is not recognized—their

¹ This method, which the work’s fundamentally argumentative unity made compulsory, has one disadvantage which I particularly regret. There has been too little room for discussion of the very individual uses of typology in the Fourth Gospel and Hebrews, and even Pauline typology is, I am aware, given less than its due attention.
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use of typology. Our critical findings have highlighted this, and the essay exists largely to give it due emphasis.

So, if we call typology a ‘science’, we should make clear at once that it will turn out to be an ‘applied’ science rather than a ‘pure’ one. The danger to which G. E. Wright draws attention with regard to the ‘systematic elaboration’ of typological theories is that they may do less than justice to the fundamentally existential nature of the biblical faith;¹ and it is a real danger, one that is actualized in a high proportion of otherwise useful treatments of typological ideas by modern scholars.² For example, the contemporary treatment of typology almost exclusively in terms of ‘patterns’ of divine activity has to be read very generously indeed if, from the point of view of our study, it is not to be taken as constituting on the one hand a misreading of the Bible’s empirical use of typology, and on the other what amounts to a dissolution of the fundamental biblical category, ‘history’, into certain component formal patterns or event-structures without vital continuity or interaction.³ It might be unjust to such treatments to see in them a return to the idea behind ‘myth’ in the primitive religions, with its own basic concept of ‘archetypes’. But one can see how such a view is encouraged by the incautious and misleading character which, in Roman Catholic and a great deal of English theology especially, the defence of typology at present assumes. To be satisfactory for the contemporary world the interpretation of typological texts must make use of historical criticism, to begin with, and then must appropriate certain features, if not of ‘the existentialist’, at least of ‘an existential’ hermeneutic corresponding as closely as possible to the existential character of

¹ G. E. Wright, God Who Acts, pp. 65 f.
² R. P. C. Hanson’s question, in his review of Lampe’s and Woolcombe’s Essays on Typology (Theology, lx, Sept. 1957), is highly pertinent to the present debate: ‘Are we not today, in so far as we accept typology, accepting it from motives quite different from those which induced the ancient writers to accept it? They saw in typology a witness to God’s wonderful activity in causing both extraordinary prediction and extraordinary fulfilment; we see it simply as witnessing to God’s character without taking very seriously either prediction or fulfilment.’
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typology’s witness to history.¹ It must take account of the essential reference of typological writing in the Bible to the life of its hearer or reader. It must show how typology is, in the Bible, ‘applied’, how the historical analogies are not grasped, nor at all amenable to being grasped, unless the interpreter sees himself as faced with and caught up within them. For man is at all times a part of the history which he interprets: he is involved inescapably in it. And when history as a whole, or the part of it which he studies, is presented, as by the Bible, as the action of God, he can go no distance at all towards understanding it as such unless he begins to confess the action of God upon him. To this end the Bible’s use of typology is, it seems to me, geared. Till this end is accomplished it confronts us with the critical question, ‘Can you believe?’ Once this end is accomplished, it confronts us with the demand, no less critical, ‘Then act as God’s action allows you!’ This whole dialectic² is what is meant in the present study by the term ‘applied typology’.

My concern with this dialectic for its own sake makes it not inappropriate to conclude with a discussion of typology in Dante’s Divina Commedia. Here again, ‘conversation’ is surely a desirable end in itself; and the extent to which the two fields of study illuminate one another should sufficiently justify their juxtaposition. The conception of the Comedy which underlies its present treatment was what prompted the whole investigation, and in this last chapter my presentation of the existential character of typology in Christianity is filled out dialectically with arguments which, though they conform with and confirm the exposition of the strictly biblical material, could not be included within it without either losing their comprehensiveness or parting company with the literary and exegetical area of reference which I had set out to illuminate. For nothing in the canonical writings provides so full a picture of Christian man’s appropriation of God’s activity in his own situation: Jesus is not,

¹ We agree here with H. W. Wolff, art. cit., at the end of the long note (14) to p. 327: ‘Present-day typology must no longer succumb to a naive objectivising. It thus appropriates to itself the idea of existential interpretation.’

² ‘Dialectic’, which the dictionaries generally define as the process of logic or argument, in theological and philosophical contexts since the times of Hegel and Kierkegaard, often involves the idea of ‘dialogue’ too, implying that historical or existential argument is properly carried on ‘dramatically’, as interaction, and not only, as it were, ‘monologically’ or ‘unilaterally’.

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after all, in historical or in theological strictness, a Christian, but a Jew—‘born under the law’, as Paul says (Gal. 4. 4). There are indeed New Testament passages, to some of which no doubt Dante himself implies a reference, in St Paul especially, which, by confirming the dialectic of typology’s existential ‘application’, provide the occasion for such a depiction (e.g. the ideology of conformity with Christ, and the language of ‘dying’ and ‘rising’ ‘with’ or ‘in’ him). But except as it were in miniature (cf. the Acts’ treatment of Stephen’s death and Paul’s captivity),¹ the depiction itself is lacking; and without it the whole dialectic—though not losing coherence—would lose, and quite properly, some force. For I present it as a possible view of a possible human existence—specifically, as a view which Christianity has embodied. I conceive, therefore, that I should be prepared to show this view as embodied, in works both admittedly and centrally (as distinct from canonically) Christian. The Divine Comedy is such a work, and I know of no other so fully suited to the purpose.

So we return, with the mention of ‘embodiment’ to the dictum with which we began. ‘Délimiter un sujet, c’est abstraire.’ It is my hope that in the course of the necessary abstractions, past and future, I may not only differentiate our subject from others, but also give an idea how vital the relations are between it and them. It is the hardest but most useful task of this essay if it can make these relations more lively.

¹ See below, pp. 150–52.
PART I

TYPOLOGY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT