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***Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible.***
**By Robert Alter.**

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William Faulkner famously opined in an interview with Malcolm Cowley that "You should approach Joyce's *Ulysses* as the illiterate Baptist preacher approaches the Old Testament: with faith." We might see in Faulkner's apparently flippant comment the implication of a more serious idea regarding prose fiction: that at its best, when wielded by a master stylist, the written word is rendered virtually invulnerable to any critical nitpicking that fails to address stylistic mastery on its own grounds.

In a nutshell, it is this idea that forms the basis of Robert Alter's analysis of style in American fiction. In *Pen of Iron* Alter takes up arms against the tendency of proponents of the New Historicism to focus more on discourse as an ideological tool to support their own political agendas than on the power of language itself, or, as he calls it, "the magic of language" as it becomes manifest in the style an author forges as his own. He argues that "What has happened too often . . . is that the focus on ideological considerations has tended to reduce the literary work to its inferable propositional content, the analysis, bent on 'unmasking' the text, looking past the articulations of style that are compellingly interesting in their own right and that might in fact complicate the understanding of the propositional content" (22). Alter then moves directly to his book's premise, saying, "the claim I make . . . is not an attempt to cut off literature from its moorings in history and politics but rather an argument that we will be better served by looking with a finer focus at the very linguistic medium writers use to engage with history and politics and perhaps in some instances to transform our vision of both these realms" (22-23).

This is a noble sentiment indeed; however, to do justice to such an ambitious premise would require a much longer volume than the

somewhat thin academic treatise that Alter has produced. As if to sidestep such a daunting task, Alter trimmed down his exploration of style to an analysis of the influence of the King James translation of the Bible on several nineteenth- and twentieth-century American novelists as they wrote their most important works. These are Melville and *Moby Dick*, Faulkner and *Absalom, Absalom!*, Bellow and *Seize the Day*, Hemingway and *The Sun Also Rises*, and McCarthy and *The Road*.

To the experienced reader of literature, the influence of the King James translation of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, on the style of each of these writers is quite obvious. I found the principal value of Alter's book to lie in its tracing how echoes of this great work, while they have not entirely faded from American fiction, have become less prominent and more subtly pronounced over the last century and a half in direct proportion to the changing (or actual lessening) influence on the American consciousness of this once ubiquitous text. Alter accomplishes this task by focusing on the hallmark traits of the work of each of these American writers. For the prose of Melville it is polyphony, or a range of interwoven tonal registers with strongly biblical overtones; for Faulkner it is lexicon, with incantatory words and phrases echoing biblical text; for Hemingway it is the spare, paratactic phrasing characteristic of the King James translation; for Bellow it is the amalgam of several stylistic traits held together by an underlying resonance like that of scriptural language; and for McCarthy it is the trait of parataxis *in extremis* that gives the prose in *The Road* a rhythm like the beat of a drum prophesying doom, as if foretelling apocalypse or revelation or both.

While the author does stick closely to "the very linguistic medium" of his chosen writers, his analysis felt to me rather starved of substance in regards to a concern for how the style of these novelists was influenced by what he so assiduously avoids: the relationship between the ideological contexts in which the books were written and the artistic visions of their authors. In addition, and perhaps because of this possibly overly exclusive focus, Alter at times needlessly repeats points he has already made, particularly one relating to parataxis, the use of a series of independent clauses in parallel formation rather than subordinate clauses. This syntactic device is discussed so often throughout the book that by the last chapter, entitled "The World through Parataxis," the term had begun to feel tedious to me through the author's over-use and over-accounting of it.

In the end I felt that *Pen of Iron* would have been substantially richer if the author had devoted more time and attention to the interplay of the forces of history and politics with the attitudes of the writers and the language of their works. Ironically, in light of his stated aims, Alter might have achieved a greater density and depth in his own text by integrating into it some ideas from the New Historicism. Nevertheless, *Pen of Iron* will be of value to those interested in the relationship between biblical text and ongoing changes in the language of American fiction.