In Genesis 40 Joseph interprets the butler’s dream: the three vine branches are three days; after three days he would be restored to his office as Pharaoh’s cupbearer. But the Rabbis in commenting on this chapter creatively enlarged Joseph’s interpretive range; instead of the single exposition of the dream given in the biblical text, they proposed at least eight alternative interpretations, all of them different and all of them valid. Joseph, seen as the midrashist par excellence, knew them all but kept quiet because these interpretations were intended not for the butler but for different audiences! This, it may be noted, is the nature of “midrash.” The text becomes the point of departure for a multiplicity of interpretations none of which is held to be final or exclusive. In this midrash sharply differs from allegory; there is no single “correct” midrash. Essentially, as Max Kadushin has argued, each midrash implies “that other interpretations are possible.” This he defines as “the principle of indeterminacy.” David Stern finds “indeterminacy” (with its post-modern connotations) misleading. He prefers to speak of “midrashic polysemy.” But all agree that this mode of exegesis is marked by openness and bounty – a capacity to include multiple and even contradictory meanings.

The works we have been considering exhibit and seem to allow for precisely this fertility of invention in regard to their biblical sources. Robinson Crusoe, a kind of midrash on Jonah, implies Melville’s freedom of invention in the following century. Joseph Andrews is a reading of the Joseph story embodied in one concrete human instance, one contingent situation or tangle of situations and, paraphrasing Kadushin, we could say that it implies the possibility of any number of other readings, involving other
tangles equally human and equally contingent. It implies Thomas Mann’s freedom of invention in relation to the same story two hundred years later. In short every such interpretive fiction is a new beginning. It says, “Read me: I am saying what has not been said before; and read me too because I will remind you of what you have read before; and read me too because you will be reminded of me when you read the next story that reminds you of what I remind you of.”

But again we may ask ourselves, is not such intertextuality the mark of prose fiction generally? Why insist on a special category for biblically inspired novels? Do not novels constantly remind us of other novels? Conrad’s The Secret Agent is demonstrably indebted to Dickens’s portrayals of nineteenth-century London. Arnold Bennett’s The Old Wives’ Tale professedly emulates the example of Guy du Maupassant’s Une Vie. Saul Bellow borrows the name of his hero and many other features of Herzog from Joyce’s Ulysses. It would seem that a web of intertextuality linking novels with other novels that precede and follow them, is the rule rather than the exception. Novelists rewrite their predecessors.

What would then be the justification for selecting and setting apart a group of novels built on biblical models? And if we have given this particular mode of “imitation” the term “midrash,” is there anything to distinguish such midrash from the creative use of fictional models generally? The answer is that for the works we are considering, the biblical source is more than a model on which one may base one’s own free invention; it is a text to be interpreted and reinterpreted, to be returned to obsessively as the vessel of still unrevealed meanings. The repeated attempts of Defoe’s hero, Robinson Crusoe to understand the meaning of a verse from Psalm 50 in light of his ongoing experience suggests that we have to do with a source which compels, which exercises authority. The relation to it will be more genuinely dialogic than the relation of Bennett to Maupassant, because the source text will be urged to speak, will be argued with, listened to, or resisted. It will have an independent voice in the discourse.

Father Mapple’s sermon on Jonah, standing near the beginning of Melville’s Moby Dick, would do as a paradigm. Here the interpretive relation is foregrounded and the image of the great whale, the controlling, multivalent symbol of the book as a whole, is set before us as a text to be expounded and remembered. Moreover, the theme of the sermon is the impossibility of escape.