The Succession History of David: A Meta-Theoretical Examination of the Applicability and Validity of Narratology

This study focuses on meta-theoretical matters relating to the applicability and validity of narratology. My method is to construct a dialogue between theory, texts, and interpreters who use a narrative or literary approach, and to analyze issues that come to the fore in this dialogue. To identify these issues, I take my starting point in suggested interpretations and these questions: Are there “cracks” in these readings? And if so, can these cracks be explained by the fact that these critics have applied narrative theory incorrectly or on texts that should have been approached differently, or should they be taken to point to deficiencies in the theory as such?

In a first phase, I wrote three essays. In the first two—“Can There Be a Narrative Method of Text Analysis and Interpretation?” and “Is There Anything Hypothetical in David Herman’s ‘Hypothetical Focalization?’”—I examine the relationship between postclassical narratologies and classical, structuralist narratology. The former appear to accept the maxims of the latter study, although they criticize the object, methods, and aims of classical narratology.

Yet some critics, as Lars-Åke Skalin, advocate a more radical approach. He calls the object of both postclassical and classical narratologies into question. Moreover, he criticizes vital axioms, such as the assumption that even fiction has a narrator who provides information retrospectively and the suggestion that readers are transposed to a world they then interpret, and claims that they are ad hoc hypotheses that are supposed to uphold the assumed common object. Skalin suggests instead an aesthetical approach in which literary fiction is not seen as a secondary variant of more natural narratives but rather as aesthetic compositions built from motifs with a sense.

Even a postclassical narratologist as Herman tends, due to the presupposition that fiction is a secondary variant of natural narratives, to discuss literature in a non-literary way. This becomes, I suggest, obvious in his interpretative praxis. I thus hold that none of the examples Herman refers to when arguing for his “hypothetical focalization” in Story Logic illustrates what they are supposed to illustrate.

The third essay I penned is a response to Gregory T. K. Wong’s critique of my doctoral thesis. Yet it is relevant to the present study, since the debate illustrates two distinct appreciations of a literary study of the Bible. Although Wong et al. advocate a synchronic approach, they focus on the history of composition and attempt, via a study of the literary form of the texts, to get hold of the intentions of the final redactors. The alternative option takes its starting point in the history of interpretation and discusses the interpretations a text has generated by comparing its content and forms with convention from secular literature.

In Untamable Texts, I discuss issues relating to the books of Samuel, critics who claim to read these texts with a literary approach, and literary theories, primarily narratology. A first issue concerns the relationship between poetics and interpretation. Theories
with a descriptive aim are often used in biblical studies to produce new readings. Critics thus claim to be able to tell what certain texts really mean, based on their expertise in specific and general poetics. They also assert that other readers for some reason have misread these texts. Yet narratology aspires to describe humans’ ability to produce and understand narratives. This reasoning implies a problem, since readings that are supposed to be based on these theories can come up with interpretations that contrast the very ability the theories are supposed to be simulations of.

One explanation to this tension is, I argue, that narratologists have suggested, based on some foundational distinctions, a host of terms denoting variables and entities that are supposed to exist in all narrative texts. The suggested distinctions and terms are not, however, only observations from a comparative study of narrative texts but also seemingly logical derivations from the model as such. If one does not accept certain axioms in the theory, and I hold that we have good reasons not to accept them, one can also call the distinctions and variables in question.

Yet many critics consider narratology to be a valuable heuristic tool. To answer this putative objection, I refer to Gérard Genette’s method when analyzing Proust and argue that he first reads Proust almost intuitively and then, secondarily, relates his result to the theory. Proust is hereby allowed to diverge from the seemingly logical necessities the theory describes.

A second issue concerns whether the term “literary” denotes only the form of a text or if it denotes a certain apprehension of its “sense-governing intent” (genre taken in a wide sense). Some critics assume that parts of the books of Samuel have a literary function or intent. A more common opinion is that it is history and apologetics that for some reason have a literary form or that the distinction between different “sense-governing intents” does not influence the analysis or interpretation of a narrative text. According to my opinion, however, the ability to distinguish between different narrative “language-games” is an important part of the competence this kind of communication is based on. It is thus a mistake to assume that all narratives are built from the same forms and that the functions of these forms are given by the forms themselves and not by the language game. To illustrate the distinction between different kinds of narratives, I did a close reading of sections of 2 Samuel. I argue that critics tend to neglect this feature and its implications.

One explanation to this is, I suggest, that narratologists have tried to cover all different forms of narrative communication in a single model. As a consequence, they tend to regard literary fiction as a secondary variant of a more basic form. I call this approach in question and argue that our apprehension of a text’s “sense-governing intent” majorly impacts our understanding of it.

Even though narratologists generally hold all narratives to be variants of a single basic structure, many claim it is possible to tell historiography and fiction apart because of certain fictional signposts. These signposts relate to the assumed fact that a writer of fiction is freer than a historian, since he is not obligated to answer the “how do you know” question. This has, however, been questioned by theoreticians who claim that the border between the two genres is not transcultural. The latter critics advocate a relativistic appreciation of historiography. I suggest that it is only according to such a notion that the books of Samuel can be described as historiography. Meir Sternberg argues that these authors could have a freedom we tend to reserve for
writers of fiction because of their implicit claim to be inspired. I suggest instead that it is a kind of “bona fide” situation, in which an account is taken to be true, even though it is not tested critically as other kinds of information.

A third issue concerns the interpretation of sense and referent. To discuss this issue, I distinguish between three apprehensions of reading: 1) a historical approach that does not consider the text’s version as absolute and directs the interpretative focus at the referent, 2) an aesthetic approach that reads the text as an aesthetic composition with sense, and 3) a phenomenological notion of reading that assumes that both fiction and nonfiction open a window to a world the reader interprets. Even though it is assumed that the text’s version is absolute, the reader fills in the world (regardless of whether it is considered to be complete). To discuss the latter options, I use two metaphors: to look at a painting and to look through a window.

I then discuss a series of interpretations I find to be “disquieting” since they appear to be at odds with basic intuitions concerning the character and sense of the texts. This can, I suggest, be explained by the fact that critics—due to the tradition of biblical interpretation, the character of the biblical texts, and obscurities in theories about narratives, fiction, and reading—tend to come up with interpretations of a putative referent that do not cohere with the sense of the text. Critics commonly argue for their readings, referring to gap-filling or to an “internal perspective” according to which they, so to speak, enter the narrative world, and interpret events and characters as individual items neglecting their function and meaning in structures such as plot and theme. Although theoreticians claim that gap-filling and the drawing of implications is regulated by the text, they have not been able to explain convincingly how the relation between these levels works.

I discuss in a fourth section two nodes or points of intersection between the partakers in the constructed dialogue: narrator and perspective. These concepts are important for biblical literary critics. Yet it is not obvious which features or functions they denote. I suggest that this in part can be explained by obscurities in the theory. I argue, for example, that the obligatory narrator is an unnecessary construction. When discussing perspective, I hold that the biblical authors used techniques to achieve an empathetic following according to which the characters are not reduced to mere types or functions in the plot. This kind of narration is more economical (suitable) if the intent is literary than if it is, for example, apologetic. These texts are thus, I suggest, rather religious than theological, since they picture life in a religious world instead of illustrate a certain system or belief.