CHAPTER 33

Introduction

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The Bible as Intertext

The Bible may well have been Victorian literature's chief intertext. It was a treasure trove for book titles: for novels of sensation such as Rhoda Broughton's *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867);[1] for domestic sagas such as Margaret Oliphant's *A House Divided against Itself* (1886);[2] as well as, more understandably, Ruskin's social intervention, *Unto this Last* (1862).[3] It could be mined for small jokes: as in Trollope's naming of the philoprogentive Mr Quiverful.[4] The choice of a biblically derived name could also provide useful plot clues: the hero of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876) is, so to speak, set up from the start to be recognized as a Jewish leader in exile.

It was invoked as a short cut for establishing certain kinds of moral framework. Thackeray relies upon quoting the words of the preacher – "Vanitas Vanitatum" – for a suitably pious ending to *Vanity Fair* (1848), reminding readers that their business is not with the sentimental Amelia and the scheming Becky but with a world beyond. Browning uses the same phrase for his opening salvo in "The Bishop orders his tomb at St Praxed's Church" to provide the reader with the moral bearings from which to judge this particular purveyor of the Word. It is quoted at moments of high drama: Dickens particularly favored it as a short cut to moral solemnity at the moment of death. Miss Barbary, of *Bleak House* (1852), responds to a reading of the tale of the woman taken in adultery (John 8:6–7) with an apocalyptic text from Mark 13:35–7: "Watch ye therefore! lest coming suddenly, he find you sleeping," before suffering a paralytic stroke. Transformed perforce into such a "sleeper," her death is counterpointed with that of Jo, the little crossing-sweeper, who finds his death eased by his new-found access to the Word, though he has formerly eaten his crust on "the door-step of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts," and looking up at "the great Cross on the summit of St Paul's Cathedral," without ever encountering the words of the Lord's Prayer.[5]

The precise signification of the biblical references with which some nineteenth-century novels teem can sometimes be frankly baffling, giving some weight to Bakhtin's claims that the authoritative nature of biblical text resists creative appropriation by the

novel, which is, by its very nature, "uncanonical." Scripture remains "inert" so that its fixed meaning is carried into the novel, preventing us from varying our distance as readers so as to accept one text, partially accept another, and utterly reject a third.[6] Should the catena of quotations from Revelation with which *Jane Eyre* ends be read as endorsing St John Rivers's mission and faith, or is it an extension of Jane and her author's critique of her cousin?[7] A similarly indecipherable ending occurs in Rhoda Broughton's novel, *Cometh up as Flower*, whose title hints at an untimely demise for the heroine. The aptly surnamed Nelly Le Strange pauses from time to time in her rambling narrative to ruminate about Eve and her apple (p. 69), Jonah and his gourd (p. 243), or disputed points of biblical translation:

> Sometimes we feel tempted to curse God and die; it would be such a relief to us; curse God, as Job's wife is supposed to have urged her much enduring lord to do, as a cure for his boils; that is, if she did not urge him to *bless* God and die, as the word has either signification, in which case the poor woman's character for piety has been shamefully taken away for the last three or thousand years.[8]

When we arrive at the heroine's deathbed on the last page of the novel it is difficult to know what to make of her preoccupation with the New Jerusalem given that, despite being married to a loving husband, she is dying of anorexia induced by love for a former suitor now dead. Anticipating a lowly mansion in her Father's house, the last words she manages to scribble with her pencil sound more like an assignation with the dead suitor than a picture designed to remind the reader of the "passionless bliss" to come: "Oh Lord Jesus Christ! Let me be in that city by this time tomorrow night! Grant me entrance there! Open to me when in fear and trembling I knock!"[9]

The troubling thing about her final compilation of biblical quotations is that they have the touch of authenticity: the *journals intimes* of believers as different as Lord Shaftesbury and Margaret Oliphant both display that same tendency to mull over their thorniest problems by way of wrestling with biblical texts. Broughton hit an authentic note again in identifying the books of Job and Revelation as chief among her heroine's biblical interests. As William James remarked, for those who were "perplexed and baffled" by the claims of dogmatic theology but retained a sense of the religious, "the book of Job went over this whole matter once for all and definitively."[10] The Book of Revelation appealed to those who clung to the notion of the afterlife all the more tenaciously in that it remained a rich field for speculation, little touched by matters of scientific proof or orthodox teaching: along with the prophetic books of the Old Testament, it enjoyed particular popularity during unsettled periods when millennial preaching was in the ascendant.

The ten-year-old Jane Eyre's list of biblical favorites, chiefly surprising today on account of its length, would have had a familiar resonance for the novel's first readers in 1847: "I like Revelations and the book of Daniel, and Genesis and Samuel, and a little bit of Exodus, and some parts of Kings and Chronicles, and Job and Jonah."[11] Furthermore, they would probably have recognized the continuum between this child's treasured secular books and her biblical preferences: both reinforce the intensely subjective nature of this alienated orphan's outlook on life. The injustice of Jonah and Job's

sufferings provides opportunities for self-identification, while the history of a people chosen for special intervention, together with apocalyptic prophecy, promises good times coming, even if current circumstances seem dire. Her skewed course of biblical reading attracts reproof from a fellow pupil at Lowood school who recommends Jane to "Read the New Testament"[12] as an antidote to her retaliatory philosophy. Furthermore, Jane's list offers a point of entry into the novel's larger concerns. Her determination to make her own biblical choices signals the fierce Protestantism of a heroine who repeatedly stands up to clerical attempts to mediate God's authority. Brontë backs her heroine's proclivity for Revelation, whose apocalyptic visions surface in Jane's dreams and paintings, in the image of the bestial Whore of Babylon cast down from the ramparts of Thornfield Hall, and in St John Rivers's keen desire to be written into the Book of Life and "fill a place in the first rank of those who are redeemed from the earth – who stand without fault before the throne of God; who share the last mighty victories of the Lamb; who are called, and chosen, and faithful."[13]

It could be argued that their Evangelical upbringing made Charlotte Brontë and her sisters into special cases – "Elle était nourrie de la Bible," recalled her Roman Catholic teacher, M. Héger[14] – but they were less atypical than might at first appear. Charlotte's admiration for Thackeray seems to have been predicated upon a sense that they shared biblically based values. How else can one explain the elaborate trope, based on 2 Chronicles 18, in the preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre*, in which her tribute to Thackeray figures him as a modern-day Micaiah, speaking truth to power?[15] Modern criticism has emphasized the vein of combative cynicism that increasingly dominated Thackeray's later work, while dismissing as Victorian sentimentality the vignettes of Christian compassion that recur in his fiction and letters. As an adolescent Thackeray had been "accustomed to hear and read a great deal of the Evangelical (so called) doctrine," which he claimed had taught him an "extreme distaste" for the work of Evangelical divines,[16] yet he retained to the last a biblical frame of reference: his final novel was entitled *Adventures of Philip on His Way through the World; shewing who robbed Him, Who Helped Him, and Who Passed Him By*.[17] His daughter, Annie, attested that by the time she and her sister were nine and six respectively, after breakfast, and again after dinner, "smoking his cigar, Papa used to talk to us a great deal, and tell us about the Bible and Religion."[18] By their teenage years the girls were so imbued with their father's views that Thackeray's mother, who had intermittent charge of her grandaughters, reported herself unable to continue reading the Bible with them: she felt obliged to tell them that "all Scripture is given by inspiration from God" and they clung tenaciously to the view their father had felt equally duty-bound to impart that "Scripture only means a writing and Bible means a Book. It contains Divine Truths: and the history of a Divine Character: but imperfect but not containing a thousandth part of Him."[19]

The developing controversy between Evangelicalism and the Oxford Movement tended to color subsequent accounts so that they were represented as polarized opponents, relying exclusively on either biblical revelation or the authority of the Church's teaching as their route to Christianity. That prolific disseminator of Tractarian teaching, Charlotte Yonge, was emphatic in her recollection of "the great quantity of Scripture which the children were encouraged to learn by heart in connection with any subject on which they were being instructed," in John Keble's parish.[20] Faithful to this

tradition she produced *Aunt Charlotte's Stories of Bible History* (1875) and a volume of *Verses on the Gospels for Sundays and Holydays* (1880), specifically designed to anchor the footnoted biblical texts in juvenile memories. Yonge's usage, however, in keeping with the Tractarian doctrine of reserve in communicating religious knowledge, remained less obtrusive than evangelically edifying literature for children, which was inclined to pepper its pages with copious biblical grapeshot. Dickens's Arthur Clennam remained haunted, even in adulthood, by memories of being "scared out of his senses by a horrible tract which commenced business with the poor child by asking him in its title, why he was going to Perdition? ... and which, for the further attraction of his infant mind, had a parenthesis in every other line with some such hiccupping reference as 2Ep.Thess. c. iii. v. 6&7."[21] Dickens is commonly reputed to have had a slim grasp on theology. The advice he passed on to his children in his will was certainly blandly permissive by the dogmatic standards of the day: they were told that they should "humbly try to guide themselves by the teaching of the New Testament in its broad spirit, and to put no faith in any man's narrow construction of its letter here or there."[22] Liberal individualism, however, should not be confused with biblical illiteracy. The referenced verses from Paul's second epistle to the Thessalonians which recommend "that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly" have informed Mrs Clennam's judgmental separatism, and, just as pertinently, omit the further instruction in verse 11 not to count such a backslider as an enemy but to "admonish him as a brother."

How far down the class system a familiarity with the Bible reached, that exceeded phrases already wholly assimilated into the language, is difficult to determine. In Hannah More's schools for the poor in late eighteenth-century Somerset, reading was taught, using the Bible as the primer, but writing was not considered essential to the work of salvation, and might in any case afford the means for seditious communication. In 1816 Coleridge confidently proclaimed the ubiquity of the Gospel: it could be found "open in the market-place, and on every window-seat, so that (*virtually*, at least) the deaf may hear the words of the Book! It is preached at every turning, so that the blind may see them."[23] Coleridge's imagery here refers to Isaiah 29:18 ("And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness") and to Mark's recollection of this when he has an admiring crowd say of Christ's miracles, "he maketh both the deaf to hear, and the dumb to speak" (Mark 7:37), but, as we shall see, when this trope of healing is transferred to the spreading of the Word, those who are on the receiving end have a tendency to be represented as impaired.

In the early and mid-Victorian period, the increasingly widespread practice of family prayers meant that domestic servants would been regularly exposed to readings from the Scriptures. Richard Altick's famous assertion that he could name the Bible and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* in outlining "pretty precisely the cultural and literary tradition the self-made reader inherited" was reliant on literary texts with their own persuasive agenda.[24] Thomas Hardy claimed that in the mid-1850s, when he was about fifteen, he was a Sunday School teacher in a parish where as a pupil in his class he had a dairy-maid four years older than himself, who subsequently appeared as Marian in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. "This pink and plump damsel had a marvellous power of

memorizing whole chapters in the Bible, and would repeat to him by heart in class, to his boredom, the long gospels before Easter without missing a word, and with evident delight in her facility; though she was by no means a model of virtue in her love-affairs."[25] Her inconsequential party-trick is turned to parodic effect when the drunken Jude Fawley is encouraged to recite the Nicene creed in Latin to a host of ignorant Oxford undergraduates (Book II, chapter 7).[26] Yet Hardy's fictional portraits of agricultural laborers using a "semi-biblical dialect" to conscious blasphemous effect were, suggested R. Hutton, a contemporary reviewer, little more than a mouthpiece for the novelist's own skepticism.[27]

Hardy's strategy here was no more manipulative of the laboring classes than was that of the writers of evangelical tracts who loved to show the deserving poor aroused to the joint virtues of Godliness and cleanliness by the influence of the Word. Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* (1847) stems very much from this tradition. The eponymous heroine visits Nancy, an elderly cottager and "a woman of a serious, thoughtful turn of mind" who finds herself troubled by Calvinist fears, of the sort that had troubled Anne Brontë herself, concerning predestined election to eternal damnation. Brontë quickly finds herself in the double bind that afflicted most middle-class Evangelical proselytizers. On the one hand she is anxious to denounce anyone, in this case the local High Church Rector, who preaches against "the reprehensible presumption of individuals who attempted to think for themselves in matters connected with religion, or be guided by their own interpretation of Scripture."[28] On the other hand she requires a biddable pupil whose own interpretative attempts require remedial help: Nancy's partial readings, it might in fairness be said, go some way to justify the High Church Rector's position. In order to allow Agnes to act as the interpreter who presents the countervailing texts, Nancy has to be infantilized by developing eyesight problems that prevent her from finding these texts for herself. Her affliction is hardly accidental: the dimming of her outer eye is closely related to her spiritual myopia. Although Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855) broadens out into wider considerations of the harm done by limited or partial readings of the Bible, it also features the same pattern of a middle-class girl, again a clergyman's daughter, trying to counter the texts loved by a working-class lass whose unhealthy fondness for the eschatological portions of the Bible is mirrored by her increasingly delirious and moribund state. By contrast, the robustly healthy insights of the heroine, Margaret Hale, are signaled by her surname.

Tennyson's poem "Rizpah" (1880), which grimly satirizes this tradition of disabling or infantilizing the poor, depends upon its readers close knowledge of biblical text. Although he cannot divest himself of his own class status, nor of the act of working-class ventriloquism this dramatic monologue requires, his poor cottager, rather than being under catechetical instruction, holds the floor and is permitted to put words into the mouth of the condescending visitor who has come to "read me a Bible verse of the Lord's good will toward men" (line 61).[29] The dying woman who has defied the law to gather up the bones of her highwayman son, hung on a gibbet for his offense, sees her Bible-visitor as an intrusive spy to be feared, flattered, and resented. Christopher Ricks's edition of Tennyson's poetry cites as his source 2 Samuel 21:8–10, in which the daughter of one of Saul's concubines protects the bones of her two sons who have been sacrificed by King David as an act of redress to the Gibeonites, but Tennyson's revision

takes account of the larger tale in which Rizpah is a pawn in a grander "aristocratic" game. Her bastard sons are substituted for Saul's legitimate descendants, "because of the Lord's oath that was between them, between David and Jonathan the son of Saul." Rizpah lives in a state where the King's spies are everywhere: "And it was told David what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul had done" (verse 11). The full irony of Tennyson's ballad stems from this after-tale to Rizpah's action. The rhythms of the biblical narrative lead us to expect that David will punish Rizpah. Instead, he is inspired by her maternal love finally to attend to collecting the bones of Saul and Jonathan from Jabesh-Gilead where they had ended up after being stolen from the place where the Philistines had first hung them (2 Samuel 21:12). In Christian Britain, however, the mother in Tennyson's poem fears that her Bible-toting visitor is part of the state's repressive network. The mother's paranoia stems from the way in which the authorities of her time had treated her attempted interventions on her son's behalf as symptoms of insubordination and lunacy:

> They seized me and shut me up: they fastened me down on my bed.
> "Mother, O mother!" – he called in the dark to me year after year.
> They beat me for that, they beat me – you know that I couldn't but hear;
> And then at the last they found I had grown so stupid and still
> They let me abroad again ... (46–50)

At the poem's ending there is more than a hint of apocalyptic reprisal for the years of injustice suffered on earth. His mother has no doubt that "My Willy 'ill rise up whole when the trumpet of judgment 'ill sound," and her dying words suggest the overthrow of the structures of this world: "And he calls to me now from the church and not from the gibbet – for hark! / Nay – you can hear it yourself – it is coming – shaking the walls" (84–5).

This sense of the Bible as an instrument of oppression also containing the seeds of its own redress is portrayed particularly forcibly in pictures of children's encounters with the Bible. Children traditionally cut their reading teeth on the Scriptures. The intimacy and sense of mutual care that could at best be inspired by time set aside for this purpose is suggested in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) where the teacher–pupil relationship it establishes between the infant Polly and the gawky teenager Graham Bretton subsequently flowers into marriage.[30] However, Charlotte and Emily were also to give currency to versions of this experience that formed fictional templates for representing the Bible as a central adult weapon for abusing children. Neglected though their education is by Hindley and his new wife Frances, Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw have plenty of experience of being "set to learn a column of Scripture names, if they don't answer properly," or of being set chapters from the Bible to learn as a penance for misbehavior by the curate.[31] At Lowood school, "The Sunday evening was spent in repeating, by heart, the church catechism, and the fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters of St Matthew." Mr Brocklehurst's subsequent manipulation of the Sermon on the Mount to justify the privations of this charity school is followed by the episode in which Jane Eyre is pilloried as "the native of a Christian land, worse than many a

little heathen who says its prayers to Brahma and kneels before Juggernaut," and then branded "a liar."[32]

How conscious Kipling was of this primal literary scene of biblical abuse when he came to write "Baa Baa Black Sheep" is unclear, but his fictional reshaping of his childhood misery in an "establishment run with the full vigour of the Evangelical as revealed to the Woman" reveals remarkable echoes.[33] The facility the young Kipling developed in lying, which he later saw as the "the foundation of literary effort," earned him the regular punishment of learning collects "and a great deal of the Bible."[34] In "Baa Baa Black Sheep" the fictional child "was always ready to oblige everybody. He therefore welded the story of Creation on to what he could recollect of his Indian fairy tales." Demonized by the Evangelical Woman and her son, he is sent out for a walk bearing a placard proclaiming him a "Liar," a punishment that seems to conflate Jane Eyre's "sin" with Helen Burns's punishment of having a piece of pasteboard with the word "Slattern" bound to her forehead.

The Materiality of Biblical Text

It went without saying that these children would have been learning their biblical portions from the Authorized Version, for by the Victorian period this had become established as the British gold standard. Not only did it bear the royal imprimatur and the reputation for learning of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, but so few changes had been effected since Benjamin Blayney's edition of 1769 that it had come to be viewed as the definitively authoritative text, rather than one among a number of possible translations.[35]

Anglophone Jews had no complete translation into English of the Hebrew Bible available until Isaac Leeser (1806–68), a Prussian émigré, published his version in Philadelphia in 1845: there is no evidence of a British edition. The small number of orthodox Jews in England, would, if male, have studied the Hebrew Bible and the commentaries (the Talmud and Mishnah) in Hebrew and Aramaic. In 1845 Grace Aguilar claimed that their lack of Hebrew excluded most Jewish women raised in an Anglophone culture from their true spiritual heritage,[36] and so when she advocated studying the Bible without the commentaries she presumably assumed that Jewish readers would resort to the King James Bible. It seems probable that Jewish women continued to read the Bible in English until the 1880s when immigrants arriving from Eastern Europe brought with them so-called "women's bibles" – translations of some biblical narratives into Yiddish.

The export of the Bible, particularly under the aegis of The British and Foreign Bible Society (founded 1804), became associated with an imperial mission to spread British values. Introducing himself to a Portuguese host, George Borrow, one of the Society's agents, explained:

> I did not come to Portugal with the view of propagating the dogmas of any particular sect, but with the hope of introducing the Bible, which is the well-head of all that is useful