MAKING ONESELF RECEPTIVE VIA HERMENEUTICS, EXEGESIS, TYPOLOGY, AND MIDRASH IN INTERPRETING THE BIBLE AND AMERICAN LITERATURE (A CASE STUDY ON THE MAJOR WORKS OF HERMAN MELVILLE)

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Abstract: *Hermeneutics and interpretation go hand in hand with the Bible, but especially with the fashion in which literary criticism developed, the latter having been influenced by Biblical criticism since earliest times. Furthermore, every type of literary interpretation is rooted in Biblical exegesis, and this is also the case for the nineteenth-century American literature where the novelists are the ones to show the Bible's influence, Herman Melville's* "Moby-Dick" *being a famous case in point.*

Keywords: *reception, metaphors, symbols, the Bible, American literature*

Conceptual Framework

On the first level of text analysis there are the literal words of the Biblical text, which function similarly to those from other books, according to St. Thomas. However, they are the signs of things, of realities other than themselves, and this referential meaning is to be gathered from the text itself and from its context. But in the case of the Bible, due to God's structural governance of supernatural history, the realities signified by the text have a referential relationship to other realities in history. The Old Testament Jews having been liberated from Egypt and from the waters of the Red Sea is more than a word but also a historical fact.

Hermeneutics and interpretation go hand in hand with the Bible, but especially with the way literary criticism developed, the latter having been influenced by Biblical criticism since earliest times. Furthermore, every type of literary interpretation is rooted in Biblical exegesis. As Prickett claims, "medieval polysemous typology was an essentially literary solution to a hermeneutic problem" (Prickett, 1998: 160). The modern discipline of 'literary criticism' has developed largely out of ancient traditions of Biblical interpretation, and this is why David Jasper offers details about the Bible's range of interpretations that later on were transferred in the secular literary criticism and interpretation. For instance, ancient Jewish hermeneutics comprised four overlapping methods of reading – Literalist, Midrashic, Pesher and Allegorical, acknowledging the complexity of the act of reading (Jasper, 1998: 21).

Hermeneutics is a second order interpreting activity in which one stands back and attempts a contemplation of what happened in one's own reading practice or in that of others. It is also used to describe the ways in which ancient texts are related to the contemporary world. In this mode it functions as a kind of mediating activity, bridging the gap between an authoritative text like the Bible and the time of the reader.

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Exegesis is closely related to hermeneutics, differing in objectives. According to Ilana Pardes's explanation, the primary objective of many exegetical traditions from antiquity on has been to draw out of Scripture its presumably deeper and less accessible latent meanings (Pardes, 2008: 11.). One possible way to do so – most notably in the Midrash but also in popular sermons of all times (Father Mapple's reading of Jonah is an exquisite case in point) – is to retell the Biblical tale. Exegesis, then, not only within the realm of modern literature, often generated an attempt to find in the Bible the potential for another narrative.

In Judaism, as well as in Christianity, the antitypes of prophecy in the Old Testament are the coming of the Messiah and the restoration of Israel. The Old Testament is, for Jews, typological without the New Testament. ***Typology*** is the juxtaposition of types (including people, institutions, or events), and is employed in exegesis when a Biblical scene or figure is taken up and viewed as an interpretative analogy for a contemporary belief or practice. Christopher Rowland points out that "the relationship between type and antitype is suggested by the accumulation of points of correspondence between two (or more) narratives or characters" (Rowland in Lemon et al, 2009: 19). Accordingly, the writers of the New Testament regarded the Old Testament in terms of prefigurements of incidents in the life of Christ, so that everything that happens in the Old Testament is a type or adumbration of something in the New Testament and everything that happens in the New Testament is an antitype or realized form of something that the Old Testament foreshadows. The New Testament is presented as a key to, or an explanation of, the Old Testament. Israel is the type, Jesus the antitype. Just as Moses organizes the twelve tribes of Israel, so too does Jesus bring together twelve disciples. By crossing the Red Sea, Israel achieves its identity as a nation; when Jesus is baptized in the Jordan, he is recognized as the Son of God. The crossing is also a type of the Resurrection (Frye, 1982: 172-3).

It is precisely the mutual influence, of Biblical text upon literary rewriting, and of literary rewriting upon Biblical text, that has provoked much theoretical debate in recent years. To produce a viable theoretical model for this two-way exchange between the Bible and its literary progeny is both difficult and necessary. Therefore, many critics have embraced the concept of ***midrash*** – the Hebrew term for the Jewish practice of retelling Biblical tales in such a way as to extract more profound meanings from gaps or insignificant details – in order to recognize the symbiotic relationship between the Bible and its rewritings.

As Jo Carruthers suggests, and we go along with him on this, "in reading the Biblical story of Adam and Eve's sin and expulsion from the garden of Eden, images from literature and popular culture come to mind" (Carruthers, 2006:260): the eating of the forbidden fruit or more commonly of the apple; the shameful covering of nakedness with hands or fig leaves; the complicity of Eve above Adam; the sexual nature of Eve's tempting of Adam with the apple. In fact, all of these factors are not explicit in the Biblical account, but occur prominently in famous rewritings or have simply diffused into popular culture.

This reciprocity of the Bible and its rewritings even affects our very mode of reading. Hence, the readership is surprised when they read the Genesis narrative because they already have expectations of what the narrative should and should not contain.

The Interpretative Reception of Melville's Major Works

In 1819, when Melville was born, the United States was entering a period of tremendous religious and philosophical turmoil that affected every aspect of society. As the nation was just completing three decades of its experiment in constitutional democracy, many political and religious leaders believed that the American people were deplorably lacking in social graces, moral values, and ideas of communal responsibility (Eliott, in Gunn, 2005: 171).

Hawthorne writes of Melville that: "He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential; he has a very high and noble nature, and better worth immortality than most of us." (Stewart, 1941: 432-33). Hawthorne's renowned remark is indispensable to the understanding of Melville's religious imagination. It calls for a consideration of Melville as a blasphemous believer, as a "pilgrim-infidel" who never ceases to wander between the two poles.

Melville's biblicism was never doubted – from the groundbreaking studies of Nathalia Wright (*Melville's Use of the Bible*, 1949) and Lawrence Thompson (*Melville's Quarrel with God*, 1952), the first to excavate Melville's biblical poetics, to the more recent studies of Americanists and postcolonial critics (Sacvan Bercovitch, Michael Rogin, Lawrence Buell), whose inquiries added a much-needed historical contextualization of Melville's use of the Bible. But while the former focused on Melville's readings of biblical texts, devoting little attention to the cultural context, the latter did the opposite. That is, they primarily discussed Melville's innovative exegesis in relation to American religious and political thought, dealing only sporadically with the biblical material itself. We intend to do both cultural and biblical exegesis.

Melville knew the Bible so well, writes Nathalia Wright, that "he could smell the burning of Gomorrah and the pit; hear the trumpet in the Valley of Jehoshaphat[,] … taste Belshazzar's feast, feel the heat of the fiery furnace (Wright, 1949)." But she does not dive into these biblical scenes with Melville to follow the details of his intimate, sensuous encounter with the ancient verses and the particular features of his biblical aesthetics. Nor does Thompson, who highlights Melville's debt to Job and Jonah in his "quarrel with God," go far enough in probing the rhetoric and cries of the two great questioners of biblical tradition. The same holds for those who have dealt with Melville's exegetical background. Such readings provide panoramic views of Melville's dialogues with other interpretive modes, primarily shedding light on American literature and culture rather than on the history of biblical exegesis (Pardes, *op. cit.:* 3).

Melville is equally intrigued by the exegetical potential of allegorical readings. He plays historical and allegorical readings of the Bible against each other – Kitto and Mapple in Jonah's case – never hesitating to thrive on both while uncovering their respective limitations. But, above all, New does not go far enough in exploring the vast aesthetic-hermeneutic project of *Moby-Dick*. Melville does not merely allude to other commentaries in passing. His metacommentary on Eadie's entry offers an extensive consideration of the actual reading strategies of biblical scholarship as it dwells on the most minute details in the Book of Jonah (*Ibid.*: 48).

Just before the *Pequod* sets sail, Father Mapple delivers a memorable sermon on the Book of Jonah from his shiplike pulpit at the Whaleman's Chapel in New Bedford, adding "sea-taste" to the well-known tale about the stubborn, disobedient prophet who escaped to the sea. The sermon opens with an alluring invitation to dive into the Book of Jonah. "Shipmates," Mapple declares as he turns over the leaves of the Bible, "this book, containing only four chapters – four yarns – is one of the smallest strands in the mighty cable of the Scriptures. Yet what depths of the soul does Jonah's deep sea-line sound! What a pregnant lesson to us is this prophet! What a noble thing is that canticle in the fish's belly!" (41). Mapple seeks to take his listeners on an exegetical voyage. He captures their ears through a flow of sonorous alliterations – "soul"/ "sea-line" / "sound"; "belly" / "billow" / "boisterously"; "seaweed" / "slime"/"sea" – that echo Jonah's canticle in the belly of the fish.

Mapple's sermon, however, is but an opening interpretive note. *Moby-Dick* as a whole is a "billow-like" and "boisterously grand" interpretation of the Book of Jonah. It offers a virtuoso projection of the terse text of Jonah on a gigantic canvas: the long epic story of the Pequod's search after the inscrutable White Whale. What would happen, Melville ventures to ask, if we were to transfer Jonah from biblical times into the nineteenth century and split his figure between the outcasts and renegades of an American whaling ship? What new interpretations would emerge once Jonah is set in a context where intimate encounters with the bodies of great fish are a daily experience? Each crew member of the Pequod strives – wittingly or unwittingly – to map out Jonah's route. Ishmael, who slips into the mouth of a whale, playfully exclaiming, "Good Lord! is this the road that Jonah went?" (332), and Ahab, who leans over his wrinkled sea charts relentlessly searching after the route of the inscrutable White Whale, are but two notable examples. Queequeg, Tashtego, and even the maddened Pip are also Jonahs of sorts, each highlighting a different course in the travel narrative of the biblical prophet, all reaching realms unheard of within Mapple's Calvinist framework (*Ibid.*: 47).

In rendering his Jonahs, Melville responds to a diverse array of other readings of the Book of Jonah. Calvin's commentaries on Jonah, popular sermons of a Calvinistic bent (Mapple's sermon is modeled on this genre) and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (Crusoe is regarded as a sinful Jonah in one of the opening episodes) are but a few of the prominent ones.

Given our focus on the exegetical trends prevalent in nineteenth-century America we single out Melville's response to Kitto's Cyclopedia, one of the first British encyclopedias to endorse the findings of German biblical criticism. It had the advantage of providing a popularized scholarly introduction to the historical-geographic research of the Bible in an accessible format. Kitto's successful reception in America was part of a broader process of cultural translation through which the continental scientific approach to the Bible became part and parcel of the American exegetical scene.

Melville devotes an entire chapter – "Jonah Historically Regarded" – to John Eadie's entry on Jonah in Kitto's *Cyclopedia*. In this chapter Ishmael engages in a mock debate with the scholars whose readings are surveyed by Eadie, calling into question their scientific presuppositions, among them the assumption that "history" is a traceable, concrete concept. Though this chapter serves as the core of Melville's reflections on the exegetical innovations of biblical criticism his

dialogue with Kitto reverberates through the entire novel, serving as a vital springboard for Melville's own reading of Jonah as a text whose historical significance cannot be detached from its implications within contemporary cultural settings, above all, antebellum America (*Ibid.*: 48).

That Melville had Kitto's Cyclopedia by his side while writing *Moby-Dick* was noted already in Wright's *Melville's Use of the Bible* (1949) and in Vincent's *The Trying Out of Moby-Dick* (1949). But it is only in Elisa New's "Bible Leaves! Bible Leaves!" that Melville's subtler hermeneutic exchange with Kitto is first examined (beyond source criticism). New draws attention to Kitto in her attempt to define Melville's "Hebraic historicism." Melville, she argues, follows Kitto's lead in showing that "the proper aim of hermeneutics is not the discovery of an allegorical Word" but rather the fashioning of a historical view of the text that would be attuned to the ways in which every culture constructs its own worldview, its own distinct "clothing" of truth (New, 1998: 294).

In Father Mapple's sermon, Melville preaches that Jonah had to do what God wanted: "Jonah did the Almighty's bidding. And what was that, shipmates? To preach the Truth to the face of Falsehood! That was it!" (*MD* 48). This is what Melville was determined to do, to tell the truth as he saw it, about the narrow-mindedness, gullibility, and hypocrisy of many ostensibly "good" churchgoers. According to Ilana Pardes, in the book of Job, more than in any other biblical character, Melville finds an admirable model for his own tantalizingly paradoxical position as a blasphemous believer (*Ibid:* 24).

Melville, in the same tradition as Hawthorne, struggled with the concepts of Original Sin, Predestination, and Divine Grace, also. The belief in Original Sin is met with in Melville's posthumously published novel *Billy Budd, Sailor*, in which Billy Budd, the young and handsome sailor, embodied "essential innocence." (*BB* 892) He is set against John Claggart, who represents the naturally "malign" (*BB* 856).

Subsumed under the doctrinal category of theology proper is the biblical doctrine of predestination. Rather than find "that unfailing comfort" in the fact that "it's all predestinated" (*MD* 168), Melville's characters struggle "all alone" – for example, Ahab in *Moby-Dick* – to escape the "walls" of Providence while their peers passively witness and listen "in a dumbness like that of a seated congregation of believers in hell listening to the clergyman's announcement of his Calvinistic text." (*BB* 887)

For Ahab, Moby Dick represents everything that represses and denies. Believing only in a fundamental malevolence, he feels towards the white whale something of 'the general rage and hate felt by the whole race from Adam down.'(*MD* 317) Having lost his leg in a previous encounter with his enemy, he also desires vengeance, not just on the 'dumb brute' that injured him but on the conditions that created that brute, which for him that brute symbolizes – the human circumstances that would frustrate him, deny him his ambitions and desires (Gray, 2004: 211).

Around 1885, after losing not only his first born child, Malcolm, but also his other son Stannie, Melville began to do some writing that would lead to his final masterwork. *Billy Budd, Sailor* contains many biblical allusions and references to sin, which continue to evoke various and controversial interpretations.

Melville's religious allusions are basic to his artistic vision and to his intellectual thought. They are essential in understanding his works on the most important levels. They reveal the spiritual struggle of a deeply thinking person at a time when traditional ideas about God and the Bible were being challenged and even destroyed by the sciences and by the new biblical criticism coming out of Europe (Coffler, 2006.).

Melville's *Billy Budd* is heavily modeled by a Christ-theme. Billy Budd is the innocent figure, loved by his father-figure (Captain Vere, with a name carrying the Latinate form of "truth" or "verity"). Billy, just like Christ, is not spared death by his just father figure (Townsend, 2004: 67). As Tyrus Hillway said, "Within the act of [Billy Budd's] sacrifice, a symbol of expiation for all the sins of mankind, burns the spark of hope for eventual moral regeneration." Billy "looked like one impaled" and his expression was "as a crucifixion to behold," the narrator of *Billy Budd* informs us. When Billy Budd utters his climactic line "God bless Captain Vere" before death, it is almost as if Melville is reversing Christ's "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

The tragic plot evolves as follows: Billy Budd, a surpassingly innocent and handsome young seaman, kills by a single blow John Claggart, a venomous petty officer (master-at-arms) who falsely and maliciously accuses him of mutiny. Billy's death blow is further complicated because he strikes only after he is unable to speak owing to his congenital stutter – an "organic hesitancy" (*BB* 53) – exacerbated by heightened emotion from Claggart's accusation borne of sheer envy and personal hatred. Nevertheless, naval law dictates hanging for the act, and the fact that the events occur in 1797 at sea on HMS *Bellipotent* in the aftermath of the major mutinies that rocked the British navy at Spithead and Nore in the spring of that year while England was at war with France seems to require strict adherence because of the threatening virus of anarchy in the social order during wartime. At this juncture the third major actor in Melville's drama, Captain Edward Vere, although he understands fully Billy's innocence and his victimization by a repugnant man, feels compelled to convince his subordinates to carry out the capital punishment. Vere even cries out that Claggart has been "struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!" (*BB* 101). And before he does hang, Billy declares in antiphonal counterpoint, so to speak, "God bless Captain Vere!" (*BB* 123) – with no taint from his usual stuttering. So the innocent comes to a tragic end.

Despite Melville's being rooted in Calvinism, his forthrightness and spiritual turmoil put him at odds with the church. He was an outcast like Ishmael, not belonging to the chosen ones. Yet Melville searched for truth as Ishmael made his way through the world seeking a place in it. He represents alienated man in the modem world, too secular to fall back on doctrine or tradition, but too rooted in it to deny it or be comfortable without it. Being preoccupied with the writing of truth when he published *Moby-Dick*, Melville moved to "a phase in which his writing, unlike earlier journalistic work, became more abstract and symbolic, a phase in which he consciously addressed the most difficult spiritual questions of mankind" (Buell, 1986: 61). His work and lectures showed his scorn for dogma, but not for spirituality. In a letter to Hawthorne he wrote: "With no son of man do I stand upon any etiquette or ceremony, except the Christian ones of charity and honesty." Melville's allusion to the Book of Job in the Epilogue of *Moby-Dick* emphasizes the degree to which the spiritual dilemma haunted him, especially since this story

symbolizes the problem of the existence of evil and suffering in the world of a beneficent God for modern man. When describing Ishmael as the lone survivor of the *Pequod*, Melville used the words of the servant who came to tell Job of yet another misfortune: "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee." Significantly, the verse, not completed by Melville, ends: "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; Blessed be the name of the Lord. For all this Job sinned not, nor ascribed aught unseemly to God" (Job 1:1) (Schleifer, 1994: 5.).

It is not surprising that Melville sought solace in the Wisdom of Solomon at the time he was finishing *Moby-Dick* and wrote. "I read Solomon more and more, and every time I see deeper and deeper meanings in him." Nor is it surprising that there were many "passages he marked in his Bible illustrating the unequaled and often curiously demonstrated power of God (Wright, *op.cit.:* 186)".

Now, we will provide a few remarks about Melville's actual bibles and use of biblical lexicon. Melville's family owned various bibles. The most important of these, the one of primary use for Melville, was the bible he bought in the initial stages of working on *Moby-Dick*, in which he inscribed "March 23rd 1850 New York." Published by E.H. Butler & Co. (Philadelphia, 1846), it is a large nineteenth-century family bible, with gold embellishments on its red-brown leather cover and an embossed image of the Tablets on its front. It contains the Old and New Testaments together with Apocrypha and a section of family records, where familial births and deaths were written, mostly by Melville himself. The bulk of scholarly attention, however, has been devoted to the numerous markings in this Bible. There are, as Nathalia Wright points out, a few conspicuous discrepancies (Wright, *op.cit.*: 9-10). Some of the texts that are central to his work bear no markings, whereas others to which he does not allude are profusely marked. But all in all, they bear witness to Melville's immersion in Bible reading and underscore some of his notable preferences (Pardes, *op.cit:* 13).

Melville's bibles, like most of the English bibles in antebellum America, were editions of the King James Version. His elaborate allusions to the King James Version, one should bear in mind, are accompanied by numerous minute echoes of the particular idioms and textures of this canonical translation: "whoso," "forasmuch as," "verily," "thee," and "thou" are but a few of his favorite adverbs and pronouns. In a self-reflexive moment, Ishmael describes the Quakers of Nantucket as "naturally imbibing" from childhood "the stately dramatic thee and thou of the Quaker idiom" (*MD* 73). At another revealing point, he quotes Bildad's words to Queequeg on hiring him – "Son of darkness ... if thou still clingest to thy Pagan ways, which I sadly fear, I beseech thee, remain not for aye a Belial bondsman" – and remarks that the ship's owner's language was "heterogeneously mixed with Scriptural and domestic phrases" (*MD* 89).

But, according to Ilana Pardes, Melville was not only interested in the resonant language of the King James Version. He was as attuned to the unlexicalized biblical expressions invented in the course of everyday life on whalers. "Bible leaves! Bible leaves!" as Melville explains in "The Cassock," "is the invariable cry from the mates to the mincer. It urges him to be careful, and cut his work into as thin slices as possible, inasmuch as by so doing the business of boiling out the oil is much accelerated, and its quantity considerably increased, besides perhaps improving it in quality" (*MD* 420). Melville's evocation of such whaler slang offers a mock imitation of the solemn use of biblical terms and leaves within the realm of institutional religion. Here the expression "Bible leaves"

depicts the fine ritualistic cutting of blubber by a mincer (Ishmael's "candidate for an archbishoprick") whose cassock is made out of the foreskin of a whale.

Concluding Remarks

The Bible is the basic text of American civilization, its influence having been identified since the colonial beginnings and consequently in Melville's fiction. In light of the above, we have highlighted the interpretative methods of hermeneutics, exegesis, typology, and midrash which both the Bible and lay literature share, focusing on Herman Melville's approach in these respect in some of his most important works. Not only was the nineteenth-century novelist fully aware of the way biblical texts were analysed, interpreted and read, but he was also willing to scrutinize them and apply the findings to his works.

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