Fisch, Harold

New Stories for Old: Biblical Patterns in the Novel


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Professor Harold Fisch has had a long and distinguished scholarly career dedicated in part to mapping the pervasive influence of the Hebrew Bible on English literature, from Shakespeare and the seventeenth century until the present moment. New Stories for Old, a complement to his 1989 study Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation, expands his impressive body of scholarship by focusing on the Biblical presence in novels across historical, linguistic, cultural, and national boundaries. After an introduction drawing on both the dialogical theories of M. M. Bakhtin alongside the tradition of midrash, Prof. Fisch notes that the polyphony of the narratives of the Hebrew Bible, as well as "their pregnant silences," are "peculiarly suited to beget other narratives." He suggests that, particularly for the eighteenth and nineteenth century English authors he examines, the Hebrew Bible did more than authorize "the moral code by which characters [were] perceived and judged," or undergird the structure of plots. Through its blending of genus grande and genus humile the Bible encouraged a revolutionary mixture of literary styles—what M. M. Bakhtin calls "heteroglossia"—while supporting the necessary grounding of the novel in narrative realism. At the same time, following Bakhtin, Prof. Fisch argues that novelists engage in a "dialogic encounter" with the source text, which may at once energize and liberate the imagination—but also "limits and compels" (p. 60). Until the present moment in America, that is; for as Prof. Fisch argues, whereas the Bible was once an "inescapable presence" (p. 130) in narrative literature, it has become, most notably in recent American novels (like Malamud's The Fixer or Bellow's Henderson the Rain King), rather just another source, an available model, in what he calls a "supermarket of mythic patterns."

The most illuminating sections of the book are those which deal with the early novels. While a great deal of critical attention has been given to Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe as the embodiment of homo economicus, for example, it is his role as "spiritual voyager" that most interests Prof. Fisch. He reads the novel as at once a midrash on the book of Jonah and, even moreso, as a commentary on the act of interpretation itself. "Man does not live by bread alone but by the language which he discovers for signifying what is
otherwise uninsignifiable. And where else should Robinson find that language if not in such a text as Jonah which gives him a key to his own lonely trials and tribulations?"(p 32) Isolated from civilization, Robinson Crusoe has the task of learning how to interpret rightly, and "rightly," in his case—as later for Fielding's Joseph Andrews—means recognizing that salvation is not an other-worldly phenomenon, the purely spiritual Covenant of Grace that Mr. Worldly-Wiseman counseled Bunyan's Christian pilgrim to seek, but is rather rooted in the attitude toward the quotient. The victories of Bunyan's Christian, argues Prof. Fisch, will be "psychological" and born of "a kind of inward conciliation" (p. 49)—a sensibility, he suggests, that leads to the later novels of Emily Bronte, Conrad, and D.H. Lawrence. But first Defoe's, then most notably Henry Fielding's, narratives, in their emphasis on "a correspondence between outer and inner events" and a "this-worldly model of salvation," point forward to Jane Austen, Dickens, and George Eliot. For this second stream, economic well-being—the restoration of fortunes, the discovery of unknown inheritances—inevitably accompanies the moral and spiritual growth of the characters. One wonders, however, if such endings aren't less theological necessities for the authors, than they are intended to reassure a solidly bourgeois, if theologically tempered Calvinist readership; certainly Bronte and Lawrence both wrote of, and as, radical Others uninterested in social accommodation.

After a compelling examination of the many Biblical narratives that find their way into Robinson Crusoe, Joseph Andrews, and Eliot's Silas Marner, Prof. Fisch addresses modern engagements first with the Book of Job, and then with the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac. Prof. Fisch argues that Job, in particular, has functioned as less as a text to be reinterpreted, than as an archetype... a mythic pattern indispensable for rendering a particular category of experience" (81). A brief examination of Kafka's "The Judgment," is followed by a study in depth of a less-well-known novel, Austrian writer Joseph Roth's Job: The Story of a Simple Man. There's a disturbing irony that I wish Prof. Fisch had addressed here, for though Joseph Roth's novel is true to its Biblical source in allowing the miracle of restoration to occur for his protagonist, from a contemporary perspective such restoration reads as melodrama rather than spiritual reassurance. His discussion of mid-century American-Jewish novels is more effective, for as he points out tellingly, in the hands of Malamud, Bellow, and Philip Roth, Biblical precursor narratives no longer compel. While I have never read "Eli, the Fanatic" as "extravagantly comic"as Prof. Fisch does, his argument that these authors now pluck from "a supermarket of mythic patterns" (p. 130), with Biblical paradigms another product on the shelf, is apt and powerful. His claim about these major novelists is true, as well, for the new generation of American Jewish authors: "It is possible," he writes, "to enjoy Levy's rye-bread but to opt out of Jewish history" (p. 158); while like many sophisticated Europeans, they may see themselves as alienated, but "they are not sitting by the waters of Babylon, nor as they remembering Zion" (p. 157).

The final section of New Stories for Old focuses on Israeli writers. On the one hand, Prof. Fisch offers a rich and evocative examination of how the Akedah is interwoven in A.B.
Yehoshua's *Mr. Mani* and S.Y. Agnon's *The Day Before Yesterday*. But in his claim that writing in Hebrew (as distinct from the English of American Jewish authors) necessarily demands that the novelist's words are "inevitably loaded with biblical meaning" (p. 158) he underestimates the power of post-modernism, secularization, and Americanization in Israel. For as Shulamith Hareven eloquently argued, over the last two decades the Hebrew language has been increasingly experiencing an onslaught from English. Hareven describes the ways in which contemporary Hebrew is used betrays the language's own "deep structures;" it is becoming "impoverished and unidiomatic," "shallow and devoid of cultural resonance."¹ Despite the precedent set by the older novelists like Yehoshua and Agnon, at the end of the twentieth century, on home territory even the language of the Hebrew Bible, it appears, is not exempt from inclusion on the shelves of the supermarket.