

Robert Alter, *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010). 198 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4008-3435-8, cloth \$19.95. Reviewed by Tim DeJong, Ph.D. Candidate in English, The University of Western Ontario, London, ON.

According to a survey by the Pew Research Center published in the fall of 2010, Biblical literacy and religious knowledge are at an all-time low in North America. Respondents to the survey could answer correctly only half of a series of basic questions about the Bible and Christian thought — and believers fared worse than atheists.¹ Robert Alter's recent book *Pen of Iron* therefore arrives as a welcome reminder of the profound, if waning, influence of Biblical language and ideas on the culture and literature of America. Alter, a Hebrew scholar who teaches at U.C. Berkeley, is widely recognized for his insight into the methods and patterns of Biblical narrative. Among his earlier works, the companion books *The Art of Biblical Narrative* and *The Art of Biblical Poetry* offer a nuanced treatment of Old Testament narratives as artistic masterpieces featuring sophisticated economies of language. In *Pen of Iron* Alter turns from ancient Hebrew to an authoritative exemplar of style in the English language: the King James translation of the Bible, first published in 1611. To demonstrate the influence of this translation on later American language and literature, Alter examines the work of two literary giants, Melville and Faulkner, before turning to one of the great prose stylists of the twentieth century, Saul Bellow, whose use of paratactic language (short, simple clauses with coordinating rather than subordinate conjunctions) in his novel *Seize the Day* is reminiscent, Alter suggests, of a similar effect in the KJV. In the final chapter, Alter reads Hemingway's prose in *The Sun Also Rises* as exemplifying a rhetorical technique often found in the KJV, a form of terse narration whose "emotional power...derives from all it leaves unstated" (158). Lastly, he analyzes fiction by Cormac McCarthy and Marilynne Robinson, two highly respected contemporary American novelists, to demonstrate how their different uses of parataxis also betray a debt to Biblical style.

Alter's chief goal in this book is to show how the spare and magisterial flavour of the KJV's language has made it an important repository of rhetorical style for some of America's greatest writers. The title of his introductory chapter, "Style in America and the King James Version," is suggestive of the special attention he intends to pay to literary style, rather than theme or content. Indeed, halfway through the chapter Alter segues into a digression on the current state of the concept of style in American letters, the dismayed tone of which seems somewhat out of place in a study of the pervasive afterlife of the KJV. In recent years, Alter laments,

literary scholars have been busy pursuing a variety of purportedly political agendas with sometimes no more than illustrative reference to literary texts — race, class, gender identity, sexual practice, the critique of colonialism, the excoriation of consumerism and of the evils of late capitalism and globalization. There has scarcely been room in such considerations for any attention to style, for the recognition that it is literary style that might make available to us certain precious perceptions of reality and certain distinctive pleasures not to be found elsewhere. (21)

Alter's criticism is accurate (though leavened by growing evidence of a return, in academia, to more formalist methods of critique), but his appeal to the importance of style strikes me as a surface complaint masking a further frustration. Alter appears disenchanted with the tendency of contemporary academics to analyze literature in the service of invariably leftist critiques of modern culture, rather than focusing on the insights afforded by the text itself. Of course, any literary work can only be understood and applied in reference to a particular context. Alter cautions the reader that his appeal for a renewed focus on literary style "is not an attempt to cut

¹ "U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey," The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (Pew Research Center, 2010), online at www.pewforum.org/other-beliefs-and-practices/u-s-religious-knowledge-survey.aspx.

literature off from its moorings in history and politics,” but in fact constitutes an approach that might enable us to rethink the relationship between works of literature and the world in which they inhere (22).

That said, while *Pen of Iron* sets itself up as an excursus into the effect of the KJV’s *style* on later American literature, it often and easily slips into a discussion of how American fiction wrestles with the Bible’s great *themes*. The two topics are obviously interrelated, since, as Alter states, “[r]eading the Bible...is not reading style in a vacuum but a style that expresses a set of leading themes and a series of orientations toward reality” (144). All this points to a central fact mostly skirted by Alter: it’s not only the stirring language of the KJV that has allowed it to so thoroughly infiltrate the English language and its literature. Nor is it simply because, as Alter puts it, “inseparable from the stylistic traits [of the KJV] is a whole world of values with which both writers and readers have to contend” — though this is certainly true (181). A further reason that the KJV pervades the works of many great American writers is simply that it stood for centuries as the dominant English translation of a book assumed, by most Americans, to be a divine source of moral guidance and authority. The Bible’s powerful articulations of truth and faith are deeply intertwined with American culture and history, and to come to grips with that history requires an honest interrogation of the Bible’s central claims. Because of this, Alter’s cogent meditations on the KJV’s influence on literary form often blur into discussions of how writers have treated Biblical themes. His chapter on Faulkner, for example, begins with this admission: “[t]he King James Version enters into Faulkner’s otherwise antithetical prose not as a stylistic strategy but as a thematic lexicon” (85). This veering from style to content and back again, while unsurprising and perhaps unavoidable, reflects Alter’s suggestion that “style is ultimately a mode of thinking,” and opens the door to theoretical and philosophical questions that *Pen of Iron*, for all its rhetorical insights, does not attempt to answer (168).

In the book’s first close engagement with an American writer, Alter examines the effect of the King James Version on Melville’s *Moby Dick*. He pays careful attention to the textures of Melville’s language, particularly the way he uses Biblical literary devices such as parallelism and intertwines Biblical phrases with other, more American idioms of speech. In this manner, the KJV becomes a stylistic resource within which Melville frames his reflections on the great conundrums of human existence. His words evoke the majestic simplicity of the KJV in order to wrestle with its themes, even “proposing subversive readings that run against the grain of the accepted ones” (55). What Alter calls “Melville’s heterodox engagement with the Bible” is Melville’s strategy of using his culture’s Biblical literacy and religious mindset to produce an iconoclastic depiction of man searching for meaning in a fallen world (59). Thus Melville’s writing in *Moby Dick*, as Alter demonstrates, is “at once profoundly biblical and paradoxically anti-biblical” (72).

Alter’s chapter on Faulkner, which explores in detail the latter’s novel *Absalom, Absalom!*, is perhaps his best, demonstrating convincing connections between the respective lexicons of the KJV and Faulkner’s novel. In both spheres, concepts such as “curse,” “blood,” “dust,” and “inheritance,” among others, figure prominently. Besides making evident the links between Faulkner’s literary imagination and the thematic landscape of the Old Testament, Alter shows how certain tropes, by recurring in story after Biblical story, establish a kind of narrative argument within Biblical history. Faulkner’s searing images of fathers and sons, for example,

echo the utterances of a line of biblical fathers who pronounce the selfsame words: Abraham on Mount Moriah, David grieving over the death of Absalom, and even Saul, madly estranged from David, who in their wrenching encounter at the cave an En-gedi, after David has addressed him as “my father,” says, in tears, “Is this thy voice, my son David?” (1 Sam 24:16).
(104)

The Bible's status as literature is on display here in two ways: in Alter's demonstration of the symbolic continuity that holds through different eras and books of the Bible, and in his description of Saul's meeting with David, which should reawaken us to just how "wrenching" the scene truly is. The text that provides *Absalom, Absalom!* with its title is 2 Samuel 18:33, which describes David's "paroxysm of paternal grief" at the death of his son Absalom (102). Alter's use of the word "paroxysm" does not overemphasize David's reaction, which features the repetition — five times over — of the words "my son." Considering the careful economy of diction and narration for which the Old Testament is famous, the repetition of these words is a telling indicator of the scene's emotional intensity.

The echoes of Biblical history Alter finds in Faulkner are compelling, but his arguments do harbour a consistent weakness. His excellent observations on the kinship between Faulkner and the Old Testament writers — which, he claims, centres on their shared awareness of "the sheer materiality of mortal existence" — are undercut by a worldview that sees the Old and New Testaments as radically distinct entities, each offering very different visions of the world, entities that were only later fused together by the early Christian church (87). Hence his assertion that the importance of paternity and offspring in the Old Testament derives from the fact that "in Hebrew Scripture . . . there is no world except this one," and that therefore having sons is the only means of achieving "a kind of immortality" (102). Any number of Old Testament texts could be cited against this claim, mostly famously Job 19:25, but also many passages in the Psalms — 73:24, for instance: "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory" (KJV). Alter consistently overemphasizes the agnosticism and doubt of Old Testament writers. "The Bible," he writes, "conceives the house, in its literal and extended senses, as a grand consummation of personal and national destiny that might at any time turn to smoke, should Israel betray the covenant: there is nothing solid or permanent in history that we can count on" (107). Biblical writers were indeed aware of the final inadequacy of the "house" as a merely human construct, metaphorical and otherwise: this is one of the Bible's great themes. But another of the great truths with which Old Testament writers wrestle — and to which they continually testify — is that within the uncertain flux of history, the "solid or permanent" Rock to be counted on is YHWH, the God of the covenant.

One further example: if Alter's description of the Book of Ecclesiastes as "a probing argument against the mainline assumptions of the Hebrew Bible regarding time, history, and value" is debatable, his assertion that Ecclesiastes advocates "zero-degree unillusioned hedonism" is a patent misreading of the book's theme (110-1). Alter's insightful close readings of Old Testament narratives and encounters do not always add up to an accurate conception of the books in which they inhere, nor of the Old Testament as a whole. Additionally, his own worldview occasionally intrudes on those of the characters and authors he discusses. He describes a scene in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead* as one in which the pastor John Ames "faces up wryly, and perhaps philosophically, to a distressing inevitability of existence for which not even Christian faith can provide consolation" (170). Alter is wrong: certainly for Ames (as well as for Robinson), Christian faith does provide consolation far in excess of the common laments of mortal existence. Here is another occasion in *Pen of Iron* in which Alter's interpretive liberties block out the meaning proffered by the text he is analyzing.

Despite these shortcomings, *Pen of Iron*, written just shy of the King James Version's 400th anniversary, is a cogent account of how the "studied simplicity of diction" of this translation of the Bible has shaped English language and writing in significant ways (123). Alter's feel for the nuance and skill of Biblical narrative and its residual traces in American literature makes *Pen of Iron* a worthwhile read. Our acceptance of the Bible as the revealed Word of God should not leave us indifferent to the compelling artistry, verbal refinement, and remarkable narrative choices that

colour so many of its stories. Too often we read the Bible simply as a moral sourcebook, paying little attention to the myriad ways in which its status as a literary masterwork multiplies its richness and power. Alter's work reminds us that the Bible is not simply divinely revealed truth: it is divine truth revealed in literature. And as *Pen of Iron* demonstrates, the illustrious King James translation of this truth has had a deep and lasting effect on the literary history of American culture.