

Anna Světlíková

Typology as Rhetoric: Reading Jonathan Edwards

Dissertation Abstract

This work is a study of selected typological writings of the New England theologian, thinker and preacher Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). Typology is primarily a Christian exegetical practice connecting the Old and the New Testament on the basis of prefigurative analogies. Edwards expands the typological principle to nature and argues that the world and general human experience contain types or images of divine things, that these typological connections are objectively existing and may be discovered by the believer. The dissertation examines the rhetorical aspect of Edwards' natural typology and the rhetorical form of the type in its connections to other tropes, particularly emblem, symbol and allegory. In doing so, it also addresses the issue of the connections of Edwards' texts to Romanticism and seeks to refine existing interpretations of these links. Edwards has been interpreted, in the tradition of Perry Miller, as anticipating Transcendentalism and Romanticism, one of the arguments being precisely that his natural types anticipate Romantic symbol. On a more general level, this work addresses and seeks to overcome some existing methodological limitations in the scholarship on Edwards, who is typically studied from the perspective of theology or religious and intellectual history, and on Early American Literature, which has too often been studied in isolation from more recent literary critical concerns. The methodology of the present work follows largely the deconstructive rhetorical criticism as practiced by Yale deconstructionists (Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Jacques Derrida) but engages also a broader historical perspective (history of typology, relationship of typology and allegory).

The rhetorical reading of Edwards' natural typology highlights some inherent tensions in his theory which are identified, with the help of Derrida's work, as part of the larger problem of the relationship of philosophy and metaphor. The performative nature of Edwards' typology is discussed against the background of J. L. Austin's speech act theory and Derrida's and Hillis Miller's criticism of it, redefining the persistent theological-epistemological discussion of subjectivity as the main problem of Edwards' project and opening a way for reading, with the help of Hillis Miller, Edwards' typology as parable. Secondly, the rhetorical form of the type as trope is examined by considering its connections to Renaissance emblem (as described by Peter Daly and others), Renaissance high allegory (as described by Michael Murrin) and early Romantic allegory (as described by Paul de Man). While the differences are greatest in comparison of the type to the high allegory of the Renaissance, there is significant formal and historical overlap between types and emblems; the rhetorical reading of Edwards, however, also emphasizes certain inherent tendencies and implications which complicate the asserted connection between the natural world and the self and so connect it to early Romantic allegory. By bringing Edwards' natural typology to such theoretical context, the dissertation suggests a way for studying major works of colonial American literature in a broader theoretical perspective than some existing interpretations of American history of ideas and Early American Literature make possible.