BRIEF MESSAGES-- ENDLESS INTERPRETATIONS

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Abstract: Though the Biblical name of Belshazzar is the starting point of this paper, the overall aim is to provide a number of examples of texts that offer various interpretations of a mysterious message recorded as having been given in the sixth century BC. So, Byron, Dickinson and Frost poems are presented as interpretations themselves that require other interpretations of both these poems and the original message in a text that also focuses on the problem of interpretation. As a consequence, the interpretive process seems to have no end.

Keywords: Belshazzar, letter, writing on the wall, message, interpretation/translation.

Interpretation—the process, the effort, the exercise—and meaning—its object and result—have fluctuated in terms of where one begins and the other exists. In philosophy, at least from Kant on—and then Nietzsche—interpretation has tended to find its object not (only) in the reality out there, but mostly in the "reality" in here, that is in the mind of the perceiver/reader.

Quite unexpectedly as it were, one finds a suggestion in an 1879 poem by Emily Dickinson. Having mentioned her name, the question of interpretation is no longer surprising since the poem herself confessed to her idea of writing poems that were basically riddles, so that Lavinia—her sister—or her potential "editor" Thomas Wentworth Higginson—her many times correspondent (n.b.), or her potential "lover" (many things about Dickinson seem to have been needing inverted commas) Charles Wadsworth, and any of her very few contemporary readers (and of her rather many posthumous ones) were challenged to interpret or decipher; we may also remember that she believed a poet should "tell all the truth but tell it slant," so every reader was expected to be some king of Biblical Daniel (The Old Testament, Daniel 5-12) in whom were found "an excellent spirit, knowledge, understanding, interpreting dreams, solving riddles, and explaining enigmas." Of her riddle poems one can easily quote "I taste a liquor never brewed--," "There's a certain Slant of Light," "He fumbles at your Soul," "I like to see it lap the Miles--," "Essential Oils—are wrung--," "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass," "A Route of Evanescence," "Of Bronze—and Blaze"…

Still, before looking at the poem in question (a lesser known one or, at least, one that has less often been quoted or analyzed), it is not uninteresting to mention another one that has a famous letter (the basic form of correspondence before telephone and e-mail) in it:

> This is my letter to the World
> That never wrote to Me—
> The simple News that Nature told—
> With tender Majesty
>
> Her message is committed
> To Hands I cannot see-- (our emphases)
> For love of Her—Sweet—countrymen—

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Judge tenderly—of Me 1862

The "message" committed to unseen hands may point to a preoccupation with such a situation in the Bible, the source of a number of her poems in more ways than one (including the psalmic structure of almost all of her more than seventeen-hundred poems). The Bible itself is, of course, another great riddle:

The Bible is an antique volume—
Written by faded Men
At the suggestion of Holy Specters—
So here finally is the poem we have in mind:
Belshazzar had a letter—
He never had but one;
Belshazzar's correspondent
Concluded and begun
In that immortal copy
The conscience of us all
Can read without its glasses
On revelation's wall
"Suggested by our neighbor" 1879

Now to decoding: Belshazzar is a Hebrew name from the Akkadian Belsarrausur, i.e. "Bel, protect the King," which becomes ironic in view of what happened. In other languages it has become Balthasar or Balthassar, or Baltasar/Baltazar. As known from the Biblical Book of Daniel (in the Old Testament—see supra) and Xenophon's Cyropaedia, he is the son of Nebuchadnezzar, but the Babylonial cuneiform inscriptions discovered in 1854 indicate him as the eldest son of Nabonidus, King of Babylon from 555 to 539 B C, and of Nitocris, probably the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar (so Belshazzar was Nebuchadnezzar's grandson). When Nabonidus went into exile (to the oasis of Tayma) in 550, Belshazzar became co-regent of the Chaldeans. Nabonidus returned from Tayma in 540 B C to defend his kingdom from the Persians and Medes; while Belshazzar remained in the city of Babylon, to defend thus the capital, Nabonidus marched his troops north to meet Cyrus. In October 539 he surrendered and the Persian armies overthrew the city of Babylon and Belshazzar was killed.

But the more interesting things happened before the advent of the Medes and the Persians and Belshazzar's death; as we learn quite early in the Book of Daniel (pp. 980-1000 in The New World…), written in Babylon in 536 B C and covering the time period 618-536—"in the third year of the kingship of Jehoiakim the king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and proceeded to lay siege to it. In time Jehovah gave into his hand Jehoiakim the king of Judah and a part of the utensils of the house of the true God, so that he brought them to the land of Shinar to the house of his god; and the utensils he brought to the treasure house of his god."

We also need to remember that just before that, in Daniel 4-36 Nebuchadnezzar is "praising and glorifying the king of the heavens, because all his works are truth and his ways are justice, and because those who are walking in pride he is able to humiliate." Here pride—as a little later in the Greek tragedies—is always the source of misfortune and downfall.

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Next, in Daniel 5:1-31 (pp.988-990), Belshazzar "made a big feast for a thousand of his grandees, and in front of the thousand he was drinking wine… Under the influence of the wine, Belshazzar said to bring in the vessels of gold and of silver that Nebuchadnezzar… had taken away from the temple that was in Jerusalem, that from them the king and his grandees, his concubines and his secondary wives might drink… They drank wine, and they praised the gods of gold and of silver, copper, iron, wood and stone. At that moment the fingers of a man's hand came forth and were writing in front of the lamp-stand upon the plaster of the wall of the palace of the king, and the king was beholding the back of the hand that was writing." Frightened, he calls the wise men of Babylon: "Any man that will read this writing and show me its very interpretation, with purple he will be clothed, with a necklace of gold about his neck, and as the third one…/after king and queen/…in the kingdom he will rule." But the wise men "were not competent enough to read the writing itself or to make known to the king the interpretation," so the queen starts talking a "capable man"/see supra/, Daniel, the hermeneut therefore, one of the sons of Judah in fact.

Daniel is thus brought before the king: "I heard concerning you that the spirit of gods is in you, and illumination and insight and wisdom extraordinary…/all the qualities of a good interpreter/…have been found in you… I myself have heard concerning you, that you are able to furnish interpretations and to untie knots themselves." But first Daniel speaks of Nebuchadnezzar, whose "heart became haughty and his own spirit became hard," so "he was brought down from his kingdom, and his own dignity was taken away from him"/pride, therefore/ and he also speaks of Belshazzar: "You have not humbled your heart," "you exalted yourself… against the Lord of the heavens' and used "the vessels of his house" to drink from /also pride/.

Thus Belshazzar neglected God and, as we have seen, praised "mere gods of silver and of gold, copper, iron, wood and stone." Consequently, "from before him there was being sent the back of a hand, and this very writing was inscribed: MENE, MENE, TEKEL and PARSIN/UPHARSIN--/ in the two different Biblical versions we used/. And "this is the interpretation of the words: MENE, God has numbered (the days of) your kingdom and has finished it. TEKEL, you have been weighed in the balances and (have been) found deficient/wanting. PERES, your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and (the) Persians." What we have here, therefore, is the accusation followed by the prophecy of punishment, which is duly fulfilled: "(In) that very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed (slain), and Darius the Mede (himself) received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old." Daniel becomes the high official over his /Darius's/ satraps.

In short, when Belshazzar, the last king of the Babylonish empire, had desecrated the sacred vessels of Jerusalem, he was warned by God through a man's hand writing on the wall; the interpretation of this writing by Daniel proves vital, life preserving; any story well understood (as in the Shekherezade) is the source of life; no story—or end of a story—equals death. And thus the well-known phrase (did Emily Dickinson know it?), "the writing on the wall" has been used (ever since?) to foretell a coming misfortune that could/should have been avoided.

In this context, Dickinson's poem reads like a Biblical tale turned into an allegory for the "conscience of us all," through which God points out and warns us about our sins (with pride as the supreme one), giving each of us our own private "letter."

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Except for the absolutely certain Biblical source, Dickinson could have also known of Belshazzar's Feast (1635) by Rembrandt—a large baroque oil on canvas picturing the king, his queen, and their guests in dramatic postures looking frightened at the hand and the lighted spot of vertical writing on the "revelation wall" behind them; or of an oratorio by Pirro Albergati of 1691, or of another one (1744) by G. F. Handel…

But, more likely (though this is not very much of a probability, either) of Lord Byron's "To Belshazzar" (the last poem in his 1814 Occasional Pieces, 1807-1814, on p.76 of The Poetical Works…); the British Romantic poem begins by addressing the Babylonian king, later described as "unfit to govern, live, or die"(?!):

Belshazzar! From the banquet turn,
Nor in thy sensual fullness fall;
Behold! While yet before thee burn
The graven words, the glowing wall,
Many a despot men miscall
Crown'd and annoint'd from on high;
But thou, the weakest, worst of all—
Is it not written, thou must die?

Or of the same's "Vision of Belshazzar" in—quite appropriately—Hebrew Melodies (1815); this is a very close "poetic translation" of Daniel: 1-31—which means that "interpretation" is much more like a poetic re-reading and re-writing:

The King was on his throne,
The Satraps throng'd the hall;
A thousand bright lamps shone (more like one, in Rembrandt's chiaroscuro)
O'er that high festival.
A thousand cups of gold,
In Judah deem'd divine—
Jehovah's vessels hold
The godless Heathen's wine!

In that same hour and hall,
The fingers of a hand
Came forth against the wall,
And wrote as if on sand:
The fingers of a man;--
A solitary hand
Along the letters ran,
And traced them like a wand.

The monarch saw and shook,
And bade no more rejoice:
All bloodless wax'd his look,
And tremulous his voice.
"Let the men of law appear,
The wisest of the earth
And expound the words of fear

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Which mar our royal mirth."

Chaldea's seers are good,
But here they have no skill;
And the unknown letters stood
Untold and awful still.
And Babel's men of age
Are wise and deep in lore;
But now they were not sage,
They saw—but knew no more!

A captive in the land, (i.e. Daniel)
A stranger and a youth,
He heard the king's command,
He saw that writing's truth.
The lamps around were bright,
The prophecy in view;
He read it on that night,--
The morrow proved it true.

"Belshazzar's grave is made,
His kingdom passed away,
He, in the balance weigh'd,
Is light and worthless clay.
The shroud, his robe of state,
His canopy the stone;
The Mede is at his gate!
The Persian on his throne!"

In a second or third interpretive stage one could wonder about a reader who may not know or remember the Daniel story in the Old Testament; the answer—Byron's answer, our answer—is that he would still have the Belshazzar episode as a "narrative" in its own right and a poem that tells about a heathen monarch (in fact, he was not really that), his desecration of God's utensils and how the punishment (which he did not care to avoid from the warning) finally came to him.

Also before Dickinson's time was published (in 1818) Byron's third Belshazzar episode, in stanza LXV (p. 680 in The Poetical Works…) of Don Juan, "Canto the Third":

These Oriental writings on the wall, (see supra)
Quite common in those countries, are a kind
Of monitors adapted to recall,
Like skulls at Memphian banquets, to the mind
The words which shook Belshazzar in his hall,
And took his kingdom from him: You will find,
Though sages may pour out their wisdom's treasure,
There is no sterner moralist than Pleasure.

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And the final line is, of course, Don Juan's moral. It may have become obvious that this paper is not necessarily about Belshazzar hypostases in literature over the past 2500 years, but about how diverse interpretations—including the one in the basic Biblical story—can be born out of one simple message. What we have so far is a Biblical story first translated into an allegory (be it only mentally envisioned), several poems as translations of that allegory, which itself—one cannot forget—is a story of Daniel's "translation"; then comes our own translation, but not before having looked at another, later translation by Robert Frost, whose "Bearer of Evil Tidings" (in A Further Range, 1936) seems to be the one whose hand is seen writing the message on the wall for Belshazzar; his poem is about this messenger, apparently headed to Belshazzar's court to deliver "the evil tidings" of the king's imminent overthrow; still, remembering that the "bearer of evil tidings" is often mistaken for and punished as the sender of the bad news (the postman who brings it is hated by the addressee), he flees to the Himalayas and thus avoids the monarch's wrath; like the protagonist in another, more famous, Robert Frost poem—"The Road Not Taken"—"he took the one less travelled by"; here are stanzas two and three (of the eleven in all):

So when he came to the parting
Where one road went to the throne
And one went off to the mountains
And into the wild unknown,

He took the one to the mountains.
He ran through the Vale of Cashmere,
He ran through the rhododendrons
Till he came to the land of Pamir—

or "the land of the Yak," where he adopted a new race of men who "had their reasons/For stopping where they had stopped." Finally—

As for his evil tidings,
Belshazzar's overthrow,
Why hurry to tell Belshazzar
What soon enough he would know?

In other words, "no news, good news," but the Biblical story is changed completely.

Still, the note appended to Dickinson's poem (by herself) requires one more context in which the interpretation should be done: "Suggested by our Neighbor"—which could very well have been her final line—sends the careful reader to an 1879 Lothrop scandal in Amherst, Massachusetts (where she lived all her life); there were newspaper reports of a father's physical cruelty to his daughter, so the father, Reverend C. D. Lothrop filed a libel suit against the Springfield Republican and the court found that he was guilty of patriarchal oppression.

How this connects with Belshazzar's message is anybody's guess (knowing that this is not only a poem about a riddle, but also a riddle poem—see supra), but one can also widen the context and go back a couple of hundred years, to the English Anglican clergyman, emigrant

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to New England, John Lothrop (1584-1653), who is remembered as the founder of Barnstable, Massachusetts (so, in the neighborhood, again), and who had thirteen children from his two wives, so that his genealogy includes more than 80,000 people, among whom presidents Garfield, Grant, Roosevelt and Bush (both, of course), early leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, many state governors, Old West gunfighter and lawman Wild Bill Hickock, poet H. W. Longfellow, Jane Stanford (wife of this university's founder), financier J. P. Morgan, actresses Shirley Temple, Brooke Shields and others, actors Clint Eastwood and Kevin Bacon…, ant the less famous Dickinson neighbor—see Huntington… Unsurprisingly therefore, one could write a paper on Shirley Temple, Wild Bill Hickock, George W. Bush, Emily Dickinson and Belshazzar. And the conclusion becomes simple: there is no end to interpretation/s provided other and other contexts are given.

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