New Stories for Old

Biblical Patterns in the Novel

Harold Fisch

New Stories for Old

Biblical Patterns in the Novel

Harold Fisch

For Joyce, again and always

Contents

Preface

This book complements my earlier work, especially *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* published by Indiana University Press in 1989. There attention was focused on the biblical text itself, on the patterns (in the sense both of informing ideas and literary structures) which give to the book of Job and the story of the Binding of Isaac, for instance, their disturbing uniqueness. Here we shall be concerned with the reappearance of these same patterns and others in prose fiction from the eighteenth century onwards. They will be seen to have had a shaping influence on the history of the novel. But this influence has been profoundly antithetical: the marvelous stories of Genesis are echoed, but they are also resisted. Abraham and Joseph are the heroes of Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, but the biblical paradigms are at the same time inverted, satirized. Job is a powerful presence for Dostoevsky, Kafka, and many other writers down to our own time who have grappled with the subject of unmerited suffering, but there is an adversarial quality in the dialogic encounter with the ancient word. The western imagination cannot escape it but neither can it accept it unaltered. What we have in effect, as I shall argue, is a continuing debate with Job.

There is also the question of the language of the novel. The impact of the Bible's characteristic mode of narrative discourse is clear in the writings of Bunyan, Defoe, and Fielding. In fact it is impossible to think of the rise of the novel except in the context of the coming of age of a new literate, Bible-reading middle class. And yet what stands out is also a continuing uneasiness. The prose of the gospels and the Genesis narratives has never been unequivocally adopted as a standard by novelists – with the possible exception of Bunyan. Even Tolstoy who pointed to it as the ideal, failed to provide us with supporting examples in his own fictional practice. This simultaneous acceptance and rejection of the biblical models will be among our central concerns in the ensuing discussion.

The final chapters will be concerned with the contribution of modern Hebrew authors. The problem here is that the biblical patterns are so pervasive (in the language as well as in the *fabula*) that a full account would turn out to be something like a history of the modern Hebrew novel! I have therefore confined myself to two Israeli authors: they are S.Y. Agnon, whose work belongs basically to the first half of our century and A.B. Yehoshua, a leading contemporary writer. Their writings seem to me of unusual interest from the point of view of this study.

The substance of Chapter 2 on *Robinson Crusoe* and Chapter 5 on Kafka's *The Trial* was presented originally in the context of two international workshops held by The Center for Literary Studies of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (one in 1983, the other in 1991) under the joint chairmanship of Professor Sanford Budick and Professor Wolfgang Iser. I am grateful to the organizers for the stimulus of those remarkable sessions. The Defoe essay, under the title of "The Hermeneutic Quest in *Robinson Crusoe*," was later included in the first volume to emerge from the deliberations of the Center, namely, *Midrash and Literature*, eds. G.H. Hartman and S. Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986). It is here reproduced in a modified form with the kind permission of the publishers. Several other chapters making up this present study are adapted in whole or in part from previously published essays. Acknowledgment is hereby made to the publishers and editors of the following items, listed chronologically. The numbers in square brackets after each item refer to the chapters of this book: "Biblical Imitation in *Joseph Andrews*." In *Biblical Patterns in Modern Literature*, eds. David H. Hirsch and Nehama Aschkenasy. Brown Judaica Studies, No.77. Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1984 [3]; "Biblical Realism in *Silas Marner*." In *Identity and Ethos: A Festschrift for Sol Liptzin*, ed. Mark H. Gelber. New York: Peter Lang, 1986 [4]; "Biblical Archetypes in *The Fixer*," *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 7, no.2 (1988): 162–76 [7]; "Bakhtin's Misreadings of the Bible," *HSLA* 16 (1988): 130–49 [1]; "Being Possessed by Job," *Literature and Theology* 8 (1994): 280–95 [6].

In Chapter 9 I have quoted extensively from a volume of studies in Hebrew devoted to A.B. Yehoshua's novel, *Mr Mani*. It is *In the Opposite Direction: Articles on Mr. Mani by A.B. Yehoshua*, ed. with an Introduction by Nitza Ben-Dov, © Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House Ltd, Tel-Aviv, 1995. My thanks are due to the contributors concerned, including Mr Yehoshua himself, who is the author of two of the extracts, as well as to the editor and the publisher, for permission to reproduce this material in translation.

Finally, I would wish to thank the many students and colleagues – too numerous to call to mind individually – who have, over the years, by their comments and criticisms, helped me to see the subject of these chapters more clearly. The occasion for the last and most sustained of these conversations was a seminar on this very subject that I gave at Yale College as guest lecturer in the fall and winter of 1991. I would like to acknowledge how much I was helped by those very lively class discussions.

This would also be the moment to express gratitude to Chaim Seymour for his help with the index and to Carola Luzann who very kindly volunteered to transcribe some of the early chapters into the computer.

<div align="right">

HAROLD FISCH Jerusalem,
anno mundi 5758 (October 1997)

</div>

Part I
Introductory

1

Dialogue and Repetition

1

The telling and retelling of stories is no incidental feature of the Hebrew Bible. It sometimes seems as though there is nothing of greater importance. The Exodus from Egypt is we may say the "primal scene" of Israelite history, and also, so it has been argued, a fundamental point of departure for the political history of western nations.[1] But the Bible is not simply concerned with telling us what happened; in two places in the book of Exodus – 10:2, and 13:8 – it enjoins upon its readers the duty of retelling the story to their children and grandchildren. There is thus a narrative and a meta-narrative, an account of what occurred and a fore-grounding of the account itself as a primary outcome of the occurrence. Which matters more, we may ask, the Exodus or the relating of the Exodus? This becomes a nice question for the exegesis of the two verses in question. The Rabbis tended to put their emphasis on the narration and the attendant ceremonies as the ultimate value, the end-purpose so to speak of the whole historical process. They read 13:8 as: "And thou shalt relate to thy son on that day saying: It is for the sake of this [relating and the visible symbols that accompany it] that God so did to me when I came out of Egypt."[2]

Historical discourse, as philosophers and historians have become increasingly aware, is inseparable from story-telling. The "facts" cannot be represented without an element of narrativity. And this means inevitably the ordering and moralizing of those same facts.[3] But whilst admitting this, most objective, "scientific" historians would maintain that the object of historiography is history; the *data* are what really matter, the story as story is secondary. The Bible it would seem inverts this order: the "telling" is all important. Things happen in order that they may be told about! And not only told but retold "in the ears of thy son

and thy son's son." These in turn would relate the story to *their* own children and grandchildren.

It follows from this emphasis on retelling that what is valued is not only the story, but the ongoing life of the story, including the potentiality for change inherent in the process of recapitulation. Clearly, when it is repeated from age to age, it will not be quite the same story each time; it will have been interiorized, experienced afresh as the new generation brings its own historical experience to bear on the record. The retelling thus achieves two functions simultaneously – it gratifies the fundamental human need for novelty and also for sameness, for a constancy of meaning.[4] Repetition, as Paul Ricoeur reminds us, involves an existential deepening of our sense of time.[5] When a story is retold its previous tellings echo down the memory. But repetition not only points backwards in time; it also points forward, gratifying our need for continuity, affirming an openness to the future. The reader too, like those who took part in the first Exodus, is booted and belted for the road, ready to start out on an ongoing interpretive journey. In retelling the story, he or she affirms its unexhausted possibilities and meanings. There is a sense in which such a tale is never concluded, for readers are encouraged to insert themselves into the narration. "Everyone is obliged to see himself as though he too had gone out of Egypt."[6]

The story thus remains alive for future generations; it haunts them like a revenant. Sometimes it seems that they cannot forget it even if they would like to. Like the Ancient Mariner they are seized with the need to repeat the tale of fear and wonder or like Horatio they are commanded to assume the role of continuing witness and narrator:

In this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
To tell my story.

In the biblical models the reader becomes a witness and the story, a testimony that he is charged to deliver. "Witness" and "testimony" are in fact the terms which Moses in Deuteronomy uses to define the reader's response to a poem, the poem he is about to introduce which would focus on the desert experience:

And it shall come to pass, when many evils and troubles have befallen them, that this poem shall testify against them as a witness; for it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their seed.
(Deut. 31:21)

Such an ongoing testimony, enjoined upon the Israelites in regard to the Exodus and the journey through the wilderness, indicates a particular hermeneutic stance, a particular relation assumed between reader and narrative. If the tale is never completed it is because the reader has an active role still to perform. His retelling is of the very matter of the story. Nor is this hermeneutic of "ongoing testimony" only a mark of the Passover celebration; we may claim it as relevant also to the subject on which we are embarked, namely, the retelling and re-echoing of Bible stories by writers of fiction from the eighteenth century onwards. And perhaps it is relevant to the poetics of the novel in general which is characterized to so great an extent by visions and revisions as earlier fables are constantly recycled.

Absence of closure as we have remarked is implied in the necessary relationship between an original narrative and its subsequent retellings down the ages, but in the case of Bible stories it is implied very often in the structure and context of the original narratives themselves. Bible stories seem to resist closure. The Exodus may seem to have a clear beginning (Egypt), a middle (the wilderness trek) and an end (arrival in the Promised Land). This would give it an Aristotelian shape. But the arrival in Canaan when it comes seems more like a beginning than an ending. There is a dynamic forward movement which takes little account of the supposed exigencies of narrative form which we are told demands an ending.[7] There is no real ending. As though to make this clear, the people on their arrival in Canaan perform the passover ritual with its re-enactment of the Exodus. They also partake of the first corn of the Land (Joshua 5:10–12). The whole occasion suggests the beginning of a new era.

Likewise, the story of Joseph and his brothers has often been seen as having a classical shape, beginning with the enmity which as a youth of 17 he aroused among his brothers, proceeding through his trials and difficulties in Egypt and ending with his triumph as vice-regent of Egypt and his restoration to his father. But if the story is read in its context, there is no such neat closure. Even Joseph's death is no terminus. Significantly, his bones will accompany the people on their pilgrimage through the desert. And their interment in Shekhem (Joshua 24:32) will mark something of a new beginning – the beginning of the turbulent history of the northern kingdom of Ephraim, the "children of Joseph," with its uncompleted vistas, its still-awaited fulfillments.

It follows from this typical ongoingness of the biblical narratives

that Apocalypse is not its characteristic mode. The book of Dan-
iel, the prophecy of Zechariah, the last chapter of Isaiah speak
of the last days, and of course much of the Apocrypha as well as
the book of Revelation belong to this genre. But the narratives
in Genesis, Exodus, Samuel and Kings – to which modern story-
tellers from Fielding to Hardy have so often been drawn – are
more concerned with this-worldly endeavor, with trial and error
in the historical present, with accidental courses and purposes
mistook. Men and women are tested, they pass or fail the test,
and then they try again.

To judge by the use that they have made of the biblical narra-
tives, what has impressed modern writers of fiction has most often
been the realism, the accessibility to everyday human imaginings
of these powerful stories. They demand to be related to the history
that we know. Of course they can be read in a transferred way
also – as "types of the Apocalypse." The author of the Epistle to
the Hebrews read the Old Testament narratives as prefigurations
of greater matters which lay beyond the world of everyday. Thus
the material sanctuary which Moses erected in the wilderness is
a shadow of a "more perfect tabernacle not made with hands"
(Hebrews 9:11). In *Paradise Lost* Milton's hero is instructed in such
typologies: Joshua becomes a type of Jesus –

> His Name and Office bearing, who shall quell
> The adversarie Serpent, and bring back
> Through the worlds wilderness long wanderd man
> Safe to eternal Paradise of rest.
>
> (XII, 310–13)

No longer are we concerned with a this-worldly struggle in the
dust of history, but with a metahistorical conquest of a meta-
physical Canaan. Our material aims and failures are eclipsed and
higher aims take their place. Robinson Crusoe toys with such
models of transference. He frequently compares his lonely ordeal
on the island with the sojourn of the Children of Israel in the
wilderness. But in meditating on this ordeal and his longed-for
escape from it, he oscillates as we shall see in his interpretation
of the biblical word "deliverance." Sometimes he wonders whether
what he really desires is not deliverance from sin, that is, from a
metaphysical wilderness such as that which Michael alludes to
in the passage just cited from *Paradise Lost* Book XII, rather than

deliverance from his island prison, that is, his physical wilderness.

There is clearly great fascination in such metaphorical dis-
placements – they enable writers to glimpse the seemingly eter-
nal forms in the everyday. But whilst many poets, among them
Dante and Milton, have been attracted by this kind of figura-
tion, writers of prose fiction have been drawn on the whole to
the realism of the biblical narratives, especially those to be found
in the historical books of the Old Testament. These stories seemed
to them to have reference to an order of time and place relatable
to their own world; they did not affirm the absoluteness of a super-
natural order. The story of Ruth and Boaz, for example, ends
with the birth of Obed, who is to become the grandfather of
David. This event is greeted with the cry: "A son is born to Naomi."
If in line with Christian typology we change the lower-case "son"
to "Son," then we get a suggestion of the final consummations
of Apocalypse; the more mundane order is transcended and a
supernatural order takes its place. But typology is not history
and in the fictive re-echoings of this story (for instance in George
Eliot's *Silas Marner*), novelists have been drawn to it as *exemplum*
rather than as prefigurative sign. It has moral power, truth to
life and a certain archetypal simplicity but it does not burden
the imagination of the late-born writer with the weight of
predetermined doctrine. The new story evokes the old, bears
witness to it, but it is not eclipsed by it. Nor does the new strive
to eclipse the old. To use a term which has been given currency
by the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, we may say that the
relation between them is dialogic, just as the relation of the reader
to the oft-told tale is dialogic. He inserts himself as witness into
the ongoing record. In that way it never loses its actuality, its
rootedness in the here-and-now and its applicability to our own
moral dilemmas.

2

The study and appreciation of the novel in recent years owe much
to the work of Bakhtin.[8] In his emphasis on the constant commerce
in the art of the novel between the world and the word, Bakhtin
has helped to save students of that genre from the effects of a
sterile formalism. Specifically, he has injected into the discussion
of the poetics of the novel the notion of the "chronotope" – a

scene of meeting rooted in time and place. It might be there-and-then, that is, some place and time beyond our own, but it always has reference also to the here-and-now, to our contemporary reality.[9] The interaction between these two modes of imagining he terms dialogue. Thus *Don Quixote* exhibits a dialogic conjunction of the world of romantic adventures of which the Don himself is the chief representative and the material world of everyday objects and concerns typified in the thoughts and conversation of Sancho Panza. The actual personal dialogue between the two characters – in which much of the novel is conducted – is thus part of a larger encounter between two different world-views – the one idealistic, the other realistic, the one anachronistic, the other contemporary. We have also the crossing of different languages, a dialogic interchange between different styles, the one "high" the other "low" in which the one is set off against the other. Bakhtin lays emphasis on the element of parody in such "heteroglossia." The language of everyday realism is meant to undermine the high speech of traditional romance or epic. From this point of view, the novel genre is in a deep sense anti-literary; it brings us down to earth and questions the received categories of the literary and the poetical.

Bakhtin finds the ritual equivalent of the novel in folk festivals and carnival, and its literary prototypes in Menippean satire and, later on, the writings of Rabelais. Surprisingly, in discussing the origins of the novel, he excludes the Bible.[10] He tends to treat the biblical material as that which is satirized and parodied (as frequently in Rabelais) or else he finds it embedded in the text as "pious and inert quotation that is isolated and set off like an icon."[11] This constitutes his chief criticism of Tolstoy's *Resurrection* – a novel which, he says, develops a number of abstract theses propped up by quotations from the gospels.[12]

Whilst this view of the biblical text may have some relevance to the history of the Russian novel and may owe something also to Marxist concepts of social realism current in Russia in Bakhtin's time, it surely ignores the powerful formative presence of the Bible in the English and American novel genre from Bunyan to Hardy and Melville. In the examples we shall be discussing, the biblical presence is manifested in at least three ways: first, as authorizing the moral code by which the characters are perceived and judged; second, as undergirding the plot structure; and third, as the model for a particular kind of narrative realism. The novel

was – we need scarcely remind ourselves – the literary instrument of the new Bible-reading, Protestant middle class. If it gives us the voice of the common man as against the elevated and hierarchical voices heard in the romance and the epic, this is largely because the Bible, which formed the staple for the new reading public, had a tendency to undermine such formal divisions. As the medieval English rhyme has it: "When Adam delved and Eve span,/ Who was then the gentleman?" Erich Auerbach has taught us that Augustine's adopting of the biblical model led to his radical questioning of the prevailing doctrine of stylistic hierarchies going back at least to Cicero. From now on humble things like a cup of cold water can be spoken of in the lofty mode of sublimity and "the highest mysteries of the faith may be set forth in the simple words of the lowly style which everyone can understand."[13] And as Auerbach makes clear, such a radical mixture of styles, such a confusion of *genus grande* with *genus humile*, is recommended by Augustine on the authority of the gospels, the Psalms of David and the narrative portions of the Old Testament. It was to have the most revolutionary impact on European literary culture in the Middle Ages and beyond. The early history of the novel testifies to that impact.[14]

To this revolutionary mixture of styles to which he drew our attention, Auerbach, had he known it, might have applied Bakhtin's term "heteroglossia" (*raznojazychie*). For Bakhtin too had discerned in the Europe of the Middle Ages a popular culture which radically called in question the traditional divisions of style, thus preparing us for the mixed mode of the novel as it was to develop later on. And there is here, as Tzvetan Todorov rightly notes, a remarkable closeness between Bakhtin's perceptions and those of Auerbach.[15] But where Bakhtin relates the phenomenon to the model of the carnival and the Menippean satire, Auerbach relates it to the Bible.

But this mixture of styles and with it the implicit questioning of the formalities of traditional modes of discourse, is not only a characteristic of European literatures – typically, the novel – when exposed to the influence of biblical realism. It is worth pointing out that the Bible itself affords examples of the same phenomenon, thus permitting us to make an even more radical extension of Bakhtin's thesis. Stephen Prickett pointed some years ago to the conjunction of different linguistic and cultural strands – Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Canaanite – in the Old Testament

writings and also to the way in which the vernacular Aramaic of the New Testament writers had been, through translation, refocused for a Greek-speaking audience with different cultural expectations. "The Bible," he concludes,

> not only illustrates Bakhtin's thesis , but actually provides one of the supreme examples of the way in which discourse arises and takes its meaning from the intersecting of contextual and linguistic boundaries.[16]

More recently Walter Reed has devoted a full length study to the application of Bakhtinian dialogics to the biblical texts in their full extent – narrative, law, wisdom and prophecy. In all these he finds a "struggle for dominance" between different narrative aims, different sources, or different cultural positions dialogically engaged with one another.[17]

If modern myth criticism, notably that of Northrop Frye, has tended to discern in the Bible a single overarching pattern, a kind of monomyth,[18] other readings have emphasized rather the decentered nature of the text, the dialogic interplay of different voices and genres. Powerful support for such readings is provided by Meir Sternberg in his 1985 study, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*. Sternberg does not refer to Bakhtin but he cogently demonstrates the richness and complexity of what he calls the Bible's "multifunctional discourse."[19] He notes, for instance, in the story of Saul's downfall and rejection in I Samuel 15, the distribution of authority in the telling of the tale between three voices, three points of view: that of the narrator, that of God, and that of the prophet. The reader transfers his sympathy from one point of view to the other, sometimes seeking to reconcile them, sometimes suffering the tensions between them, always entering into the narrative as an active dialogic partner. Sternberg, for instance, notes the gap between the divine judgment of Saul's fault and that of Samuel in the following passage:

> And the word of the Lord came to Samuel saying, I repent that I have made Saul king, for he has turned away from following me and has not performed my commandments. And Samuel was enraged and he cried to the Lord all night.
>
> (I Samuel 15:10–11)

The reader's sympathy (like that of Samuel) is drawn to the tragic figure of Saul. We likewise are enraged at the divine judgment. It becomes a task of some difficulty and one requiring all the narrator's rhetorical skill, to persuade us to see the situation otherwise.[20] We are involved in the story, our point of view by no means consistently and rigidly predetermined. Such shifts and dialogic variations closely resemble the characteristics to which Bakhtin directs our attention in his favourite authors and he defines them in almost identical terms. In Dostoevsky he finds "polyphony"; in *Don Quixote* he finds "double-voiced, internally dialogized discourse." These are emphatically the attributes of the biblical narratives also.

We could demonstrate the "dialogic," multivocal character of the Bible equally from poetic texts. The vision of the underworld in Isaiah 14 is an example of what Bakhtin terms "authorial unmasking." All the kings of the nations, we are told, rise up from their thrones in Sheol to meet the newly arrived king of Babylon. In a mocking lament on his fall, the prophet likens him to Helel ben Shahar, the god of the dawn, who is thrown down by Baal in the Canaanite mythology.

> Sheol from beneath is moved for thee
> to meet thee at thy coming:
> it stirs up the shades for thee,
> all the chief ones of the earth;
> it has raised up from their thrones
> all the kings of the nations . . .
> Thy pomp is brought down to Sheol,
> the sound of thy harps;
> maggots are spread under thee,
> and worms cover thee.
> How art thou fallen from heaven,
> O bright Star, son of the morning!
> How art thou cut down to the ground,
> that didst rule over the nations!
>
> (Isaiah 14:9–12)

The voice here that is ironically echoed is that of some Canaanite theomachy.[21] But the lofty style, suited to the high wars of the gods and suited also to the high and proud pretensions of the king of Babylon, is here undermined by a process of mock-epic reduction

and parody. One does not begin to understand the passage in which this verse occurs if one remains with the high epic style of the myth. There are at least two other voices engaged here: one is that of parody, almost one might say, comic travesty. To be sure the prophet is echoing the epic style, but he is also undermining it, reducing the grand vision of a mythical underworld where the great kings sit on their thrones to a foul pit of worms and maggots. In verse 11, such mockery becomes explicit:

Thy pomp is brought down to Sheol,
the sound of thy harps;
maggots are spread under thee,
and worms cover thee.

It is not only the king of Babylon who is reduced to dust; so is the high poetry ("the sound of thy harps") in which such kingship is normally celebrated. But behind the epic and mock-epic voices and, at the same time, refracted through them, there is a third voice, namely that of divine indignation. The prophet declares that God will cut off the name and remnant of Babylon, turning it into a desert "and I will sweep it with the broom of destruction, says the Lord of hosts" (verses 22–3). The homely image of the broom not only serves to sweep away the remnants of Babylon but also the remains of the poetic system which the prophet has been echoing. There is here in this hybrid mixture of voices a dialogic encounter between different languages which of course also represent different belief-systems. And the final effect is reductive, we are brought down to earth, to the common fact of death – death without honor and without mythological trappings.

It can be claimed that this passage from Isaiah is as richly dialogic in Bakhtin's sense as the episode of Epistemon's visit to the underworld in Book 2, Chapter 30 of Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* which Bakhtin so much admired. There we see Alexander the Great darning old hose and Cyrus attending to the cows.[22] The visit to the Underworld, an august *topos* in Homer and Virgil, becomes in Rabelais part of a carnival, a riot of gross imaginings. Now, there is no carnival in Isaiah, no celebration of the lower bodily functions, but there is a remarkably similar mock-epic drift and a comparable realism, as the figure of the Babylonian king is stripped of its glory and his body is trodden underfoot.

Such "double-voiced, internally dialogized discourse" is more

characteristic of biblical literature than is commonly realized. In general, the Bible is by no means so "inert" a text as Bakhtin thought. Isaiah 14 is of course poetry, whilst our business in this study is more particularly with prose narrative. In the memorable first chapter of *Mimesis* ("The Scar of Odysseus")[23] Auerbach pointed to the unadorned simplicity of the story of the Binding of Isaac as the standard of biblical realism. It was the polar opposite of the realism of Homer with its epic richness, its fullness of descriptive detail and prodigality of episode. This is a fundamental insight to which we shall return from time to time, and yet it is by no means adequate as an account of biblical narrative. The stylistic situation is more complex than Auerbach had supposed. The book of Esther for instance is more like a novel than the brief and enigmatic story of the "Binding." And like the novels discussed by Bakhtin, Esther too is characterized by a conspicuous mixture of styles.[24] It impresses us at first as a tale of oriental opulence, of royalty and feasting. The descriptions are elaborate as the story moves forward with a certain slowness and repetitiveness:

And when these days were fulfilled, the king made a feast for all the people that were present in Shushan the capital, both for great and small, seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace: there were hangings of white, of fine cotton, and blue, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple on silver rings and pillars of marble: the divans were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of alabaster, marble, pearl and precious stone.
(Esther 1:5–6)

Homer could not have been more elaborately descriptive. But then this festive style is undermined in the story itself. Esther and her uncle Mordecai, whilst accommodating themselves to the manners and "style" of the court, bring into the novel another world-view and another language. In the account of Mordecai's doings we note that economy of detail which Auerbach perceived as the mark of Hebrew realism. The very few things that we know of him (for example, his refusal to bow down, his overhearing of the plot against the king, his putting on of sackcloth) are utterly necessary and utterly significant, unlike the superfluity of detail in the account of the feasting and the customs of the palace and the harem in the first two chapters. The silences

of Mordecai and Esther turn out to be more eloquent than the prolixities of Haman and his associates (for example, 5:10–14). In short, the book of Esther gives us a Hebrew "counterplot" in contrast to the main "Persian" narrative and exhibits the dialogic interplay of two world-views as well as of the two modes of language that go with them.

3

In spite of all this it may be objected that the Bible directs us to a reality "beyond" the here-and-now of the Bakhtinian chronotope. It insists surely on a process of salvation aimed at transforming the world we know. Martin Buber anticipated Bakhtin in his insistence on the centrality of dialogue[25] but ultimately such dialogue is for him grounded in the relationship between Man and God. Is there not here an irreducible barrier separating the art of the novel as Bakhtin understood it, from biblical story-telling and from the experience of biblical Man? *Heilsgeschichte*, salvation-history, would seem to be in the end irreconcilable with chronotope.

Against this objection it should be insisted that there are different ways of understanding salvation. If the first epistle to the Corinthians declares that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (15:50), then the book of Deuteronomy by contrast urges that the commandment is not in heaven neither is it beyond the sea (30:12–13)! Salvation is near at hand, within the realm of human possibilities or, as Buber would say, rooted in community. For him the I/Thou dialogue seeks materialization by being "embodied in the whole stuff of life."[26] Buber was particularly fond of Psalm 73 which for him held the key to the primal encounter. Verse 25 of that psalm is usually rendered: "Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides thee." Buber read the verse a little differently as: "Whom have I in heaven? And being with thee I desire nothing more on earth." This is to rid the verse of its metaphysical suggestions; God and Man encounter one another not in heaven but on earth.[27] Salvation-history, in short, belongs to the world of everyday.

The book of Ruth can be taken as an example of salvation-history in this sense. There is an unfolding divine plan reaching

back to the patriarchal age as in the speech of the elders (4:11–12) and reaching forward to the birth of David. But fallible human beings are involved and if they advance the process, they do so, as we noted earlier, by indirections, by trial and error. There is no clear sense of an ending. Instead attention focuses on every-day events – a hot day in the fields during the barley harvest, a chance meeting between Ruth and Boaz, a transaction involving a parcel of land, a marriage and a birth. The story has the epic momentousness of an episode in covenant history but it is also firmly anchored in the quotidian and the mundane. The two combine to form a "double-voiced" narration which is profoundly dialogic. There is an implicit divine "guidance" both here and in the book of Esther, but there are also human beings blindly groping for some kind of assurance. Moreover, there is no question of one mode "undermining" the other. We are not speaking of a parodic relation between the two "voices" in dialogue. We are speaking rather of a cooperative dialogue, wherein Man is addressed and summoned to respond. But this transaction takes place in the visible diurnal sphere, amid the randomness and discords of our human situation.

It is necessary to stress that the characters enjoy a certain autonomy, a freedom, we might say, from authorial control. In the story of Ruth such freedom finds expression in the famous exchange between Ruth and Naomi on the road from Moab to Bethlehem (1:11–18). Naomi seeks to dismiss the two daughters-in-law; one of them leaves her, the other remains. But it is not alone the characters who are independent: the narrative itself is in a sense undetermined; it is free to move in the direction in which the characters wish it to go, without authorial intrusion. Moreover, the reader is also involved as a free agent in dialogue with the narrative; as such, he is implicitly invited to weigh the actions of the characters. He may, for instance, judge the mid-night visit of Ruth to the threshingfloor as a bold move cunningly contrived to "catch" Boaz whilst his heart is merry with wine (3:7), or again he may see it as an act of self-sacrifice and of loyalty to the living and the dead – which is how Boaz himself sees it (3:10).

The striking parallel with two other Old Testament stories, that of Tamar and Judah (Genesis 38:13–30) and that of Lot's daughters (Genesis 19:31–8) would seem to reinforce the less noble view of the encounter between Ruth and Boaz. Those are also stories

of assignations initiated by women left without husbands with a view to compelling an older male kinsman to "lie with them" so as to perpetuate the clan. Moreover, the three stories are linked as part of the same family history. Lot is the ancestor of the Moabites from whom Ruth is descended and Judah, through Tamar, is the father of Perez, the ancestor of Boaz. There is in fact a pattern of repetition, for repetition is not only characteristic of the ongoing history of Bible stories – stories begetting other stories – it is also a characteristic of the interior rhythm of the stories themselves and the interrelationships between them. The Bible tends to focus on what Robert Alter terms "type-scenes." Michael Fishbane speaks more loosely of "inner-biblical midrash" – as when different passages echo and comment on one another.[28] The third chapter of Genesis recording the sin and expulsion of Adam is followed by the sin and expulsion of Cain who becomes a wanderer in the Land of Nod "east of Eden" (4:16). Similarly, in two later chapters (21–2) we have the account of the exposure and near death of Ishmael followed by the "Binding" or near sacrifice of Isaac; in both cases a voice from heaven intervenes to save "the lad." Such "dialogic revoicing," as Walter Reed terms this technique, is more frequent than is generally realized.[29] In the instance that we are presently discussing, the story of Ruth and Boaz echoes that of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) whilst the latter is also echoed with much ironical contrast in the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife which immediately follows it (Genesis 39). Again, the story of Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams is clearly recalled for the reader by the account of Daniel's similar performance in a later generation for a later monarch (Daniel 2).

We return to what may be termed the Ruth corpus. When the three stories – that of Lot and his daughters, of Judah and Tamar, and Ruth and Boaz – are put side by side, what stands out is not only the remarkable similarity between the three narratives, but equally the striking differences in tone and atmosphere. The story of Lot is one of cave-dwellers (19:30). With a crude directness and without any ceremony at all, the older sister proposes to the younger that they should make their father drunk and each lie with him so as to bear offspring from their father. In the case of Judah and Tamar we have a pastoral, nomadic community (Judah is celebrating a sheep shearing). Tamar waylays Judah at the roadside disguised as a prostitute. Minimal forms are observed and there is payment for services rendered; moreover, Judah

justifies her actions in retrospect (38:26) and the dialogic exchange attains a higher moral tone than that of the Lot story. By the time we reach Ruth and Naomi, we are in a settled agrarian society with delicacy and rules of decorum to go with it. Ruth's secret visit to the threshingfloor where Boaz is sleeping is preceded by a ceremony of washing and anointing and in due course their union is sanctioned by the elders at the gate in accordance with the well-established custom requiring the redemption of the property of the dead by a near kinsman (4:2f). The male partner is no longer the father (as in the Lot story) nor the father-in-law (as in the Judah-Tamar story), though he is a father figure and one linked by kinship to Ruth's father-in-law, Elimelech (2:1).

In short, there are different perspectives from which to view the story of Ruth and Boaz. The parallels are significant but they are not imposed on us. The characters are as Auerbach would say "fraught with background," but the effect of that background is not completely unambiguous. The author makes no direct comment, his point of view being refracted rather through the discourse of the characters, and his voice becoming perhaps just audible in the brief genealogical parentheses already alluded to.

The story of Joseph is one whose moral thrust is relatively direct and this made it easier for Fielding to subject it to burlesque treatment in *Joseph Andrews*. But it is nevertheless "polyphonic" in a subtle way or, at least, craves a polyphonic interpretation. The lack of authorial comment, the silences of the text at critical moments, all invite us to discern a hidden dimension – an occulted guilt for instance in Joseph, by no means expressed in the words of the story but nevertheless derivable from it.

4

At this point where interpretation becomes something more like a reinventing of the story, a creative extension of its possibilities generated by the dialogic exchange between the text and the reader, we leave the Bakhtinian model behind. It becomes necessary to invoke another category, namely, that of *midrash*.[30] "Midrash" is the name given to the mode of biblical commentary practised by the Rabbis of late antiquity. Those teachers, pondering on the story of the attempted seduction of Joseph by Potiphar's wife, wondered what really lay behind Joseph's "refusal" to agree to

her solicitation (Genesis 39:8). Perhaps it was not so determined a refusal after all! The Hebrew word *wayema'en* – "he refused" is punctuated in the received masoretic text by the very rare accent known as *shalshelet* – a drawn-out undulating note which suggests a very reluctant refusal indeed. The midrash reads the story with an eye to such ambiguities. If the text finds it necessary to stress that Joseph was so good looking (39:6), perhaps this suggests that he preened himself – "he began to eat and drink and curl his hair," says one midrashic source. Then again, what is the meaning of that rather cryptic phrase, "and he went into the house to do his work" (v. 11)? Among the Rabbis there were two views on this: one was that he had work to do around the house; another view was that he went into the house to accomplish his desire with Potiphar's wife, knowing, as the same verse pointedly tells us, that there was no one at home except his mistress. Only he was deterred at the last moment by the sudden recollection of his father's face.[31]

These are not extravagant notions but the elaboration of meanings which the text seems to authorize and even invite, once the reader's imagination allows itself to range freely over it and within it in a dialogic give-and-take. The result is something between interpretation and a new invention, for biblical narratives, by virtue of their polyphonic character, as well as their pregnant silences, are peculiarly suited to beget other narratives. And this makes midrash directly relevant to our immediate concern in this study of modern novels based on biblical patterns. Such novels may be viewed as an extension of the midrashic mode, which combines an act of reading with the fertile play of the imagination. They are the effect of a radical hermeneutic, an interpretive bounty, whereby new and independent narratives are generated out of the dialogic encounter with the prime text of the Bible. And it may be claimed that the reinterpretation or "reinvention" of Bible stories after this fashion became a central feature of the history of the novel from the time that it first came into existence in the form that we recognize it. The Joseph story is a particularly good example. I will argue in Chapter 3 that Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742), which he saw as inaugurating a new genre, that of the "comic epic poem in prose" – is a kind of "midrash" on the biblical story of Joseph and his brothers.

Thomas Mann's famous trilogy of *Joseph and His Brothers*, appearing two hundred years later, is even more obviously a

"midrash." In fact, it uses a great many traditional midrashic interpretations to fill in the gaps and round out the human contours of the biblical narrative. Whilst the biblical text merely mentions that Potiphar's wife spoke to Joseph "day by day", Mann supplies the actual conversations! The text leaves Joseph's reactions as an open question: how did he react to these attempts by his mistress to engage him in conversation "day by day"? Mann's narrator provides one possible answer: he did nothing to avoid these exchanges! His face, as he urges his argument for restraint, is flushed with excitement and desire. Almost unconsciously, the narrator tells us, he is employing his charm on the woman whilst convincing himself that he is only acting the schoolmaster! He enters the house when no one but his mistress is there, hardly recognizing the strength of the urge which leads him to do this. In true midrashic style, Mann's narrator compares the provocative use of Joseph's charm in arousing his mistress's passion with the provocative use of the same charm, earlier on, in arousing his brothers' hatred. For both Joseph will pay the penalty.[32] And finally, in a playful fashion Mann introduces the actual midrashic story of Jacob's image appearing to Joseph at the critical moment.

> This it was which saved him. Or rather, he saved himself – for I would speak in the light of reason and give credit where it is due, not to any spirit manifestation. He saved himself in that his spirit evoked the warning image. In a situation only to be described as far gone, with defeat very nigh, he tore himself away – to the woman's intolerable anguish, as we must, in justly divided sympathy, admit...[33]

Mann is writing a modern, somewhat sceptical midrash, but he is employing a dialogic method which enabled him, as it enabled the authors of these medieval commentaries, to exercise his imaginative autonomy whilst drawing upon the power of an ancient writing which still resonates for later generations of readers.

In speaking of "imaginative autonomy" we must of course bear in mind that nevertheless the ancient text exercises a certain constraint. Playfulness, variety, rounding out, new perspectives, all manner of additions and interpretive modifications, parallels with other literatures and mythologies and with other episodes in the Bible itself – all are to be found in Mann's novel and, in varying degrees, in the other biblically-shaped novels we shall

be considering. But the source text nevertheless remains some-where in the background of the story as an unsubverted, indeed obsessive point of reference. There are unlimited possibilities for new readings, but they are new readings of a textual constant which remains to be joyfully re-encountered or else, in some cases, to be fought against and resisted. Either way the Bible is a pres-ence not easily put by; it asserts its authority with a certain impor-tunacy. All this yields a dialogic situation clearly different from that implied by the Bakhtinian model. If midrash as we have said gives the reader a more creative role in the interpretive process, it also paradoxically places him under greater constraints. He is subject to a kind of control unknown to Rabelais or Dostoevsky (or their readers), for he is responsible to, coerced by, a source text which cannot be ignored or set aside. Here again we have left behind not only the Bakhtinian categories but also the assump-tions of much post-structuralist theory, predicated as that is on the absence of a firm and unalterable source of meaning behind or beyond the text.[34]

From this point of view, Mann's novel is a highly reflexive discourse, often adverting amusingly to this very situation. Thus when Joseph tries to argue the lady (and himself) out of giving way to their passions, he does so by urging upon her the need to remain true to the sacred record which governs the story of which they are a part!

Hearken, Eni, and in God's name recall your understanding for that which I would say, for my words will stand, and when your story comes into the mouths of the people, so will it sound. For all that happens can become history and literature, and it may easily be that we are the stuff of history.... Much could I say, and give words to many involved matters, to resist your desire and mine own; but for the people's mouth, should it come to be put into it, will I say the simplest and most perti-nent thing, which every child can understand, thus: "My master hath committed all that he hath to my hand: there is none greater in this house than I; neither hath he kept back anything from me but thee, because thou art his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" These are the words which I say to you for all the future, against the desire that we have for each other.[35]

Joseph's speech here with its embedded biblical text may be play-fully ironical, but it is not absurd. The biblical passage is here not "inert" quotation but part of a dialogic exchange between different worlds and different cultures. In Mann's reconstruction the dialogue between Joseph and Potiphar's wife becomes indeed the focus of a confrontation between the fertility religion of Isis and the religion of the biblical patriarchs. Whilst the author freely rereads that religion in accordance with a somewhat limited view of ancient Israelite belief, based on the anthropologists of the "myth and ritual" school, the text nevertheless retains its literary power and its commanding authority as an ancient word which cannot be ignored or completely trivialized in spite of the mani-fold ironies which surround it.

It may be suggested that here our classic analogue is *Don Quixote*, another inaugural text in the history of the novel and of course a book to which Fielding looks back in *Joseph Andrews*. Cervan-tes's hero feels himself bound to recall at all points and indeed to act out, the deeds recounted in the literature of chivalry. He is in a manner constrained by this body of writing, encountering it at every turn and forcing the other characters to encounter it with him. This dialogic stance could serve as a paradigm for the situation I am here seeking to define, Cervantes presenting through his hero's devotion to the tales of chivalry something like a hermeneutic key to the use of biblical sources in modern fiction. Moreover, this may be more than mere coincidence. Marthe Robert has plausibly suggested that behind the symbolism of the tales of chivalry Cervantes is pointing to the attachment of the con-temporary believer to his sacred texts. *Amadis de Gaul* is Don Quixote's Bible. Sacred writ is here masked as romance, and the "inspired fanatic," whether given to persecuting or crusading, is masked as "a harmless maniac."[36] Such satirical, or at least comic reference to current beliefs had necessarily, in the period of the Inquisition, to be disguised. And Cervantes disguises it and dis-guises himself in the process.[37] But if such is the disguised theme of *Don Quixote*, then it is necessary to add that we are not here in the realm of mere comic parody or satire. There is a serious undercurrent also. The Don as well as being a figure of absurd-ity is also a figure of benevolence and moral passion and he owes this moral passion to the noble tradition enshrined in those same "sacred texts."

This we will find is true in general of the writers to be considered in this book down to our own century. The biblical source may be reflected with irony, it may come to seem as absurdly out of place as the literature of knight-errantry in the "real" world that we inhabit – but it will nevertheless retain a certain moral authority for reader and narrator alike. Kafka in *The Trial* is much preoccupied with the Book of Job, but he is preoccupied above all with the way that it does not work for the modern victim of a metaphysical wager. Joseph K. hears no answer out of the stormwind, there is no vindication, and above all, no happy ending. Like the Man from the Country he will never gain admission to "the Law." Nevertheless the book continues to haunt him; Kafka cannot escape the Joban paradigm. It remains as a kind of testimony and, as such, it demands to be interpreted anew for each generation of writers and readers.

Part II
Biblical Realism and the English Novel