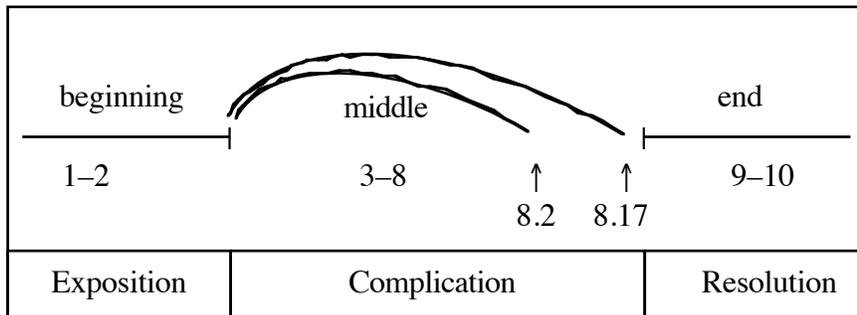


of the text, in that it compels us to focus upon the shape of the work as a whole before we engage in more self-regarding readings.

Among the range of formalist concerns over which one might spend time,¹ I choose here only one: plot, its structure and development.

Esther has, structurally speaking, a conventional plot, with beginning, middle, and end clearly marked out



If we analyse plots as typically consisting of exposition, complication, resolution, and coda, in the Book of Esther chs. 1-2 are evidently Exposition. These chapters enclose seven distinct scenes portraying circumstances anterior to the plot proper. The Complication begins only in ch. 3, with Mordecai's refusal of obeisance to the newly elevated Haman, and with Haman's reaction. That is the point at which the destruction of the Jews is determined upon, which decision constitutes the base-point for two arcs of tension that will reach as far as the Resolution. At the end of ch. 8, at the point when the second imperial decree is issued, we know the moment of Resolution has arrived, for the Jews can relax and make holiday. Thereafter, the last two chapters, at least from 9.20 onward, form a Coda projecting the discourse beyond the time-frame of the narrative proper.²

Two points of interest emerge from this analysis. The first is that the Exposition is unusually long, suggesting that the story is not so naive as its simple style might tempt us to think. What is being delivered in the

1. See for example Ann Jefferson, 'Russian Formalism', in Ann Jefferson and David Robey (eds.), *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1982), p. 22.

2. See William Labov, *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular* (Conduct and Communication, 36; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), used by Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Bible and Literature Series, 9; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), pp. 101-102, 107-109.

Exposition is not the mere details of time, place and personages of the story—which is all an Exposition needs. Rather, we are presented with a mass of background, on the symbolism of power, the character of the king, the battle of the sexes, and the relationship of Esther and Mordecai, which all must be held in mind in the course of the subsequent narrative and cross-fertilized with the matter of the action. So, for example, when we read the response of Ahasuerus to Haman in 3.11, ‘do with them as seems good to you’—which may sound, taken by itself, like a brisk imperial efficiency—we are obliged to recall, on the contrary, that we know from the Exposition that this king is a man who can make no decision of his own accord, like how to handle the disobedience of Vashti or what to do when he finds he is missing her, but has always to rely on the advice of his courtiers. When someone comes to him with a concrete proposal like the extermination of an anonymous race of deviants, the king is only too glad to have someone else to do the troublesome business of decision-making for him and cheerfully consigns the people to Haman to do with them as he likes.

The second point concerns the resolution of the tension. At first sight the Resolution is the death of Haman (7.10), author of the decree for the extermination of the Jews. But to stay with that perspective is to have failed to notice that the moment of complication of the plot is not precisely the threat of 3.13 against the Jewish people, but the fact that the threat has the form of a law of the Persians and Medes (which the Exposition in 1.19 has forewarned us is unalterable). So it will be no final resolution of the plot when Haman is unmasked as involving even the queen in his scheduled genocide, or when he is hoist on his own stake (to the height of 75 feet), or even when Mordecai the Jew is made vizier in Haman’s place (8.2). For even when those resolutions have come about, the Complication is not yet resolved, for the unalterable law that has decreed the Jews’ destruction still stands—as the king reminds Esther when she begs for the decree to be revoked (8.8). The intellectual problem of how to alter the unalterable is solved, and the tension of the plot therewith resolved, only by Mordecai’s brilliant idea of a *supplementary* law of the Persian and Medes requiring the Jews to defend themselves against any attempt at genocide (8.11-12). Since the first law had thoughtlessly failed to require any particular persons to carry out the genocide, no one, in the event, could be blamed for failing to obey it; and clearly Jews and non-Jews alike throughout the empire read the situation as a (bloodless) victory for the Jews (8.15-17), with-

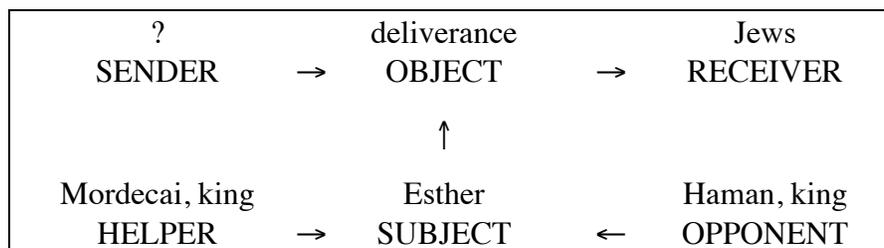
out a whiff of criticism for the doctrine of the Persian law’s unchangeability. As against that resolution, the bloodletting of 9.5-6 is a concretization of the new-found Jewish supremacy; it purges the empire of anti-Jewish elements, which is good news for the future. But it does not resolve anything, for there is nothing still needing to be resolved. Mordecai’s drafting of the second edict has already done that. So to analyse the plot, even along the quite unsophisticated lines here sketched, is not simply to perceive the subtlety of the narrator’s art but to touch base already with the narrative’s own specific attitudes to power, violence, law.

2. Structuralism

In using a structuralist strategy for reading, we are explicitly seeking—below the surface of the text—relationships, especially of opposition and contrast, that manifest themselves on the level of the text. In the discipline of literary structuralism there are several different procedures that stand ready-made as grids on which the narrative may be laid out. Two of these may be of service here, an actantial and a semantic analysis.

a. Actantial analysis

An analysis of the actants in the Esther narrative is quite straightforward, but it reveals two interesting realities. The actantial pattern, in the style of A.J. Greimas,³ may be set out thus:



The first interesting aspect of this analysis is that, if we designate the Object as *deliverance* for the Receiver, the Jews, we are left with a question as to the identity of the Sender. The Sender is the person or circumstance that endeavours to communicate the Object to the

³. For an introduction to this method, see Daniel Patte, *What Is Structural Exegesis?* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).

Receiver. Now the Sender in any narrative (or, performance, in Greimasian language) can of course be, *faute de mieux*, the Story itself, or Fate; but in this particular narrative, in its biblical context, we are tempted to designate the sender as God, even though God does not actually appear in the story as a character nor is any allusion made to him. Outside the Hebrew Bible, other versions of the Esther Story—such as the elaboration it receives in the Greek Bible—make it entirely explicit that the story is essentially a narrative of God’s action. The crucial coincidences of the plot (e.g. the presence of a Jewish woman on the Persian throne, the reading of the chronicle of Mordecai’s deliverance of the king’s life at the very moment when Mordecai’s own enemy has arrived to seek *his* life) unmistakably point to the hand of God, despite the absence—for whatever reason—of God from the explicit action. A structural analysis, then, dealing solely with the evidence of the text, registers the text’s lack of identification of the Sender as a crucial distinctive of the story.

Secondly, we observe that the position of the king in the actantial grid is ambiguous. Inasmuch as he authorizes the plan of Haman, he belongs with him as Opponent; but inasmuch as he commands Haman’s death and signs Mordecai’s edict bringing deliverance to the Jews he is Helper. This ambiguity in the role of the Persian king, which the actantial analysis reflects, corresponds with the ambiguity of the book’s stance towards the Persian government, which is experienced by the Jews both as threat and as protection—an experience consequently inscribed in the book.

b. *Semantic analysis*

Another tactic from the structuralist strategy that can be profitably employed for Esther is a semantic analysis of codes, the groupings of terms distinctive of our text.⁴ The result of such an analysis will be that each of the several codes we examine here will turn out to be a manifestation of the theme of power, a central concern of the writing.

We can look first at the *alimentary code*. There is a good deal of data relating to this code, for there are nine banquets (*mishteh*, lit. drinking-party) in the book. The first and second are displays of the king’s wealth and munificence (1.1-4, 5-8). The third is Vashti’s all-female

⁴. A paradigm for the present study is provided by David Jobling, *The Sense of Biblical Narrative: Three Structural Analyses in the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup, 7; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 2nd edn, 1986), I, pp. 26-62.

counterpart to the king's all-male banquet (1.9), and the fourth is Esther's, given by the king to celebrate Esther's accession to the throne (2.18). Fifth is the drinking of the king and Haman when the plot against the Jews has been hatched (3.15). Sixth and seventh are Esther's banquets at which Haman is unmasked (5.5-8; 7.1-8). Eighth is the banquet held by the Jews in every city after the twenty-third day of the third month, celebrating the arrival of the edict of Mordecai (8.17), and ninth are the empire-wide Jewish banquets of the fourteenth and fifteenth of the twelfth month, celebrating the 'rest' achieved by the pogroms of anti-Semites on the previous day(s) (9.17-19).

Since banquets celebrate success, it is appropriate that the first five should be Persian banquets, and the last four Jewish banquets, for the story represents the movement of power from Persians to Jews. The first pair, given by the king in a vulgar display of wealth and power, contrasts with the last pair, which celebrates, by contrast, survival and honour (though they, of course, may be not so very different, albeit in another key, from wealth and power!). The third and fourth, given by and for the Persian queens (Vashti and Esther), contrast with the sixth and seventh, given by the Jewish-Persian queen (Esther). The fifth and central banquet is shared by the Persian Ahasuerus and his supporter Haman the Agagite: in celebrating the decree that has been just now issued against the Jews it marks the point at which Persian success will begin to be overshadowed by Jewish success.

Beside the banquets, there is a negative mode of feasting—which is fasting. Persian power, as expressed in the first edict, is responded to by the spontaneous Jewish fasting of 4.3, a symbol of powerlessness. Esther's further demand for a fast of unparalleled severity, no food or water for three days or nights (4.16), conveys how absolute is Jewish powerlessness. She herself, ironically, while maintaining this extreme Jewish fast with her maids, has been preparing a Persian-style banquet for the king (5.4, on the third day; cf. 4.15 and 5.1). She is the only Jew who is in the position to do anything about the edict, because she is the Jew who is also a Persian. She must fast and feast simultaneously therefore, bravely preparing her victory banquet in the very moment of experiencing intense powerlessness.

The *code of clothing* is significant also. There are distinctions here between normal and deformed clothing, between workaday clothes and celebratory clothing, between the clothes of the powerless and the clothes of the powerful. The issuance of the edict against the Jews

has its effect in Mordecai's tearing his usual clothes and putting on charmless sackcloth (4.1)—as if he were already dead and enfeebled like the inhabitants of the underworld, wearing clothes for no more than decency's sake in a world where aesthetic sensibilities no longer apply. Esther, who does not yet know of the edict, sends out replacement normal garments to Mordecai 'so that he might take off his sackcloth' (for she knows of nothing to mourn about), but he sends them back to her (4.4). She herself, even when she hears of the edict, cannot of course wear sackcloth within the palace (cf. 4.2), though she can fast. For the sake of the Jews in sackcloth this Jew must show herself a Persian, dressed in her 'royal robes' (5.1) for the king's presence. Clothing will become conspicuous ultimately when Mordecai leaves the king's presence in royal robes of blue and white, fine linen and purple (colours and materials all recalling the imperial colours of the pavilion hangings in 1.6). That will proclaim his identity as Persian—as Persian as it is possible for a Jew to be. He has already had a foretaste of that identity in his temporary elevation as 'the man whom the king delights to honour' (6.7-11), paraded through the city in 'royal robes which the king himself has worn' (6.8). Clothing then is a conspicuous code signalling where one stands on the power axis.

The *topographical code* is another coding for power; its significance becomes transparent in the manner in which it relates to *areas* of power. There is in the narrative a simple disjunction between inside and outside, in which Jews begin by being outside (Mordecai walking daily outside the harem, 2.11; sitting at the king's gate, 2.19, 3.2; unable to enter the king's gate in sackcloth, 4.2). It is fundamental to the narrative that acts of power originate in the inside and are despatched outwards (3.12-13; 8.9-10). Esther is an outsider who gains power when she becomes an insider (ch. 4); she is an unusual figure in that she does not loosen her links with the outside world even when she is in the court. Haman, who is to begin with very much of an insider, after the first banquet prepared by Esther innocently 'goes out' of the king's presence and 'goes home' (5.9, 10); but we know that this exit from the centre of power is symbolically unwise. For when he comes again in the morning he has been displaced by Mordecai (6.6). And when he goes home the second time it is only to have his outsider status confirmed by his wife (6.13). Now that he has become an outsider, even when he enters the king's presence once more (ch. 7) he comes as a disempowered person who will hear at the centre of power nothing to

his own advantage but only the pronouncement of his own death sentence; and he exits directly from the royal court to the gallows (7.9-10). The disjunction between inside and outside, constitutive of the story, and fatal to Haman, but privately circumvented by Esther, is ultimately abolished in the appointment of Mordecai: in going out of the king's presence clad in royal robes, he manifests the truth that the imperial power is now no longer located within the throne-room, but is concentrated in his person. His co-religionists, whose welfare he seeks (10.3), are therefore no longer to be regarded as outsiders; in ch. 9, any town where they may happen to find themselves, and especially any place where they are 'gathered' in a show of solidarity, becomes a centre of power that no one can resist (9.2).

There is also a further disjunction within the 'inside' sphere, that is, between the king's presence and the rest of the palace: the king's presence is so 'inside' that even the rest of the palace is 'outside' by comparison. This disjunction is manifested in the law, known not just in the palace but throughout the whole empire, that to enter the king's presence unbidden is to risk death (4.11). The king's presence, as the focus of the greatest power, is evidently the most dangerous place. And that is true not just in an obvious sense. For Vashti has discovered that not to enter it when bidden is nearly as dangerous as entering it unbidden (1.11-12, 19).

These codes signal the narrative's concern with power, where it is located, and whether and how it can be withstood or manipulated by others.

3. *Feminism*

A feminist criticism is concerned with 'the way the hypothesis of a female reader changes our apprehension of a given text, awakening us to the significance of its sexual codes'.⁵

The feminist issue in the Book of Esther is, it may be suggested, whether power truly resides in the males, as the conventional wisdom both Persian and Jewish would have it. In the case of the Vashti episode, we are being invited to consider the question, Where does power truly lie? Is it with the king, who has well-nigh universal power,

⁵. Elaine Showalter, 'Towards a Feminist Poetics', in Mary Jacobus (ed.), *Women Writing and Writing about Women* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), pp.22-41 (25).

but of whose power it becomes plain at the first opportunity that it is always open to resistance? Or does it not rather lie with Vashti, who knows how to take the power she needs for her own self-determination—which is to say, all the power that matters? He can be thwarted; she, however, provided she stands her ground, cannot. Her power is all the more evident when we ask, What exactly is Vashti resisting? It is not, apparently, any demands of Ahasuerus that she appear naked, adorned by nothing more than her crown (though some rabbinic commentators thought so, reading 1.11). Nor is it his drunkenness, even though it is true that his ‘heart is merry with wine’ (1.10). It is simply his demand. And the strength of her resistance lies in the very absence of a reason for refusing his demand. She doesn’t need to have a reason, for she is under no obligation. Her power lies in her freedom to choose for herself.

As if to underline the fact that the issue is not one of legality but of power, the king’s response is simply one of anger; that can only mean that she has done nothing illegal but has only made him lose face (cf. 7.7). His appeal to his wise men to tell him what, ‘according to the law’, is to be done to her for her disobedience (1.15) conspicuously fails to elicit any existing law, though they can invent an edict intended, *post eventum*, to punish her (1.19). But in this they seem to wrongfoot themselves, since the punishment they prescribe (not to come before the king) is evidently, and ironically, Vashti’s dearest wish (it was ‘coming before the king’ that she had declined in 1.11-12). The issue of power, that is to say, is still in the forefront: even when the king and princes believe they are exercising power over her, by preventing her entering the king’s presence, they are achieving no more than what she herself has desired.

The issue of power in sexual politics is further explored in the response of the princes of Persia to the news of Vashti’s disobedience. They unhesitatingly assume that throughout the empire it will be the signal for wives, long suppressed, to start rising in rebellion against their husbands, and that ‘there will be contempt [on the wives’ part] and wrath [on the husbands’ part] in plenty’ (1.18). This truly hysterical assumption can only mean that the men feel threatened, and that male supremacy is being depicted as resting on the flimsiest of foundations. It can only be ironical that their recipe for maintaining the sexual hierarchy is to spread the news of Vashti’s recalcitrance throughout the empire, and it can only be satire on males that a

multilingual decree needs to be issued throughout the 127 provinces asserting that every man should be master in his own house (1.22). It should be observed, incidentally, that this satire is, no doubt, from the author's perspective, at the expense of the Persian king and his courtiers, not of males generally. It corresponds to the critique of Persian power that is characteristic of the book as a whole. But because the princes fear the consequences of Vashti's defiance upon 'all women' and foresee not political dangers but purely domestic difficulties we are bound to read in this scene not only that, but, even more tellingly, a satire against any male power that apes the Persian style.

The issue of power underlies the portrayal of Esther also, even if less obviously. Esther is an altogether different type of woman from Vashti, a 'traditional' woman and no radical feminist but a beauty queen, a charmer. In the narrative about Esther herself there is not the open satire we have met with in ch. 1. But we are not supposed to forget that her king is a shallow and nervous male chauvinist and that it is he who sets the style for the relation between the sexes in Persia. The regimen of twelve months' beauty preparation for potential bedfellows of the king (2.12) is a rather unpleasant sample of male psychology, as though there were something distasteful about women in their natural state. The king of course needs no such preparation himself; he must be beautiful and fragrant enough already. The text itself subverts the Persian theory about female beauty when we find that Esther's success with the king apparently results in large measure from her rejection of all the artificial beauty aids that his palace administrators have devised (2.15). Nevertheless, the fact remains that she owes her place on the Persian throne to nothing but her good looks, her only other great asset being her cookery. She herself falls in with the prevailing sexual politics when she does not hesitate to use her female charm as a bargaining counter. For when in ch. 8 she pleads for the decree against the Jews to be revoked, her last and climactic argument is her own sexual attractiveness: 'If I be pleasing in his [the king's] eyes' (8.5) is the argument she thinks will linger most efficaciously with him.

So Esther is a conventional beauty queen who wins favour and status both in the harem and with the king on the basis of her charm (2.9, 15, 17). Equally conventionally, she is also the dutiful adopted daughter, who does everything Mordecai tells her to: she does not divulge her ancestry because Mordecai has charged her not to (2.10, 20); and even

in the palace she ‘obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him’ (2.20).

Yet there is another dimension to the image of Esther. The scene between her and Mordecai in ch. 4, in which they communicate across the boundary between the inside and the outside, is crucial in establishing her as the central figure through whom deliverance for the Jews must come if it is to come at all. Mordecai in this chapter treats her for the first time as an adult in a sentence that in the same moment underlines her alienation from her people and her identity with them: ‘Think not that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews’ (4.13). She is indefeasibly an outsider, but with a chance to operate as an insider, that is, with power. Esther rises to the occasion, and the narrator signals, with the scene’s concluding sentence, that Esther has taken charge: ‘Mordecai went away and did everything *as Esther had ordered him*’ (4.17), so reversing the language of 2.10 and 2.20.

Thereafter, though weighty matters like the fate of her people and the disposal of half of the kingdom or Haman’s life are in the king’s gift, Esther is the one who is in confident command: her ingenious play with the two banquets proves that. For she does not blurt out at once or at the first banquet what she wants, since it may be dangerous to take your sovereign’s masterful ‘half of the kingdom’ *au pied de la lettre* when it is the head of his prime minister you want (who knows whether that might be more than is on offer?); it is safer to make the king’s acceptance of the second invitation a pledge to do whatever Esther wants without quantifying fractions, and at the same time to represent her own request as nothing other than ‘doing what the king has said’ (5.8).

There is another aspect to Esther’s role that a feminist perspective alerts us to. If we ask how the danger to the Jews comes about, the answer is plainly: through Mordecai’s intransigence. And how is the danger averted? Mordecai has no hand in that, except to alert Esther to the facts and to put pressure on her. It is she who makes all the running, and picks up the pieces that male honour has threatened to make of her people. Mordecai, to be sure, solves the intellectual puzzle in ch. 8 neatly enough, but he has not had the wit to protect himself in the fight for power that constitutes life at the Persian court. Esther represents effective action over against Mordecai’s somewhat gauche integrity.

The book as a whole purports to portray a triumph for a woman. For

its name is Esther's, and it is the story of her success as a powerful woman over her upbringing as a traditional woman and over the expectations of her as a woman at the Persian court. Even so, the ending of the book raises some doubts about how thorough a success hers is. For some sexual-political struggle between the figures of Esther and Mordecai seems to be going on in ch. 9. We observe that it is *Mordecai* who writes the letter to the Jews throughout the empire enjoining observance of the fourteenth and fifteenth of Adar as days of celebration in commemoration of the victory achieved (9.20-22). And the Jews do what *Mordecai* has written to them (9.23). But in 9.29 'Esther the Queen' is writing 'with full authority this second letter about Purim in order to make its observance obligatory', because her power needs to be safeguarded literarily. The struggle is not yet over, however, for subsequently, it seems, some scribe, breaking grammatical concord,⁶ finds it necessary to add 'and Mordecai' because he (it must be a man) does not care for the flavour of the politics. And then finally Esther is lost sight of altogether, and the book itself peters out with wishy-washy generalities about *Mordecai* (10.1-3), for all the world as if the story had really been about him all the time.⁷

The ultimate victory in the sexual politics of the Book of Esther comes not in the Hebrew book, however, but in the Greek version with its expansions. Here the whole story becomes framed by narratives of the dream of Mordecai and its interpretation (A 1-11=11.2-12; F 1-10=10.4-11.1). The whole chain of events is thus represented as divinely foreseen and foreordained, and, more to the present purpose, as portraying the conflict of the narrative as a struggle between *Mordecai* and Haman. We know that the male has finally edged Esther out of her triumph when in 2 Maccabees we hear the day of celebration (which had come into being primarily through Esther's courage and shrewdness) being referred to as 'Mordecai's Day' (15.36).⁸

4. Materialism

⁶ The verb *btktw* is feminine singular, but the subject in the text as it stands is both Esther and Mordecai.

⁷ For details see David J.[A.] Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (NCB; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984), pp. 329-30.

⁸ See further David J.A. Clines, 'The Additions to Esther', *Harper's Bible Commentary* (ed. James L. Mays; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. 815-19.

A materialist criticism approaches the text in terms of the material, i.e. socio-economic, conditions that produce it, especially the condition of antagonistic social classes.

The book of Esther professes itself the product of an oppressed group; and the Jews of the time it depicts are unquestionably a subject people. Their story satirizes the Persian claim to absolute power, and claims power for themselves. The Jews cannot of course deny that the king possesses the power—the wealth, the provincial organization, the military force (cf. 1.3; 8.11), and the means of communication (the imperial postal system, 3.13-14 and 8.9-14). They find power exercised against them (and the other subject peoples), for example, when the king can appoint officers in all the imperial provinces to gather all beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa (2.3). But what it really means to be subject or oppressed becomes evident chiefly in the fact that the ultimate power, over life and death, is firmly in the hands of the Persians, who are in the position to formulate decrees, not just for individuals' deaths, but for genocide.

Yet this story, however sincerely it represents the position of a subject race, self-evidently does not originate from the masses. However much they too may be affected by the imperial edict, this is a court-tale, told by habitués of the seat of power, reflecting the intrigue typical of the palace and the harem. For this reason the narrative must be described as reactionary rather than progressive. For it tolerates Persian power in every respect except in the ultimate area, that is, over life and death, and it commends co-operation rather than resistance. In accord with such a stance, the ideal state of affairs for the Jews of the book of Esther is not that the Persian government should be overthrown, but that a co-religionist of theirs should be 'next in rank' to the king (10.3) and should wield the 'power and might' of the Persian empire (10.2). The important thing is not that Persian power should be eliminated but that Mordecai the Jew should grow 'more and more powerful' (9.4). Infiltration of the Persian court by a Jewish woman is not for the sake of sabotaging the power base of an alien authority but in order to swing Persian power behind a Jewish cause at a time of need. And once the Jews become influential at the Persian court, they are not shy of pressing the imperial means of maintaining control (the means of communication) into the service of the Jewish deliverance (8.9-14).

Moreover, as if to prove how reactionary they can be, once the Jews have thrown in their lot with the Persian system, they adopt some of the

less charming manners of the Persian court: they set about exterminating those who seek their hurt (9.2), doing ‘as they pleased to those who hated them’ (9.5)—that ‘as they pleased’ being elsewhere the sign of godless licence (as in Dan. 8.4), and, already in this very book, the principle on which Haman has been plotting *their* extermination (3.11). They seek no change in the structure of society; it is accepted as given, as itself one of the ‘laws of the Persians and the Medes’. The Jewish ambition is solely to position themselves at the centre of power in that society. Having once decided that if you can’t beat them you should join them, they now determine as well to have their cake and eat it. They want to be Persian citizens and cultural outsiders at the same time. They support the government but they support Jewishness no less.

Such a blurring of identities and shovelling underground of the ultimate divergence of interests of Jews and Persians is pragmatic rather than principled. A materialist perspective points up the fragility of the stance toward power adopted by the book. Some might call it realist, of course, but the underlying tension is too strong for the compromise position to last.

5. *Deconstruction*

‘To deconstruct a discourse’, says Jonathan Culler ‘is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies.’⁹ I see two points at which the narrative of Esther is open to deconstruction in these terms.

The first is the issue of identity. It can be taken for granted that it is quintessential to the standpoint of the narrative that Jews should maintain their racial identity. It is true that, until the edict against them, they are, at least from the official point of view, a group without strong coherence: they are ‘a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces’ (3.8), many of them exiles cut off from their homeland, carried away from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar (2.6). But once the edict for their annihilation is delivered, we see the reality of Jewish solidarity: they act only and everywhere in concert. ‘In every province, wherever the king’s command and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting’ (4.3); all the Jews in Susa gather them-

⁹. Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 86.

selves at Esther's command for a communal fast (4.16); and when the second edict arrives, 'in every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict came, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday' (8.17). In ch. 9 also the Jews of the empire act unitedly on the fateful thirteenth of Adar. And once the hostility has been eliminated, they pledge themselves to perpetuate the memory of their common action: 'they ordained and took it upon themselves and their descendants that without fail they would keep these days, that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every family, province, and city, and that these days should never fall into disuse among their descendants' (9.27-28, abbreviated). All of which is to say that the narrative sees itself as promoting racial identity, stressing collective action, experience and memory.

What it celebrates, however, is a deliverance achieved through *denying* one's Jewishness. Esther not only contracts a marriage with a Gentile—which is the quickest and surest way of denying one's Jewishness—but keeps secret her ancestry, deliberately, in response to her guardian's injunction (2.10, 20). Of course she does reveal her racial identity when it will be advantageous, but we cannot get over the fact that it is only by denying it that she can use it profitably. And, as if to reinforce the idea that Jewish identity has its drawbacks, the narrative reminds us that the threat of genocide against the Jews arises only because Mordecai divulges his Jewishness (3.4) and acts on Jewish principle so rigorously as to deny his superior the conventional courtesies (3.2). Which is to say: the Jewish people find themselves under a death sentence because one Jew acts like a Jew and tells his people he is a Jew; they escape through the good offices of another Jew who has pretended she is not a Jew. If being Jewish is being Esther-like no tragedy need be expected; if it is being Mordecai-like, no saviour in high places can be counted on. This is a very confusing message from a narrative that purports to sustain Jewish identity.

The second issue is the function of writing. In this narrative, reality—from the Persian point of view—always tends towards inscriptions, and attains its true quality only when it is written down. Only what is written is valid and permanent. We have first been alerted to the value of writing in Persian eyes at 1.19 where it is not enough that the recalcitrant Vashti be deposed; her loss of office only becomes a reality when it is 'written among the laws of the Persians and Medes'. Next, the social order of 'each man master in his own house' can only be

assured by ‘letters to all royal provinces, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language’ (1.22). Then, the deepest reality about the plan for Jewish annihilation is not that Haman wills it or the king assents to it, but that it stands written. Writing is what makes the threat real to every Jew, that ferrets them out in every corner of the empire and confronts them with their fate; it is wherever this royal edict comes—the written text, that is—that there is great mourning among the Jews (4.3). The writing itself, and not just its content, is the threat.

Between chs. 4 and 7 there is (of course) no writing, because nothing there is settled or finalized. Only when the flux of dialoguing, negotiating and executing has come to an end will the secretaries be summoned again (8.9) and the imperial pleasure be set down in the diverse scripts of the empire. The very act of writing—quite apart from the fact that it is irreversible Persian law that is being written—makes matters certain and makes royal decrees everywhere effectual. The deliverance itself is depicted as the result of the writing: ‘in every province and in every city, wherever the king’s command *and his edict* came, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday’ (8.17).

Now there are two moments of disequilibrium or deconstruction over this matter of writing. The first deconstruction manifests itself in the Jewish adoption of Persian writing. It is one thing to use the imperial chancellery and the royal post for dispatching the second edict; that is a matter of convenience, and clearly advantageous to the Jewish people. It is another matter that the upshot of the whole sequence of events should be that Mordecai ‘recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus’ (9.20). For that means to say that the story of Esther and Mordecai is now written into the Persian record (as indeed was the story of Mordecai’s discovery of the eunuchs’ plot, 2.23), as well as being circulated in written form to his kinsfolk. Jews as well as Persians apparently need to have the realities of the Haman affair permanently enshrined in written form.

This is, in its own small but deeply symbolic way, a crisis for Jewish identity, though the narrative does not perceive it. Persian writing is a symbol of Persian bureaucracy, which is a manifestation of empire with its conglomerate of 127 provinces and who knows how many ethnic groups. But Jews, though dispersed, are ‘one people’ (3.8), with one language and possessed of a folk memory. In the terms of this narrative, they should not need writing. It is a betrayal of ethnicity to adopt the

administrative machinery of an alien empire in the hope of preserving the national memory. Are the threat of genocide and the amazing deliverance from it so impotent, have they stirred the Jewish imagination so little, that the only way of retaining the memory of them is to give them the Persian treatment, recording them in chronicles of such dismal banality that they will be read only to put people to sleep (6.1)?

We see in 9.24-25 what the Persian treatment of the events would look like. In this capsule entry for the imperial chronicles what we find is the true story cruelly denatured, Esther written out of the record, and no less than seven mistakes made about the course of events (including, incidentally, the novel information that the king ‘gave orders in writing’ for the death of Haman, which he certainly did not according to the narrative).¹⁰ The Jewish story pays a high price for being abstracted into the Persian chronicles.

And as the end of ch. 9 makes patent, in almost laughable fashion, once the memory of the event has been committed to the scriptorium, the paperwork never stops. Not only must Mordecai draft a minute for the chronicles and a circular to Jews everywhere, but Esther too must write to them a ‘second letter’ (9.29) supporting or extending the letter of Mordecai. For, it appears, the Jewish people had instituted on their own initiative a ritual of fasting and lamenting in commemoration of the danger. But for that institution to attain full reality there needs to be a ‘command of Queen Esther’ that ‘fixed these practices’ and was ‘recorded in writing’ (9.32). She has undeniably become the (Persian) Queen Esther.

The second point of deconstruction concerns the validity of writing. Writing in this book is primarily the writing of law, law that not only has the authority of the king behind it but, in the society of the Medes and Persians, is informed by its own tradition of irreversibility. This is the law that the Jews in ch. 9 assimilate to themselves as a guarantor of the memory of their deliverance and of the correct observance of its rituals.

But what the narrative has also told us, *sotto voce*, is that the concept of the irreversibility of Persian law is a myth. Everyone pretends that it cannot be altered, but if you are determined enough, you can beat an unmovable object over the head with an irresistible force. Mordecai undid the effect of the first edict: that is the heart of the narrative.

¹⁰. For the details, see David J.A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story* (JSOTSup, 30; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), pp. 52-53.

Writing is thereby proclaimed—against the grain of the whole narrative—to be not permanent; its validity is challengeable. What price then Jewish commitment to writings that concern them? What future is there for the Book of Esther? Has it not become a self-consuming artifact?

A deconstructive reading removes certainties and dismembers dogmas. It casts a quizzical eye over what has been passing for truths. And in so doing it draws our attention to the fact that texts are not transcripts of the way the universe is, nor tape-recordings of what actually happened. It need make no mock of the sincerity of the text, not turn us against the text as flimsy or fallible. If anything, it can sometimes happen that a text shorn of the bogus claims of its reverers can become more effectual, indeed attractive. Seeing the emperor has no clothes might sometimes be the best way of recognizing what a fine figure of a man he truly is.

Observations in Conclusion

1. I am impressed in this study by the value of as many strategies as possible for reading a text. As a critic of the text, I should hate to be restricted by a methodological purism. What I have noticed is that different strategies confirm, complement or comment on other strategies, and so help develop an integrated but polychromatic reading.

2. I say as many strategies ‘as possible’ since there must be texts where certain strategies are inappropriate. I did not, for example, see what could be made of a psychoanalytical approach to this text—though I could see some interesting psychological angles to it.

3. I did not see any methodological difficulties in reading an ancient text, which is also a simple text, not to say a naive one, using contemporary strategies. The readings are inevitably not so coruscating as readings of intricate and self-conscious texts such as are often chosen by contemporary literary critics. No doubt that is largely my fault, but I do think the text itself is in part the cause of the deficiency.

4. I did not feel well served, as a critic, by current exponents of critical theories. I did not, for example, though I do not know the scholarly literature very well, find any critic doing—for any text—what I have attempted to do here.¹¹ And I found that those who wrote about strate-

¹¹. Since this paper was first written, I have come across the volume *Literary Theory at Work: Three Texts* (ed. Douglas Tallack; London: B.T. Batsford, 1987),

gies tended to be rather defensive, protective and uncritical of their own favoured strategy—though eager enough to polemicize. Among structuralists and deconstructionists, for example, I saw an unwillingness to blow the whistle on members of the same guild with febrile imaginations and an inability to communicate.¹² Why do theorists not realize that they are not in *show-business* but in the business of *persuasion*? But then, since Socrates at least, the sophist has often been mistaken for the entertainer.

in which nine contributors read three works (Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Henry James's *In the Cage*, and D.H. Lawrence's *St Mawr*) from their own theoretical perspective. This is still not quite the same as having *one* critic perform different theoretical operations on the *same* text.

¹². I know about the 'tyranny of lucidity', and accept that 'To challenge familiar assumptions and familiar values in a discourse which, in order to be easily readable, is compelled to reproduce these assumptions and values, is an impossibility' (Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* [London: Methuen, 1980], pp.4-5). I am talking about mystification.