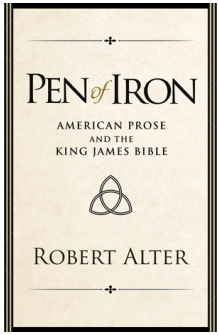
Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible, by Robert Alter



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One of the great benefits of the four hundredth anniversary of the first publication of the King James Bible (KJB) in 1611 has been the flowering of scholarship on the history and influence of that most important and enduring of English texts. Robert Alter's *Pen of Iron*, a study of the influence of the KJB on modern American prose, is part of that publishing trend, although as it is comprised of material originally delivered as the Spencer Trask Lectures at Princeton University in April 2008 it some-

what pre-dates the current publishing craze. Some of the recently published materials on the texts, contexts and cultures of the KJB have been very fine examples of scholarly analysis. This brief book, however, says very little about the biblical text itself. Its intention is to suggest some of the ways in which prose writers of the last two centuries have drawn upon the style of the KJB to articulate an essentially American literary register.

Over the last number of decades, Alter has established himself as one of our finest critics of the literary reception of biblical writing. His previous work has marked many contemporary approaches to the study of biblical texts as literature, and the study of biblical texts' influence upon literature. The burden of this book, the analysis of a biblical literary style, is particularly timely. *Pen of Iron* redresses the current critical neglect of style: in the last several decades, the study of the techniques of writing has been eclipsed by that of the ideas expressed in writing, and the analysis of ideology has supplanted the practice of close reading. As Alter puts it: "reading the untranslatable text is ultimately what departments of literary studies ought to be about, but in the peculiar atmosphere that has dominated the academy for several decades, the reverse has often taken place: the original text has been read as though it might as well have been a translation" (40). The main chapters of *Pen of Iron* therefore pursue close readings of several important American novels, including works by Herman Melville, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Saul Bellow, Marilynne Robinson, and Cormac McCarthy—alongside, ironically, close readings of selected biblical texts in translation. The chapter on Melville's *Moby-Dick* is perhaps the most convincing work in this study. "Melville's own huge and distinctively American ambition, to fuse poetry and prose, epic and tragedy and novel, led him to combine colloquial and biblical, Shakespearian and Miltonic, with the ambling language of a learned encyclopaedist thrown in for good measure" (76). In the chapter on Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* we have more obvious evidence of an author's Bible reading—Alter cites Faulkner's claim to have read through the KJB "every ten or twelve years" (78). Alter's consideration of the novel notes Faulkner's drawing upon the ambiguities of the David narrative (80), though he misses an important allusion to Melchizedek when the novel describes "a personage who in the remote Mississippi of that time must have appeared almost phoenix-like, fullsprung from no childhood, born of no woman and impervious to time and, vanished, leaving no bones nor dust anywhere" (87; the allusion is to Hebrews 7:3: "He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he

continues a priest forever")—perhaps an instance of an overwhelming concentration on the Old Testament precluding a sensitivity to the New.

Any work on literary dependence opens itself to the danger of overreading, and *Pen of Iron* is no exception. Alter admits, for example, that "'son', of course, is one of the most common words in the English language, and so one should not automatically assume that its recurrence in *Absalom, Absalom!* owes anything to the King James Version" (102–3). But Alter goes on to read the expression "my son" in relation to similar statements by Abraham and David (104). This raises a larger issue: for all the genius of his readings, Alter does not establish the canons by which he recognises literary dependence, either to the Bible, in distinction from other works using similar vocabulary or style, or to a particular translation of the Bible, particularly the KJB. So the conclusion that *Absalom, Absalom!* "vividly demonstrates how the King James Version of the Bible, three full centuries after the Puritan founders, continued to enrich and distinguish American prose" (113) is not proven. Alter's claims with regard to Saul Bellow are perhaps more moderate: "I do not mean to claim that he was consciously imitating the Bible in this project but simply that he had internalized something of its dignified, even stark, simplicity of diction" (130). But this is simply to recognise a pattern of similarity, rather than a description of dependence.

The effect of this argument, therefore, is not always convincing. Perhaps most problematically, Alter's argument is repeatedly tempted to homogenise the style of the KJB. The text the influence of which he is tracing is rather more varied in its vocabulary and register than Alter sometimes suggests. Furthermore, Alter's argument rests on a series of contestable historical claims. The first paragraph of the first chapter is especially problematic: he claims, in the opening paragraph, that in England "the Protestant Reformation took an important step toward its consolidation in 1611 when the Bible was made fully accessible to the reading public in a translation that rapidly became canonical" (1). This is a large claim, and it does not take account of the many dozens of editions of the Geneva Bible (1560) that had been published in popular formats to huge popular success: in fact, even through the first half of the seventeenth century, it was the Geneva Bible that was most often drawn upon by canonical authors. Neither does Alter delineate the elements that made the style of the KJB so "distinctive" (1) from that of the previous English translations. This is an important consideration, given that in their preface to the new work the King James translators admitted that they were only attempting to improve an existing translation. Additionally, the

translators continued to draw upon the foundational texts of the Tyndale tradition: the KJB was in many ways little more than an anthology of the best of the English translations of the previous century. Nor does Alter justify his claim—still in the opening paragraph—that "it was in America that the potential of the 1611 translation to determine the foundational language and symbolic imagery of a whole culture was most fully realized" (1). In some ways the claim is unverifiable—and the gesture, although appropriate to the lecture series in which this book originated, seems inappropriate to its final publication. But it is an important point for Alter to establish, for his readings of American prose return to his claim that "the language of the Bible remains an ineluctable framework for verbal culture in this country" (3). And yet it might be the case that Alter does not give sufficient nuance to the biblically informed culture he is describing. He notes that in its early decades "Harvard required Hebrew but not koine Greek" (2), and works from this to a larger claim that the Old Testament rather than the New Testament was the "text of reference" in the making of early America. The difficulty with this claim is that college entrants in the seventeenth century would already have been proficient in Greek. This is not to deny the importance of Old Testament narrative material in the making of the early American mind—but it does qualify the grand sweep of the argument of Alter's introduction.

But in so many ways this is a book to be welcomed. It is certainly true, as Alter observes, that "we no longer have a culture pervaded by Scripture, where Bible reading is a daily practice in parlor and in pulpit, where the active memories of ordinary people are stocked with many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of phrases and verses from the canonical texts"—though this reviewer is not as hopeful as is Robert Alter that "something of the old dynamic stubbornly persists" (180). And it is for that reason that we need critics of the calibre of Robert Alter to remind us of the mental worlds that we have lost. Popular appreciation of "America's national book" (9) may have gone the way of popular appreciation of America's monarchy, but *Pen of Iron* makes a powerful case for the preservation of the legacy of good King James.

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