

Biblical Narratives and Novelists' Narratives

THE ETHEL M. WOOD LECTURE 1989

My first duty this evening is to thank the chairman for his generous introduction. My second is to say how conscious I am of the distinction of the Biblical scholars, theologians, and historians who have preceded me as Ethel M. Wood lecturer. To follow them, and to do so as an outsider to the disciplines they professed, is a peculiarly onerous task. Hence the subject I have chosen. It is one on which - as a novelist and as a member of a university department of literature - I hope to be able to speak with neither timidity nor temerity.

Let me open forthwith by reading to you three fictions based on biblical themes. Only one of them is actually written by a novelist: this fact being in itself a part of the argument I want to present; or an illustration of the pattern of continuities and discontinuities I am concerned with. The first of the stories is taken from the volume on Exodus in the *Midrash Rabbah*, a compilation of rabbinic exegeses, annotations, and elaborations on various books of the Bible, which was finally put together, it is believed, some time in the early Middle Ages. The particular text to which the following tale refers is Ex. 2. 10; it tells how the infant Moses, having been saved from death by Pharaoh's daughter, is later brought up in the king's household.

Pharaoh's daughter used to kiss and hug him, loved him as if he were her own son and would not allow him out of the royal palace. Because he was so handsome, everyone was eager to see him, and whoever saw him could not tear himself away from him. Pharaoh also used to kiss and hug him, and he [Moses] used to take the crown of Pharaoh and place it upon his own head, as he was destined to do when he became great. It was this which God said to Miriam: *Therefore have I brought forth a fire from the midst of thee* (Ezek. 28.18); and even so did the daughter of Pharaoh bring up him who was destined to exact retribution from her father ... The magicians of Egypt sat there and said: 'We are afraid of him who is taking off thy crown and placing it upon his own head, lest he be the one of whom we prophesy that he will take away the kingdom from thee.' Some of them counselled to slay him and others to burn him, but Jethro was present among them and he said to them: 'This boy has no sense. However, test him by placing before him a gold vessel and a live coal; if he stretch forth his hand for the gold, then he has sense and you can slay him, but if he make for the live coal, then he has no sense and there can be no sentence of death upon him.' So they brought these things before him, and he was about to reach forth for the gold when [the angel] Gabriel came and thrust his hand aside so that it seized the coal, and thrust his hand with the live coal into his mouth, so that his tongue was burnt, so that he became slow of speech and tongue.¹

Several points in the tale call at once for comment. Perhaps the most obvious of these are the mythic or fairy-tale elements in it. We recognise, for example, the foundling who will eventually displace those who have given him succour: a theme which is found in the widest imaginable variety of literary contexts. (Shades of Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*!) A comparable motif is that of the child or adult who, as a result of preternatural cunning or assistance from some unexpected source, makes the right choice among a group of objects offered to him. (Shades of Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice*!) The passage is also much preoccupied, as such tales often are, with the irresistible physical beauty and charm of the chosen hero: because he is chosen by God or fate, the people around him choose to love him, too. Or rather, they are compelled to do so; they have no choice in the matter.

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There are other elements in the tale which, though hardly 'deeper' than those I have just spoken of, are of a different kind. Notice, for instance, the way in which the synchronicity of the entire Biblical text is taken for granted. Jethro, whom Moses is to meet much later in the Land of Midian, and whose daughter he is to marry, turns out to be a familiar and important figure in the court of Pharaoh. An even more startling example of this mode of conceiving time, or the relation of time to truth, is the quoting by the God of Israel to Miriam, Moses' sister, of a passage from the Book of Ezekiel - which we know to have been composed some thousand years, at least, after Moses may be supposed to have led the people of Israel out of Egypt. To this habit of mind - one to which our notions of chronology and succession are wholly irrelevant - we may also assimilate certain disturbing, echoic effects which are to be found in the passage. I am thinking particularly here of the instant recourse by Pharaoh's magicians to the proposal that the infant Moses be slain. This inevitably harks back to the edict that all the male children of the Israelites should be killed, and forward to the last of the curses which God was to visit on the Egyptians. For a Christian reader that particular reference is bound to carry farther forward still: to Herod's Slaughter of the Innocents. And as for the coal of fire placed in the infant's mouth - well, to that I shall be returning shortly.

I turn now to the second of my fictions; one written in circumstances remote from those which the rabbis had known. It is taken from Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, first published in Copenhagen in 1843.

It was early in the morning, Abraham rose betimes, he embraced Sarah, the bride of his old age, and Sarah kissed Isaac, who had taken away her reproach, who was her pride, her hope for all time. So they rode in silence along the way, and Abraham's glance was fixed upon the ground until the fourth day when he lifted up his eyes and saw afar off Mount Moriah, but his glance turned again to the ground. Silently he drew the knife - then he saw the ram which God had prepared. Then he offered that and returned home ... From that time on Abraham became old, he could not forget that God had required this of him. Isaac threw as before, but Abraham's eyes were darkened, and he knew joy no more.²

This re-telling of the story of the Binding of Isaac is in fact the second of four which Kierkegaard relates successively at the beginning of his book. In the first of the tales we are told that before seizing Isaac, Abraham makes himself hideous and declares himself to be an idolator; he does this so that Isaac will never know that it was the true God, the God of Israel, who was demanding this terrible sacrifice from them both. In the third of the tales, Abraham turns not against God, as he seems to in the one I have just read, but against himself: how could he, Abraham, ever have brought himself to carry out such a deed? And in the fourth reworking of the story it is indeed Isaac who turns out ultimately to be the victim of the sacrifice, in that he is the one whose faith is lost or spoiled. 'No word of this,' Kierkegaard writes, 'has ever been spoken in the world' - no word, that is, until he himself, the nineteenth century seeker after faith, dared to speak it.³ 'It is supposed to be difficult to understand Hegel,' he remarks, a few pages later, 'but to understand Abraham is a trifle.'⁴

My final example is from Thomas Mann, who is indisputably a novelist, and one acknowledged to be among this century's masters of the form. The passage I am going to quote does not come from the great tetralogy, *Joseph and His Brothers*, which Mann himself (who was not given to

excessive modesty) compared in scale and bulk to an Egyptian pyramid. (He added, just in case we missed the point, that this pyramid, his pyramid, was built not by the labour of thousands, but by that of one man.)⁵ My example comes from a short story, 'The Tables of the Law', which was written after the Joseph novels, but which came clearly out of the same creative urge as that which had produced the longer works. It is relevant to add that in devoting himself to a set of novels based on Hebraic themes, the self-exiled Thomas Mann - a German of the Germans - was quite consciously issuing a challenge to those who ruled his country at that time, and to the concepts of German and European history which they were attempting to impose on the world.

When he [Moses] spoke he had a certain way of letting his arms hang limp at his sides, while his fists shook and trembled. He informed them that the God of their Fathers was found again ... This God was called Jahwe, which name is to be understood as 'I am that I am, from eternity to eternity', but also as flowing air and mighty sound. This God was inclined towards their tribe and was ready under certain conditions to enter into a covenant with them, choosing them above all other peoples...

Moses stormed at them and the fists on his broad wrists trembled. Yet he was not completely honest with them, and kept under cover much, indeed the essential thought, that was in his mind. Fearing that he might scare them off he said nothing of the implications of invisibility, that is its spirituality, its purity, its holiness ... Afraid to frighten them he kept silent ... When he announced to them that Jahwe the Invisible was inclined towards them, he really ascribed to the God and interpreted for the God what was possibly true for the God but was certainly true for him: for he himself was inclined towards his father's kin, as the sculptor is inclined towards the shapeless lump from which he hopes to carve a high and fine figure, the work of his hands. Hence his trembling desire, hence too the great heaviness of soul which filled him directly after his departure from Midian...

Was it however that his speech displeased the people - for he spoke badly and haltingly and often could not find the right word - or did they divine, while he shook his trembling fists, the implications of invisibility as well as those of the covenant? Did they perceive that they were being lured towards strenuousness and dangerous matters? Whatever the reason they remained mistrustful, stiff-necked, and fearful of his storming. They ogled their Egyptian whip-masters and mumbled between their teeth.

'Why do you spout words? And what kind of words are these you spout? Likely somebody set you up as chief or judge over us? Well, we want to know who.'⁶

Now I have deliberately taken my three fictions from writings which are strikingly different in intention, and in attitude both to the material they are presenting and to the source of that material. They differ above all, and crucially, in the attitudes to the faith they seek to express or explore or bring into doubt. To think oneself back into the frame of mind of the rabbis is extremely difficult; perhaps impossible for someone brought up, as I was, completely cut off from their intellectual and devotional traditions. However, anyone attending to the tale I read a few minutes ago would probably agree, at the very least, that the writers of it have an intimacy with their own faith, and hence a relaxed confidence in it, despite all the pain they are familiar with, that is quite unlike

what is to be found in Kierkegaard. In contemplating the Binding of Isaac, Kierkegaard is trying to develop and illustrate the concept of dread, which he makes peculiarly his own: a condition which (for him) is evoked almost as intensely by the necessity of belief as it is by the temptation of unbelief. His aim is not to make a commitment to faith easier for his readers, but just the reverse of this; he wants his readers to feel how arduous of attainment such a commitment is likely to be. Hence his insistence, which perhaps falls strangely on our ears, on the ineluctable contradiction between the spheres of the ethical and the religious.

The ethical expression for what Abraham did, is that he would murder Isaac; the religious expression is, that he would sacrifice Isaac; but precisely in this contradiction consists the dread which can well make a man sleepless, and yet Abraham is not what he is without this dread.⁷

When we turn to Mann, by contrast, we find ourselves in the company of a consummate ironist and sceptic. Above all other writers Nietzsche is the one whose influence we feel at work in almost everything Mann wrote; the Nietzsche who taught that all values and indeed all gods are relative, man-made, history-bound. They are the products of needs, and also (once they are established) themselves the generators of needs, which can neither be evaded nor wholly articulated, and which are therefore constantly undergoing processes of change and fracture, displacement and inversion. When Mann writes of Moses' teachings that they were 'possibly true of the God but [were] certainly true of him', this sly equivocation is not a fudging of the issue; for him that is precisely the issue.

The differences, then, between the writers are great; so great that one can imagine their meeting together as an occasion only of a mutually pained and pitying incomprehension. And yet, without trying to imagine ourselves somehow comfortably *au dessus de la mêlée*, occupying some unassailable vantage-point kindly conferred on us by history (in these matters there is no such position) - can we not say, nevertheless, that there are remarkable similarities in the treatment given to the biblical texts in all three cases? At perhaps the simplest level, one might notice that both Mann and the rabbis are struck by the flaw or deficiency which is imputed to their hero, and seek in their different ways to explain it. Moses, the mighty law-bringer and leader of his nation, says of himself (Ex. 4.10) 'I am not a man of words ... for I am slow of speech and of a slow tongue.' How can this be? The rabbis answer by telling us of an injury inflicted on him, for his own protection, as a baby. And what is this injury? Why, it is the same one that Isaiah was to suffer when the seraph revealed to him his prophetic vocation. Which then raises the interesting, indeed the positively Nietzschean question: is the impediment from which Moses suffers to be construed as a disadvantage at all? Or is it sign of the weight and veracity of everything his slow tongue will utter? For Mann, on the other hand, Moses' stammer is a sign of his consciousness that he is holding back from the Israelites how severe they will find the vocation to which he is impelled to call them. One notices too how Mann translates the hero's inner sense of both the violence and constraint under which he is acting into a displaced physical activity of a kind one often finds among those who are slow of speech: his fists, he tells us, tremble at the end of his arms.

It is hardly necessary to examine yet again the Kierkegaard passage in order to justify one incontestable generalisation about the writers of all three tales: namely that they approach the biblical texts with an alertness and curiosity that are the marks of the profound respect they

feel for them. These texts, and the heroes they present, are given to them to be searched, to be pondered over, to be subjected to whatever the writers possess both of understanding and (quite as importantly) of bafflement; of the capacity, that is, to admit to bafflement. At the same time, and in the same measure, all three passages have in common a kind of playfulness without which they could never have come into existence. This quality of playfulness seems to me as much in evidence in the Kierkegaard story, which is undoubtedly the most sombre of those I have read, as it does in the other two. The very form Kierkegaard adopts, in juxtaposing one after another his re-tellings of the tales, so that over and over again Abraham arises betimes and sets out on his journey, always to the same end, and yet to such different ends - this form is in itself a proclamation of the freedom with which the writer's imagination is working. Every line reveals its own provisionality, a darkly joyful acceptance of the speculative enterprise on which it has embarked.

Each passage, in other words, is aware that what it offers to us is nothing more, and nothing less, than a fiction. None of them, the rabbinic midrash no more than any of the others, claims that this is how the events it is describing actually took place. On the contrary. The implicit suggestion throughout is not, 'I will tell you what actually happened on such-and-such a day'. No, if there is a single utterance which might be supposed to lie behind and within each tale it is something apparently much more modest in nature. It takes the form of a brief but fraught question: 'What if -?' What if Moses, ensconced within the palace of the oppressors had revealed prematurely (or rather had been unable to conceal) his chosenness as leader of a chosen people? What if the hesitancy of his speech sprang from his own half-consciousness of something he did not dare to divulge to his audience about the task imposed on him - and on them? What if Abraham could never reconcile himself to what had been demanded of him - even in retrospect, even after the ram had been given to him, and he and his son had returned safely home? What if Isaac could never forgive him for being ready to obey (or for being tempted to disobey) that command? In short, I am suggesting that once such questions lodge in the minds of those who ponder over the Biblical stories, they can be answered only by the telling of further stories. Indeed, such questions are themselves incipient stories; stories in the egg, as it were.

It may well seem to you at this stage that I have described the relationship between the stories in the Bible and the fictions derived from them in terms directly contradictory of one another. On the one hand I argued that the later stories are marked by a deep regard for, and a concomitant seriousness about, the texts they draw upon: in effect, I said, they acknowledge these texts, and what they reveal of their heroes' callings, to be unfathomable and inexhaustible. On the other hand, I went on to say that the writers' attitudes towards the tales they themselves tell should be seen as essentially playful and provisional throughout. How can these states be reconciled? My answer is than in imaginative writing of the greatest intensity, seriousness and playfulness are hardly to be distinguished from one another; each not only permits the other but ultimately becomes the other. Or to put the same point in another way: the writer's conviction that he is confronted by situations and actions which are ultimately beyond his comprehension cannot be divorced from his impulse to propose to himself, and then to others, that childish and yet alarming 'What if - ?'

I do not use the word 'alarming' casually, nor do I wish to suggest that it is easy to achieve the resolution of the tension between playfulness and seriousness which I have spoken of. Nothing of the kind. It is bound

to be hard, for instance, for a believer to understand that it might be the unbelief of a novelist like Mann which irresistibly attracts him to the records of an ancient faith; part of their allure for him is that they will seem to have the power to test him, intellectually and morally, as nothing else can. By the same token, however, a lesser novelist who approaches the biblical texts from without, as a stranger to the spirit which possesses them, may find it hard to preserve his unbelief from the taint of cynicism and vulgarity, or worse. Of one thing we can be sure: the novelist's response to the Bible, or any part of it, will reveal him for what he is to the judgement of his readers, believers and sceptics alike; and he is hardly in a position to feel aggrieved if the former should sometimes express their judgement with a more-than-aesthetic vehemence. (None of which, it hardly needs to be said, justifies or palliates the Iranian mode of attempting to settle such issues.)

There is one further point to be made. Both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures demand to be read as truth, as fact, presented in the only way their particular kind of truth can be presented: by means of great, overarching narratives, each of which constantly assumes and resumes its entire past, or that which it claims to be its past, and points to an end which is yet to come. (In the Hebrew Scriptures the fate of Israel is the paramount issue throughout, and all historical events are seen as merely instrumental to that fate; in the Christian scriptures Israel itself, the historic Israel, has in its turn become merely instrumental to the proclamation of the new faith - and hence of what is declared to be a new Israel.) At the same time, these large unfolding and infolding narratives are themselves for the most part composed of innumerable smaller stories, in which delighted and skilful use is made of all the resources of the story-teller's art. Plot and characterisation; description and dialogue; the giving of information and the deliberate withholding of it; ironic digression and juxtaposition; metaphor, analogy, framing devices - all these, and much else, as several sophisticated literary critics have latterly been demonstrating to us, are cunningly deployed in what might appear to be even the simplest of Biblical tales.⁸

All of which leads us to conclude that the 'What if - ?' spirit of which I have been speaking, the spirit of imaginative speculation and self-projection, out of which all our richest fictions, in all ages, have emerged, is by no means as irreconcilable as it might seem to be with the biblical writers' conception of their task as sacred historians. Precisely because they have such confidence in the indefeasible veracity of the larger, overarching story they are telling, they are able to grant an autonomy, a dramatic presence, a psychological inwardness and coherence, to all or any of the participants in their tales: not least those participants who are to be seen to be on the wrong side; who are misguided or downright evil; who are to be opposed and fought and ultimately defeated. By the same token, they are able to show weakness and temptation at work in the hearts of those who are ultimately to triumph. By what other means could the narrative skills referred to a moment ago be made manifest; how else could the writers contrive the suspense and surprise which no story can do without?

Let me give you just one small example of the kind of thing I have in mind. The fact that my example comes not from one of the biblical tales but from the hymn of praise uttered by the Israelites after the drowning of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea is not disadvantageous to my argument; on the contrary, it reveals how deeply embedded in the minds of the biblical writers are the narrative and dramatic impulses of which I have just been trying to speak. The passage is from Exodus 15.9.

The enemy said: I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil; my lust shall be satisfied upon them; I will draw my sword, my sword shall destroy them.

Safe on dry land, triumphant, relieved - or imagining himself to be so, in historical retrospect - the psalmist re-enacts the fate that has been escaped; and he does so by imagining, with an extraordinary zeal and exactitude, the gloating anticipation of the enemy. Step by step the verse rehearses the attack which never took place - the pursuit initially, then the overtaking, then the act of plunder, and finally the frenzy of the physical destruction of the intended victims. What if - ? indeed!

Innumerable commentaries have no doubt been devoted to that passage in the millennia that have passed since it was first put into writing. I suspect, though, that it has never been called 'novelistic' before. But that is exactly what it is, in its horrified and yet jubilant movement into the mind of the other, of the opposing partner in the drama it is enacting. And if I am challenged yet further to define what I mean here by novelistic, I shall do so by invoking for the last time the non-novelist, Kierkegaard:

It is repugnant to me to do as is so often done, namely, to speak inhumanly about a great deed, as though some thousands of years were an immense distance; I would rather speak humanly about it, as though it had occurred yesterday, letting only its greatness be the distance.⁹

NOTES:

¹ *The Midrash Rabbah: Volume Three - Exodus*, translated by S.M. Lehrmann, London 1939, p.33.

² S. Kierkegaard: *Fear and Trembling*, translated by Walter Lowrie, New York 1954, p.28.

³ *Ibid.* p.29.

⁴ *Ibid.* p.43.

⁵ Thomas Mann: Author's Foreword to one-volume edition of *Joseph and His Brothers*, translated by H.T. Lowe-Porter, London 1970, p.v.

⁶ Thomas Mann: *Stories of a Lifetime, Volume One*, translated by H.T. Lowe-Porter, London 1970, pp.289-90.

⁷ *Op. cit.* p.41.

⁸ See, for instance, Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979); Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1981); Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington, 1985); and, most recently, Gabriel Josipivici, *The Book of God* (New Haven 1989).

⁹ *Op. cit.* p.45.