

## The “Biblical Context” of Christoph Hein

**Alfiia Revanerovna Valeeva\***

Naberezhnye Chelny State Pedagogical University, Naberezhnye Chelny, Russia

**Raisa Rustyamovna Akhunzianova**

Naberezhnye Chelny State Pedagogical University, Naberezhnye Chelny, Russia

### Abstract

The article examines a typological feature of the artistic world of the German writer Christoph Hein, whose works are distinguished by a peculiar “biblical context”. Basing the research on Hein’s earlier works, the authors analyze bibleisms – quotations from the Bible, which present signs-symbols, and define their artistic function consisting in manifestation of aesthetic information. The analysis of bibleisms reveals the motif structure of Hein’s works, namely the biblical motifs of the Fall, continuity, punishment, suffering, humility, sacrifice and silence. The present work also aims to interpret the biblical image of Noah and to study the influence of the Bible on Hein’s poetic manner. The “biblical context”, which presents an intertextual element of poetic style, actualizes and forms the artistic meaning, defines the structural and stylistic characteristics of the writer’s works.

**Keywords:** Bibleism; Biblical context; Biblical image; Biblical motif; Intertextuality.



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### 1. Introduction

Reflection of the themes and motifs of the Bible in the German literature presents an important issue in the study of literature connected with the interest in the origins of spiritual culture and its modern condition. The article considers one aspect of this problem – the perception of the Bible and the influence of the biblical texts on modern German writers – using the example of Christoph Hein’s early prose.

Being a clergyman’s son, in his works Hein always refers to Christianity. It is not surprising that literary critics perceive him as a successor to Protestant tradition, which, according to the German literary theorist H. Schlaffer, has become a characteristic feature of the national literature since the 18th century (Schlaffer, 2002). This view with regards to the writer is sustained by the subheading to the review of the opera “Noah” based on the motifs of the short story “An elderly Sir, as light as a feather” (“Ein älterer Herr, federleicht”): “Christoph Heins protestantische Kalendergeschichten aus Deutschland” (“Christoph Hein’s Protestant calendar stories from Germany”) (Isenschmid, 1994).

In one of his first interviews the writer himself underlines the fact that many famous German writers are the children of Protestant clergymen (“Pfarrersöhne”) (Jachimczak, 1988). Although Hein is not willing to reveal the sources that influenced his works, he acknowledges the impact of the language of the Bible on his individual style: “Meine Sprache kommt stark von der protestantischen Bibelübersetzung, die Luther ja als Sprechender, als Prediger geschaffen hat” (“My language, to a great degree, comes from the Protestant translation of the Bible by Luther, storyteller and preacher”) (Dieckmann, 1998). Undoubtedly, the writer knows the Bible very well and often quotes it in his works. For example, Hein quotes the Old Testament, the second book of Moses “Exodus” (Das Buch Exodus) (Hein, 1990) in his essay “Des Menschen Auge hat’s nicht gehört. Von der Magie und den Magiern” (A human’s eyes haven’t heard this. On magic and magicians”). The paradoxical title is a quotation from Shakespeare’s “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” which in its turn parodies the Apostle Paul’s first message to Corinthians. Hein makes extensive use of the biblical matter in his works, resorting to biblical themes, images, motifs, as in a short story “Moses Tod” (“The Death of Moses”) (Hein, 1996a).

### 2. Material and Methods

The research centers around the biblical matter, present in Christoph Hein’s early prose. The early prose includes works written from 1981 till 1990, as well as the collection “Execution of a Calf and other stories”, published in 1996, which is due to the fact that it contains works created before the unification of Germany.

The research is based on a study of literature and the culturological approach to literary phenomena. The methodological basis consists of cultural-historical and hermeneutic methods. The research resorted to elements of intertextual methodology and linguo-stylistic analysis.

The cultural-historical method presupposes examining the object of study in the frames of the world’s general cultural context. The intertextual analysis enables us to detect connections between the fictional texts of the writer and the Bible.

The hermeneutic method concerns the problem of interpretation of a text of fiction. The interpretation of the fictional text implies understanding of Hein’s individual style, the peculiarities of which are revealed by means of linguo-stylistic analysis.

### 3. Results

The extensive use of varied biblical matter enables us to speak of a “biblical context” which creates psychologism of narration and sets the emotional tone, determines the multidimensional content and structure of Hein’s works. The author is characterized by a special historical perception of modern reality as a part of a long historical process, starting at the mythological biblical time. It is this biblical time that serves not only as a starting point of the history of the mankind, but also a measure of values which is always present in our memory. “Biblical context” can be considered an intertextual element of Hein’s poetic style, the element which binds different times and peoples in a polyphonic dialogue and incorporates the writer’s works into the centuries-old world cultural context.

### 4. Discussion

Resorting to biblical matter in German literature has continuously been the focal point for much discussion, which is sustained by the works of M.Braun “Probebohrungen im Himmel: Zum religiösen Trend in der Gegenwartsliteratur“ (“Trial Boring in the Sky: on a Religious Trend in Modern Literature”) (Braun, 2018) and E. Garhammer “Zweifel im Dienst der Hoffnung. Poesie und Theologie” (“Doubt in the Service of Hope. Poetry and Theology”) (Garhammer, 2011), compilation of articles edited by D. Weidner “Handbuch Literatur und Religion” (“Hand-book Literature and Religion”) (Weidner, 2016) and by G. Langenhorst “Gestatten: Gott! Religion in der Kinder- und Jugendliteratur der Gegenwart” (“Allowed: God! Religion in Modern Juvenile Literature”) (Langenhorst, 2011). Analysing the issue of literature and religion coming closer one to the other, M.Braun states that this is the “...Trend, den wir in den letzten 25 Jahren beobachten können.“ (“the trend which we can observe in modern literature of the last twenty-five years” (Braun, 2018).

It should be mentioned that particular aspects of the biblical problematique are reflected in critical works concerning Hein’s literary heritage. Thus, M.Braun considers a category of “memory” on the basis of Hein’s short story “Moses Tod“ (“The Death of Moses”) and analyses a dialectical interconnection of memory and religion (Braun, 2009). The researcher also characterizes the peculiarities of the writer-chronist’s style comparing it with the style of Luke the Evangelist in the book “Probebohrungen im Himmel: Zum religiösen Trend in der Gegenwartsliteratur“ (Braun, 2018) and the article “Heimat, Vertreibung, Exil. Zu Christoph Heins Roman Landnahme“ (“Homeland. Exile. On Christoph Hein’s Novel “Land Seizure”) (Braun, 2005). The literary critic H. Mimpriß treats the use of religious motifs as an expression of humility and hope (Mimpriß, 2000). Considering the insufficient (to our viewpoint) level of research on the biblical matter in Hein’s works, we find it justified to study this problem on the basis of the writer’s early, most famous works which are the embodiment of Hein’s aesthetic views and reflect his basic problematique.

#### 4.1. Bibleisms and Biblical Motifs

Bibleisms are termed as popular expressions taking their origin in the Bible (Belokurova, 2006). These are separate words or idioms in general use fixed in linguistic dictionaries.

Among bibleisms of the earlier works a group of proper names can be singled out: anthroponyms and toponyms, such as Moses, the mountain Nebo, (Hein, 1996a), Noah (Hein, 1996b), Gomorrah (Hein, 1985). These names are most frequent in the works treating biblical themes as the main subject matter.

An artistic peculiarity that characterizes a biblical word consists in the wide scope of this sign-symbol. A single biblical word brings about a whole complex of biblical stories and corresponding motifs. Thus, the name of Noah is associated with the name of the biblical patriarch, righteous person who built Noah’s Ark and saved his family and many animals during the Flood (Averintsev, 2003a). The biblical story of the Flood is based on the antithesis: righteousness-salvation and sinfulness-punishment. The basic function of resorting to the bibleism Noah is exactly manifestation of this aesthetic information.

The second group of bibleisms – idioms that have been borrowed from the text of the Bible and originated from the biblical legends – is the most frequent in Hein’s works. For example, this is what Dr. Spodeck says of his little town: “Der Tod eines Mannes wie Horn sollte ausreichen, um diese Stadt wie ein biblisches Gomorrha auszutilgen.“ (“A death of a person like Horn is enough to destroy this town as that of the biblical Gomorrah”) (Hein, 1985). As is well known, the biblical city of Gomorrah alongside with the city of Sodom is a symbol of abject sinfulness, which caused Divine wrath and was completely consumed by fire. The biblical nomination Gomorrah characterizes all the inhabitants of the city and conveys the Old Testament motif of the Fall and the imminent punishment.

It is the same story of Sodom and Gomorrah that Claudia, a character of the novel „Der Fremde Freund“ (“A Friend Stranger”), alludes to: „Hinter uns sind nur brennende Städte, und die Umkehrende, die Zurückbleibende erstarrt zu einer Säule bitteren Salzes.“ (“Behind us are only burning cities, and the one who turns back or falls behind will turn into a pole of bitter salt” (Hein, 1982). This biblical quotation also refers to the motif of punishment: having disobeyed, even the righteous people may be punished.

Speaking of his father and himself, Dr. Spodeck says: “... weil ich sein Sohn war, weil ich Fleisch von seinem Fleisch war.” (“as I was his son, as I was flesh of his flesh” (Hein, 1985). This biblical Old Testament idiom underlines recurrence of the Fall and forms the motif of continuity of generations.

Such bibleisms as “Leiden-Christi Gesicht“ (“the face resembling the face of the suffering Christ”) (Hein, 1985), characterizing Gertrude Fischlinger, “einem Gottesurteil gleich” (“equatable to divine retribution”) (Hein, 1989) - on Dallow Senior’s reaction to the imprisonment of his son, or “Die verlorene Seele“ (“the lost soul”) (Hein, 1985), the constitutive feature of the major character Horn, express the motif of suffering.

In the whole gallery of lonely and suffering characters, presented in Hein's early works, a particular group of female images which comprises Gertrude from "Horns Ende" ("Horn's End"), Friedericke from the short story "Friedericke, Martha, Hilde" (the story from the collection "Einladung zum Lever Bourgeois" "Invitation to A Morning Royal Reception") (Hein, 1980) can be singled out. These are characters who humbly accept the heavy ordeals that they had to face.

Alongside with the Christian motif of humility there also arises a motif of sacrifice. In our opinion, the death of the major character Horne of the novel "Horns Ende" („Horn's End“) can be interpreted as a self-sacrifice, notwithstanding the fact that suicide is considered a sin in Christianity. Among the leading motifs of this action apart from the wish for freedom and protest against life circumstances, we can name a desire thus to influence the minds and change the existing order. Introductions to the chapters in which Horn induces the boy Thomas, who has already grown up, to recollections, can serve as a proof of the statement: "Du darfst nicht vergessen, mein Junge. Wenn du mich vergißt, erst dann sterbe ich wirklich. Aber dann wird die Hölle die Toten erwecken." („You mustn't forget, my boy. When you forget me, only then I will really die. But then the Hell will awaken the dead.“) (Hein, 1985).

The quotation from the Gospel of Luke emphasizes the motif of silence and the motif of memory: "Wenn ihr schweigt, dann werden die Steine schreien." ("If you keep silent, then the stones will cry out.") (Hein, 1985)

Bibleisms – quotations from the New Testament and the Old Testament – convey the motifs of silence, memory, Fall, continuity, punishment, suffering, humility, sacrifice. It is noteworthy that among all the motifs it is precisely the motifs of silence and memory that become the leading motifs of the author's works.

## 4.2. Artistic Functions of a Biblical Image

Hein's story "Ein älterer Herr, federleicht" ("An elderly Sir, as light as a feather") is one of the few works with the biblical subject being the main one. The presence of the biblical nomination Noah in the text brings about two-dimensional narration.

The realistic line of narration centers around the image of the old Noah living in a complete isolation from the world in his flat in an abandoned tumbledown house to be demolished. In his conversations with a girl, who looks after him out of pity, the old man confesses that he is the biblical Noah and tells her the stories of his long 949-year-old life which lead him to a conflict with God. The girl does not take the stories seriously. Tiny psychological details of narration form an ironic image of both a miserable and moving "crazy" old man.

The biblical line of narration is connected with the image of the patriarch and prophet Noah of the Old Testament and the story of the Flood as a result of which only Noah and his family were saved and became the ancestors of the modern mankind. It worth mentioning that the whole biblical story of Noah is not included in the text of the story, thus becoming its underlying theme.

The bibleisms "Noah", "Flood", "Fall" convey the biblical motifs of the Fall and the "divine wrath" – retribution (Hein, 1996a). According to the character of the story all punishment for human sins was useless since the story of the fall and punishment is repeated again and again. The literary reviews pointed out the peculiar interpretation of the image of Noah by the author, from whose perspective a righteous man turns into a theomachist (Schuer, 2001); (Kämpfer, 2001).

The opposition of two planes of narration and images of the Noah of the Old Testament and the modern Noah creates an ironic effect of blending of the heroic and the comic, a play of contrasts and synthesis of the opposites form the ironic key of narration.

The biblical story of Noah which is not included in the plot of the story turns into "prehistory", an initial episode of narration, broadening the fictional space and time from the mythological beginnings up to modern times. The evolution of Noah's image from a great righteous man to a comic "theomachist" reflects, to our mind, the author's conception of the historical development of the human society.

## 4.3 Biblical Matter and the Peculiarities of Hein's Poetic Style

Reflecting on the role of literature and word power in his essay "Worüber man nicht reden kann, davon kann die Kunst ein Lied singen" ("What is impossible to speak of, art can sing a song about", Hein mentions the Bible and particularly emphasizes the Old Testament (Hein, 1996b).

Literary criticism pays attention to the language of the author which under the influence of "religious" symbolism is defined as a form of "hidden writing", "reading between the lines" and is characterized as "Aesop's language" (Braun, 2009). As it was stated above, resorting to bibleisms only manifests certain aesthetic information which constitutes the underlying theme of the text.

The biblical matter serves as an intertextual element of the writer's poetic style, as a cultural code referring to its original source – the text of Holy Writ. This in its turn presupposes that the reader has to possess certain knowledge in the sphere of Christianity, to know and understand the Bible, to possess the skills of text analysis. Using bibleisms in the course of narration demonstrates striving for dialogue with a prepared reader.

Hein resorts both to the texts of the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament bibleism of Sodom and Gomorrah, for example, adds emotional colouring to the narrative. Using the bibleism, the author conveys the psychological state of the character of „Der Fremde Freund“ ("A Friend Stranger"): her loneliness, helplessness, suffering. Biblical metaphors are one of expressive means of the writer, whose poetic style, to our mind, can be characterized as a style of „hidden“, „subtextual“ psychologism (Valeeva, 2014).

Quotations from the New Testament express the most significant motifs of the author's works: "Lasset die Toten die Toten begraben, sagt die Bibel. Wollen wir in diesem Punkt christlich handeln. Lassen wir die Toten ruhen." („Let the dead bury the dead. Let us act as Christians here. Let us leave the dead in peace.“) (Hein, 1985).

The implication of the word “dead” here is the past, which must be left intact, as it cannot be changed and does not need interpretation. The past must be remembered, it must be conceived.

In “Moses Tod” (“The Death of Moses”) the writer narrates the biblical story of the prophet Moses who led his peoples out of Egypt and to the Promised Land (Averintsev, 2003b). The story centers around the death of the 120-year-old biblical patriarch to whom it was announced that he would not be able to cross the river Jordan, but would have the chance to look at the Promised Land from the mountain Nebo. However, the author does not only transmit the biblical version of Moses’s death, but also introduces a version from a non-extant historic chronicle. The prophet’s death becomes ground for reflections on the role of a chronist and interpretation of history, that is Hein uses the biblical theme to manifest his basic aesthetic principles.

Hein interprets history (including the biblical history) as an invariable part of modern times which influences the present, thus understanding of history is elevated to the rank of the category of aesthetic perception of reality (Beier, 1990). As Hein states in his essay “Die Zeit, die nicht vergehen kann oder Das Dilemma des Chronisten” (“The Time that cannot Pass, or a Dilemma of a Chronist”), a writer to a certain extent is also a historian, also a chronicler of time (Hein, 1992).

The position of a writer – chronicler of his time, his technique of biblical narration and “Protestant” translation of the Bible defined the poetic style of Hein’s prose. According to M. Braun, “die Grundformel von Heins Erzählprogramm: mit archaischer Strenge, spröde und unbewegt in den Wirrnissen der Zeit, unbestechlich und verlässlich, mit mitleidloser Genauigkeit Zeugnis abzulegen von den Ereignissen der Zeit.“ („The main formula of Hein’s narrative programme: with archival strictness, in a dry and impassionate manner in the fuss of time, impartially and reliably, with merciless precision bear witness to the events of the time“ (Braun, 2005).

Resorting to biblical matter stresses one more peculiarity of Hein’s poetic manner – its ethical orientation, orientation toward eternal moral values. In so doing, the writer is a moralist not inclined to moralize, which is achieved through an intellectual dialogue with the reader, by means of biblical matter as well.

## 5. Conclusion

The biblical matter in the works of Hein creates a particular “biblical context” of the author’s poetic style. The use of biblical nominations or quotations manifests the necessary aesthetic information which forms the implication of the work. The metaphorical character of biblical matter determines such peculiarities of the style as the tragic tone and implicit psychologism of narration. The aesthetic function of numerous biblical motifs alongside with other existential motifs consists in forming the message and structure of the works of fiction. The study of the biblical matter revealed the influence of the biblical chronicle on the individual style of the writer, confirmed the ethical orientation of his works and significance of aesthetic categories of his artistic world. The “biblical context” as an intertextual element of Hein’s poetic style gives birth to an intellectual dialogue with a prepared reader and incorporates the writer’s works into the world cultural context.

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