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Listening to the Text

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## LISTENING TO THE TEXT\*

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It has been rumored; no, it has been suggested; no, indeed it has been asserted that our discipline is caught up in the throes of crisis. What exactly is understood by that rumor, that suggestion, that assertion, given the various ways in which that term is used, is less than clear. The *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*<sup>1</sup> offers the following definitions to assist us on the way:

Crisis. 1. a stage in a sequence of events at which the trend of all future events, especially for better or worse, is determined; turning point. 2. the point in a play or story at which hostile elements are most tensely opposed to each other. 3. Medicine. a. the point in the course of a serious disease at which a decisive change occurs, leading either to recovery or death. b. the change itself. 4. a condition of instability, as in social, economic, political or international affairs leading to a decisive change.

The most common usage of the term today derives from the fourth, "a condition of instability," without, generally, including the last phrase, "leading to a decisive change." It is the equivalent of trouble. If that is what is meant then, I suggest, we are on familiar ground; the situation is, for us, quite normal and ought cause no undue alarm. The medical definition too does not seem appropriate, as yet. Diagnosis precedes prognosis and I am not yet certain what the serious disease is. The dramatic definition as well seems overwrought, for who is protagonist and who antagonist is not yet evident. And are we at the turning point "at which the trend of all future events especially for better or worse is determined"? I do not think we have arrived there yet.

An abstract noun with the same suffix but a different stem may more accurately describe the present moment; not crisis but stasis. Again, the dictionary: "1. the state of equilibrium or inactivity caused by opposing equal forces." I am bold enough to use this term because even a hasty

\* The Presidential Address delivered 19 December 1982 at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature held at the New York Hilton, New York, NY.

<sup>1</sup> New York: Random House, 1973.

perusal of much of current scholarly publication leaves one with the uneasy feeling that ours is, at the moment, scholiastic scholarship. There is much marking of time, much treading water. Yet crisis or stasis—the choice between them may be a matter of temperament, or neither—some attention ought be paid by us to the state of our common endeavor. The rumor or suggestion or assertion grew out, it appears, of an unease if not a disease felt. For many our enterprise has grown stale and unprofitable. We call for bread and are, we believe, given stone.

Let me offer two concurring perspectives, one from a literary critic, the other from a philosopher, that have, at least for me, cast some light on crisis or stasis. Frank Kermode in *The Sense of Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*<sup>2</sup> wrote, and I am beginning in *medias res*, intending to retrace my steps, regarding the failure of fictions, that they cease, in Francis Bacon's words, "to give some show of satisfaction to the mind."

Our ways of filling the interval between the tick and the tock [the beginning and the end] must grow more difficult and more self-critical as well as more various; the need we continue to feel is a need of concord and we supply it by increasingly varied concord-fictions. They change as the reality from which we, in the midst, seek a show of satisfaction, changes, because "times change." The fictions by which we seek to find "what will suffice" change also.

Don Ihde in his *Sense and Significance*<sup>3</sup> wrote of the "lies" (the equivalent of Kermode's fictions, it seems to me), ideas one treats as though true (Vaihinger's *als ob*)<sup>4</sup> allowing, in proper pragmatic terms, their conceptual "usefulness" to disclose their truthfulness. He wrote: "Eventually I learned from these 'lies,' once their pedagogical usefulness began to open new vistas of thought which in turn allowed one entrance to undreamed of territory."

A summary of these may, perhaps, be seen in what the novelist Henry Miller wrote of the French word *histoire*.

That *histoire* should be story, lie and history all in one, was of significance not to be despised. And that a story, given out as the invention of a creative artist, should be regarded as the most effective material for getting at the truth about its author, was also significant. Lies can only be imbedded in truth. They have no separate existence. They have a symbiotic relationship with truth. A good lie reveals more than truth can ever reveal. To the one, that is, who seeks truth. To such a person there could never be cause for anger or recrimination when confronted with the lie. Not even pain, because all would be patent, naked and revelatory.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> (Reprint edition; New York: Oxford University, 1981) 62–63, but see the whole chapter, pp. 35–64.

<sup>3</sup> (New York: Humanities Press for Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1973) 14–15.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Kermode, *The Sense of Ending*, 39–42.

<sup>5</sup> *The Rosy Crucifixion, Book One, Sexus* (New York: Grove, 1965) 339.

The terms here used, “fictions,” and “lies,” can be or are disquieting. They cut the ground of positive as well as positivistic meaning from under our feet. Indeed, at one point, I was ready to indulge in the stratagem of substitution stratagem for these terms. But that would have been neither fiction nor lie; that would have been rank deception. We shall have to grasp the nettle. “Fictions are,” Kermode wrote, “our humanly ordered picture of the world.” I would add, or any part of that world, that whole. Taking this seriously, we may argue that the truthfulness (not the truth) of fictions is their conceptual usefulness within the limitations of our present experience as that present experience bears within itself our past experience as well. Ihde, writing of phenomenology, commented:

In its Husserlian beginnings [it] was thought of as a new “science of experience” beginning in descriptive psychology. If the science metaphor is understood in its best sense as an open-ended, exploratory, exciting in discovery, interrogation which results *not* in leaving things as they were, then it is indeed appropriate. Perhaps phenomenology is like science in another sense as well. To perform as a creative theoretical thinker it is necessary to change perspective. The scientific thinker must abandon or at least suspend certain long held and habitual beliefs about things. He must begin to think in a new and often radically different way.

He must, if I may summarize what Ihde has written, tell a “lie.” To continue:

The “common man” of the Copernican era insofar as his positivistic holding to his earthbound perspective holds, was quite correct in insisting that the sun sets and rises. But he also fails to see the possibility of inhabiting a different perspective, the imaginative perspective which places the thinker at that point which allows one to “see” that the earth moves around the sun.<sup>6</sup>

Or, anticipating a further discussion, the Russian formalist Šklovskij observed that the role of art—not merely of science—is delivery from mere recognizing, i.e., re-cognizing, back to seeing.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the role of Kermode’s “fictions” or Ihde’s “lies” may be more clearly recognized through Kermode’s distinction between fiction and myth.

Myth operates within the diagrams of ritual, which presupposes total and adequate explanation of things as they are and were; it is a sequence of radically unchangeable gestures. Fictions are for finding things out and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability, fictions, the agents of change.<sup>8</sup>

Let me put these two perspectives together. Ihde’s “common man” saw

<sup>6</sup> Op. cit., loc. cit.

<sup>7</sup> See below, note 25.

<sup>8</sup> Kermode, *The Sense of Ending*, 39.

the sun rise and set. The sense-making ordering of that observation was a notable fiction or, in Ihde's word, "lie," the Ptolemaic picture of the universe; in its time and place an unbelievably subtle and, in terms of conceptual usefulness, truthful fiction. But the Ptolemaic fiction became Ptolemaic myth, the "truth," as challenged by Copernicus, no longer truthful.

This is, I recognize, all too brief, all too crude. Yet I may have suggested enough to allow me to take another step. The crisis or stasis of our present situation may, I suggest, be understood from the perspective here indicated: the failure of a fiction, a "lie" or its transfiguration into a myth. The fiction that lies at the basis of our discipline has increasingly, so it appears to me, failed to provide that "show of satisfaction"; the "sense-making paradigms" have ceased to make full sense. What is that fiction whose name-day if not its birthday was celebrated two years ago? The Documentary Hypothesis or, to add poignancy to our present situation, the Source Myth, for it is its mythic stasis that gives rise to crisis. Without attempting to argue the point, I suggest that the greater part of biblical scholarship as it deals with both the Hebrew and the Greek Scriptures is poised ultimately on the Documentary fiction, the Source Myth; a fiction, a myth as subtle, as elegant and as truthful, in terms of conceptual usefulness, as was the Ptolemaic view of the relationship between earth, sun, planets, fixed stars. Let me now turn to what I understand to be the genesis of that fiction.

The beginnings of modern biblical scholarship, as we recite its history, are most generally set in the seventeenth century and are seen as part of that vast refocusing of Western thought that followed after and was, indeed, the continuing echo of renaissance and reformation. Spinoza and Astruc are among the names mentioned and we recount how they observed the several divine names used in the early chapters of Genesis and what conclusions they drew therefrom. Now, of course, when we make note of this, we do not intend to suggest that no one had noticed previously that Deity was referred to in Gen 1:1 by one noun, presumably a proper name, but in Gen 2:4b two names occur; the name from Gen 1:1 and yet another, quite clearly a proper name. The difference was noted in the midrash *Gen. Rab.*<sup>9</sup> and explained in the following fashion: the first name, *'elōhîm*, denoted deity as the just one, as judge; the second name, the tetragrammaton, was the name of mercy. It is evident from the use of the single name in Gen 1:1 that the divine intention was to create a universe governed solely under the principle of justice. The appearance of a second name conjoined to the first in Gen 2:4b indicated that a universe governed solely by justice could not endure, hence, mercy had to be joined to it to insure the survival of

<sup>9</sup> *Gen. Rab.* 12:15; 33:3, etc.; Eng. trans. pp. 99, 262-63.

creation. That this is an explanation of the text cannot be gainsaid. But for Spinoza, who undoubtedly knew it, for Astruc and for others it no longer gave, in Kermodé's words, "some show of satisfaction to the mind."

What we are called upon to recognize is the difference between the situation in which the author of the midrash functioned—no later than the sixth century of this era—and that of the seventeenth century. Times had changed and with that change the vast structure of fictions that had made sense of Scriptures no longer satisfied man in the midst of that change.

The Sea of Faith [in Arnold's words] was once, too, at the full and round  
 earth's shore  
 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
 But now I only hear  
 Its melancholy, long withdrawing roar  
 Retreating, to the breath  
 Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
 And naked shingles of the world.<sup>10</sup>

The fictions that were for finding out had become the myths and myths were not enough.

I saw the 'potamus take wing [T. S. Eliot was later to write]  
 Ascending from the damp savannas  
 And quiring angels round him sing  
 The praise of God, in loud hosannas.  
 Blood of the Lamb shall wash him clean  
 And him shall heavenly arms enfold,  
 Among the Saints shall he be seen  
 Performing on a harp of gold.  
 He shall be washed as white as snow,  
 By all the martyr'd virgins kist,  
 While the True Church remains below  
 Wrapt in the old miasmal mist.<sup>11</sup>

To dispel what it saw as the old miasmal myth was the task the nineteenth century imposed upon itself. New sense had to be made of what was now, for the *gebildete Mensch*, no longer sacred Scripture, a single seamless text from Genesis through the Apocalypse, but a sprawling corpus of Hebrew, with some Aramaic thrown in, and Greek texts. It was either that or, as some preferred, interment decently, perhaps even regretfully, on the shelves of libraries or, more radically, casting with little regard on the midden heap of history the corpse of these now out-worn texts.

<sup>10</sup> "Dover Beach."

<sup>11</sup> T. S. Eliot, "The Hippopotamus" in *A New Anthology of Modern Poetry* (ed. Seldon Rodman; New York: Modern Library, 1939) 246.

What tools were available for sense-making? Here one must attend to the fact that, for whatever reasons, much of this took place on the European continent, first and foremost in Germany. It was in Germany that the study of texts, of the texts of classical antiquity, had been and was being developed into what was thought to be a science. One could have hoped that Wilamowitz's *Geschichte der Philologie*, recently translated into English under the title *History of Classical Scholarship*<sup>12</sup> and edited with an introduction by Hugh Lloyd-Jones of Oxford, would have afforded some deeper insight into that development. Unfortunately it is a mostly dreary and sterile recitation of names, beginning with the Hellenistic discipline of *grammatike* and carrying down to the middle of the nineteenth century. Finally, on page 155—there are twenty-three pages left—he wrote: “But enough of names”; then, on page 178: “What classic scholarship is, and what it should be, are clear from its history.” I had thought I had an inkling when, in discussing the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century English scholar Richard Bentley, he wrote: “Actually in this maiden effort [the publication of *Epistula ad Millium*] we already have the whole of Bentley—the happy knack of the emender, the exact observation which enabled him to arrive at fixed rules, the vision that showed him what the great tasks of scholarship were.” But it was not to be, for a few pages later he wrote: “. . . but the simple truth is that there is more to scholarship than that.” (Than what? “the vigour with which he seizes on the genuine tradition. . . . The gift of metrical observation.”) To continue:

Even to understand a poem, and a poet, rightly requires other things than intellect, which was Bentley's only weapon. . . . Scholarship of this kind [establishing the historical facts] can purify the author's text, which is certainly a great achievement and the essential first step; but it cannot bring his work to life and in order to do so in the way in which the author intended, historical research has to conjure up before us the whole environment from which it sprang.<sup>13</sup>

Actually Lloyd-Jones' “Introduction” of twenty-eight pages is often more insightful and more helpful. What is of particular interest is his underscoring the conflict between Wilamowitz and Nietzsche.<sup>14</sup> Since Nietzsche is the godfather, rightly or wrongly, of a significant school of contemporary literary criticism that is certainly influencing biblical scholarship, that reminder is important. It is then to Nietzsche we may turn for some understanding of the development of classic scholarship. But it is not the late Nietzsche, it is not even the Nietzsche of the ideas and notes for the planned but never-completed *Unzeitgemässen Betrachtung Wir*

<sup>12</sup> Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1982.

<sup>13</sup> Wilamowitz, *Classical Scholarship*, 79, 81–82.

<sup>14</sup> Wilamowitz, *Classical Scholarship*, xi–xii.

*Philologen*<sup>15</sup> I have in mind. It is, in the first instance, the Nietzsche of the inaugural lecture in the University of Basel, May 28, 1869, "Homer and Classical Philology."<sup>16</sup> In that lecture, dealing with the problem of the personality of Homer, one comes to understand what classic philology—the classical philology clearly undergirding developing biblical scholarship—was in the mind of the twenty-three-year-old professor.

Philology is composed of history just as much as of natural science or aesthetics: history, insofar as it endeavors to comprehend manifestations of the individualities of peoples in ever new images, and the prevailing law in the disappearance of phenomena; natural science, insofar as it strives to fathom the deepest instinct of man, that of speech; aesthetics, finally, because from various antiquities at our disposal it endeavors to pick out the so-called "classical" antiquity, with the view and pretention of excavating the ideal world buried under it and to hold up to the present the mirror of the classical and everlasting standards. . . .

We may consider antiquity from a scientific point of view; we may try to look at what has happened with the eye of a historian, or to arrange and compare the linguistic forms of ancient masterpieces, to bring them at all events under a morphological law; but we always lose the wonderful creative force, the real fragrance, of the atmosphere of antiquity; we forget the passionate emotion that instinctively drove our meditation and enjoyment back to the Greeks. . . .

The entire scientific and artistic movement of this peculiar centaur is bent, though with cyclopic slowness, upon bridging over the gulf between the ideal antiquity . . . and the real antiquity; thus classic philology pursues only the final end of its own being which is the fusing together of primarily hostile impulses that have only forcibly been brought together.

That a few years later, in the third lecture of the series, "The Future of our Educational Institutions,"<sup>17</sup> he saw the enterprise in a different light is also enlightening. There he said:

Another tracks down with the distrustful eye of a policeman every contradiction, every shadow of a contradiction of which Homer was guilty; he fritters his life away tearing homeric rags to tatters and stitching them together again; rags he himself stole from the magnificent robe. . . . Another torments himself with consideration of the question: why was Oedipus condemned by fate to such abominable acts, murdering his father, marrying his mother? Where is the blame! Where poetic justice! Suddenly he understands. Oedipus was, strictly speaking, a passionate fellow, without Christian gentleness: he even fell into an unseemly rage when Tiresias called him monster, the curse of the whole land. Be gentle! That is perhaps what Sophocles wanted to teach: otherwise you will end up marrying your mother

<sup>15</sup> "Gedanken und Entwürfe zu der Unzeitgemässen Betrachtung Wir Philologen" in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, Band II, *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtung* (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner, 1964) 529–602. "We Philologists," in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964) 8.109–90.

<sup>16</sup> *Complete Works*, 3.146–70.

<sup>17</sup> *Sämtliche Werke*, 2.391–527; *Complete Works*, 3.3–142.

and killing your father! Finally one promises the solution to a problem such as, "the homeric from the standpoint of the preposition," and believes he will draw truth from the bottom of the well by means of *ana* and *kata*.<sup>18</sup>

This is not entirely a caricature of the classic philology that was becoming the basis of biblical scholarship. Perhaps a clearer understanding of what was and is involved comes from Lloyd-Jones' "Introduction." In it he points to Wilamowitz's own notable contributions to the field but at the same time he indicates his Achilles' heel, most certainly that of the whole direction of scholarship he so ably represented.

The various disciplines linked together by his conception of *Altertumswissenschaft* are in theory on an equal footing; but in practice the rest were held together in the firm grasp of a single branch of study, history; and to regard every facet of a culture from a historical standpoint may involve some dangers. For example, modern anthropology has accustomed us to the idea, obvious enough in itself, that cultural phenomena may on occasion be viewed with profit under a synchronic as well as a diachronic aspect. Certain elements in religion, and even in philosophy, are best understood if we are free to approach them from a standpoint that is not fixed in time; and we can now see the harm done to the understanding of ancient literature and thought by an excessive preoccupation with development. In a sense every work of literature is a historical document; but an exclusively historical approach to it may result in the error of trying to extract from literature historical evidence that is not really there.<sup>19</sup>

This is, however, a retrospective judgment; Nietzsche's contemporary judgment on the historicism that had emerged was lost sight of in the welter of controversies that swirled around him. At any rate it was this classical scholarship at its best and at its worst that provided the theory and practice of biblical scholarship. I do not intend, in making this statement, to suggest that biblical scholarship has remained with this status quo; yet, to return to a point raised earlier, much of what we have been doing is the writing of scholia on the central fiction formed in the image of classical philology. Our *explication de texte* has been of the fictional text. The Oral Tradition School indeed replaced documents but not underlying structure. Form criticism, rhetorical criticism, etc., etc., have all functioned within the fundamental fiction. Even the sociologists of ancient Israel work within some version of the Graf-Wellhausen fiction. Perhaps until recently only structuralists or at least some of them have ventured if not to challenge at least to ignore the fiction and/or myth. But times change and the sense of satisfaction, the sense-making of the fiction or the myth is more and more called into question. The realization that historiography itself, as Kermode has noted, is also fiction raises all sorts of questions about the "fixed results"

<sup>18</sup> *Sämtliche Werke*, 2.455; *Complete Works*, 3.79–80.

<sup>19</sup> Wilamowitz, *Classical Scholarship*, xvii.

of a *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*.<sup>20</sup> So scholia, like Ptolemaic epicycles, multiply and ramify. Thus it is that the crisis or stasis of ennui, of tedium vitae, of sheer boredom often pervades our ranks.

If this is a truthful, if not a true estimate of our present situation, what is to be done? I shall suggest what may seem the *mus ridiculus* of my labors; in the first instance a generalized statement, although the statement is after the fact. By that I mean that the “investigative ‘rules’” summarized by Ihde, to whom I have previously referred, as the stance of “phenomenological reductionism” are for me an afterthought, helpful in reminding me along the way of what I found out or was forced to find out as I have, ever since I learned to read or even before, when I listened to my grandfather, been involved in texts.

The rules are quite simple: suspend explanations; describe. Ihde wrote: “Phenomenology calls for the suspension of ‘theories’ which attempt to go behind or under experience, for a suspension of ‘constructs’ which are elaborated to account for such and such a phenomenon.” In short, bracket out the fiction, the myth that makes sense out of experience and return to experience; in our situation, return to the text. Yet this return, it seems to me, is not to the state of *tabula rasa*. Ihde suggests there is no “‘pure’ experience.” The rule is intended to direct one’s “looking” or in our case, I would say, our hearing. “It is a call to center one’s focus on the ‘thing itself.’” It is intended as well to make us aware by means of this “purposeful suspension of our habitual explanations . . . how powerful and constant these taken for granted predispositions are.” Or again, how we have forgotten how fictive our fictions are.

The second rule is that of varying possibilities. “One seeks to exhaust, insofar as possible, the full range of possibilities lying within any given region of investigation.” It is the narrowing of that range of possibilities that has, I suggest, given rise to our scholasticism, our stasis, our crisis. Again, it must be admitted that one cannot exhaust possibilities. What the rule calls for rather is “further to open the field of investigation and to preclude too rapid closure.”

The third rule: seek structures. Again, to quote Ihde, one “seeks not only the richness of experience, but its ‘shape’ . . . Variations are supposed to gradually reveal those structures both in terms of their boundaries and in terms of their characteristic features.” Such an approach is to bring one at last face to face with the “resistant of the invariant.” It is at this point that I begin to become uneasy, but I am reassured that “not all invariants are clear and distinct. . . . There are ‘inexact essences’ just as there are ‘concepts with blurred edges.’” In other words, the structures we discovered are, more than possibly, fictions that make sense for now,

<sup>20</sup> Cf. my paper “Wellhausen and Judaism” in *Semeia* 25.

for us who have opened ourselves to "the full range of possibilities," whose conceptual usefulness is their truthfulness for us.<sup>21</sup>

These rules are, as I have indicated, afterthought. I did not begin my particular intellectual journey with phenomenological theory. I began, however, phenomenologically. Academic autobiography is, I recognize, both *infra dig.* and *de trop*, yet I have never forgotten what I heard Victor Lenzen, the famed physicist and philosopher, tell the Philosophy Union in the University of California, Berkeley, almost fifty years ago: the presence of the observer changes the nature of that which is observed. How I find out what I find out as I am involved with a text may, in the long run, be as important or even more important than the results. Indeed, and this is a mere aside, a part of our stasis may be due to the fact that how we find out is as dreary as what we find out. As an aside within an aside, part of our pedagogical problem may be that our students have never found out how we found out what if anything we find out.

Last year, in commenting on Robert Polzin's *Moses and the Deuteronomist*,<sup>22</sup> I referred to my own experience of more than twenty years ago when I was studying the Habakkuk *peshet* of the Qumran Scrolls.<sup>23</sup> The question I found myself confronting as I pondered the text before me was, how did the interpreter of the words of the prophet arrive at his interpretation? The question arose because in many instances there was a gap between the prophet's words and the interpreter's declaration, "*peshet ha-davar*,"—"the word refers specifically to . . ." Was this sheer and mere arbitrariness on the interpreter's part—Humpty Dumpty's "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less"? Was it Elliger's "pneumatic interpretation"? The meaning of the prophet's words was revealed to the interpreter. One could not bridge the gap by mere human means. Was it a quasi-scholastic application of a body of hermeneutic rules? The interpreter was a *Schriftgelernter* in the most invidious and frequent sense in which that term was and still is used. Having rejected these as untruthful and having no exact knowledge of the times and circumstances in which the text had come into existence, I was thrown back on my own imagination. The hermeneutic rule I followed in order to discover the hermeneutics of the author of the *peshet* was: listen. I betook myself inside the enclosure of the text and listened to the interpreter listening to the biblical text. I had an idea of what his listening had wrought; I had the result, the *peshet*. Could I submit my subjectivity to his so that I could hear the prophet's words not as the Massoretic text instructed me to hear them but as someone back there instructed me to hear them? I had to

<sup>21</sup> Ihde, *Sense and Significance*, 16–18.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist* (New York: Seabury, 1980).

<sup>23</sup> Lou H. Silberman, "Unriddling the Riddle. A Study in the Structure and Language of the Habakkuk Peshet," *RevQ* (1961) 323–64.

acquire a second naïveté; let my ears and tongue play games; rollick and frolic with sounds; batter and bruise words until now and again they suddenly shattered, broke open and, wonderfully, the fragments joined themselves into an arch that spanned the gap between text and text. I am sure that despite my listening I did not always hear aright, but the most recent survey of what has come out of the studies of the Habakkuk *peshet* suggests that I do not have a tin ear.

I have indulged in this autobiographical unscientific prescript only to make clear that I am not offering a universal panacea but only an approach to a problem. If I argue phenomenological reductionism as at least a helpful undertaking in our situation it is because like Moliere's character who was amazed to learn he had all along been speaking prose, I learned to my amazement that what I had been forced to do by my scholarly tasks in order to make sense involved phenomenological reduction. I was forced to listen to the text in an unanticipated way. In doing so I have become ever more aware of the possibility of regarding and so dealing with and understanding biblical texts as—whatever else they are—works of literary art using the techniques of that art for their purposes. This means, of course, that they are subject to canons of literary criticism or, to remain true to the suggestions with which I began, to sense-making fictions, to truthful "lies."

But which particular fictions? Which conceptually useful "lies"? I do not intend to recite for you the present possibilities. I have acquired seven or more years of protocols of an exciting, provocative and challenging inter-disciplinary seminar on structuralism. I now have the beginnings of a shelf of volumes intended to make it possible to save the text. I have listened earnestly to the discussions that have taken place here at the Society's meetings during the past several years. These and more have offered and shall continue to offer themselves to us as ways of, I hope, listening to the text. It is and will continue to be our responsibility to search among them, to examine them, to test and to judge them, with the expectation that each may in some sense "open up new vistas of thought," indeed, save us from writing the biblical from the standpoint of the preposition.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1980) xi-xii: "Theoretical pronouncements therefore do not stand here as instruments to be used in mastering literary structures. On the contrary, it is through contact with literature that theoretical tools are useful precisely to the extent that they hereby change and dissolve in the hands of the user. Theory is here often the straight man whose precarious rectitude and hidden risibility, passion, and pathos are precisely what literature has somehow already foreseen. For literary stages the modes of its own misreading, making visible the literarity of the heart of the theory and rendering the effects of its project of understanding unpredictable. The rhetorical subversion of theory by its own discourse does not, however, prevent it from generating effects; indeed, it is precisely the way theory misses its target that produces incalculable and interesting effects elsewhere."

Instead of such a survey I shall offer some listenings to the text based on a somewhat less modish—that is not meant pejoratively—program. One is certainly a creature of one's experience and, as you recognize, what I experienced in the situation described above was art or artistry as technique. I intend to pursue that theme, not to suggest the exclusion of any other, but because it is congenial and because I think formal considerations may be laid out more clearly than others no less germane.

In an essay "Iskusstvo kak priem" ("Art as Technique"), published in *Poetika*<sup>25</sup> in 1919, Viktor Šklovskij began by discussing the problem of the economy of means in language, pointing out how habituation leads to automatization so that "in ordinary speech we leave phrases unfinished and words unexpressed." He wrote of an algebraizing mode of thought in which an object is apprehended by number and place. "We do not see it but recognize it by its primary characteristics." The result is that "automatization swallows up the thing, the clothing, the furniture, the woman, even the horrors of war." He quoted Tolstoi: "When the complexity of life passes by, unnoticed by many, then such life is as though it had not been." Art, on the contrary, Šklovskij argued, is just that which restores the experience of life. "Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things; to make the stone stonier." How does art accomplish this? The underlying act of art, its essential technique is, for Šklovskij, "alienation," "distancing."

The goal of art is to help someone experience an object as being seen not as being recognized. The technique of art is the technique of the "alienation" of the object, the technique of form-made-difficult; a technique that increases the difficulty of and the duration of perception, for the process of perception is art's own goal and must be prolonged. Where is alienation found? In literature, everywhere!

Let us return for a moment to Šklovskij's discussion of automatization in order to recognize it as a motive for what Wilamowitz wrote of as "the happy knack of the emender." In Judges 14, the battle of wits between Samson and the inhabitants of Timnah is recounted; in v 18 it is reported that the latter, having forced Samson's wife to reveal the meaning of the riddle, in the very nick of time, at the end of the deadline of the seventh day, **בטרם יבא ההרסה**, "before sunset," declared the solution. In Kittel, *BH*<sup>3</sup>, ad loc., and other places we are instructed "lege ההררה,

<sup>25</sup> In *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (trans. and Introduction by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis; Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1965). Although I know no Russian, it became evident as I used this translation that often all that was being translated were words not thoughts. Fortunately, I found a German translation of this essay and the two others quoted in this paper (*Texte der Russischen Formalisten* [Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1969] 1.2–35; the Russian and the German translation are on facing pages) that made sense of what was non-sense in some places in the English translation.

cf. 15,1” where we read: **ויאמר אבאה אל אשתי החדרה** [“let me go into my chamber to my wife”]. Automatization has clearly taken over. The word for sun, **חרם**, required to tighten the tension of the situation, the seventh day, just before sunset, must be dismissed because the verb **בא** is followed by the noun **חדר** just a few lines later. Why the rare word **חרם**? Robert Boling in his recent commentary suggests, “apparently to avoid confusion with *šmš*, chief element in Samson’s name.”<sup>26</sup> Yet it seems to me entirely possible that this somewhat alien word was chosen to “increase the difficulty and the duration of perception.” Why? For the sake of what was yet to come. The word **חרם** is saying, listen carefully. First we hear the solution in beautifully balanced words: **מה מחוק מדבש ומה עו מארי**. (A phonic analysis of this tells us what a subtle poet we are reading: five *mems*, actually six, for the *mem* of **מחוק** has a dageš; two glottal stops, an *‘ayin* followed by an *‘aleph*; and more, all of which slows us down.) Then Samson’s strange reply: **לולא הרשתם בעגלתי לא חירתי מצאתם חירתי** [“Had you not ploughed with my heifer you would have not solved my riddle”], with its utterly incongruous parallelism: the ploughing with a heifer; the solution of a riddle. This is a poetic device Šklovskij discusses in another essay to which I shall refer. Here again are phonic devices that are a delight: **לולא** and **לא** together with the internal rhymes **חם** and **תי**. But back to **חרסה**. Listen to its dissonant echo, the incongruous congruity of sound, in **חרשתם**, for which the writer has prepared us. The story itself stops in its tracks—we know the story—as we experience what Nietzsche called “the deepest instinct of man, that of speech.”

Another example among many of automatization leading to emendation is to be seen in the suggestions that have been made concerning the last verse (6) of Psalm 1. **כי יודע יי דרך צדיקים ודרך רשעים תאבד** [“For the Lord knows the ways of the righteous but the way of the wicked shall perish”]. The three notes in Kittel reflect what was already summarized in Gunkel’s Psalm commentary:

The second **דרך** attracts one’s attention: 1) the same word has already been used in 6a; 2) because **אבד** is not used otherwise with **דרך**. Shall we strike the first **דרך** with Sievers, Rothstein or read **יאבד** [in place of **תאבד**?] Schlögl read **יעוד** Ps 146:9. Perhaps a quite other word stood in place of the second **דרך** and an inattentive copyist still heard the previous **דרך**; similar occurrences are frequent. [The reference is to the two occurrences of **תורה** in v 2, the first of which is, of course, disposed of; to Ps 21:9 where the two occurrences of **תמצא** must be modified; and to Ps 72:17 where the two occurrences of **שמו** are not permitted.] The easiest is Cheyne’s suggestion to read here **ותקוה**. “Hope” is used with **אבד**, cf. Ps 9:19, Prov 10:28, Job 8:13. Further support is found in the fact that Ps 112 whose beginning is imitated by Ps 1 seems to conclude in the same way.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Robert Boling, *Judges* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1975) 231–32.

<sup>27</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *Die Psalmen* (5th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968) 4.

But he failed to note that it does so only if the massoretic reading תאווה רשעים תאבד is emended to read תקווה. The emendation of תאבד to יאבד or the emendation דרך to תקווה are examples of what Wilamowitz designated “the exact observation which enabled him [Bentley] to arrive at fixed rules.” דרך is masculine, hence the verb must be; or saving the verb, a feminine noun must be sought. No attention is paid to the hollow “o” of תאבד followed by a glottal stop and the falling “e” set between the fading aspirated *bet* and *dalet*, all of which conspire in the meaning “perish.” I do not intend to belabor this point but merely to indicate “automatization,” not listening to the text, has led more often than we imagine to “the happy knack of emending.”

I wish we had time to examine further the impact on our hearing of the text of Šklovskij's discussion of poetic language:

If we examine poetic language both in terms of its stock of sounds and words as well as in terms of its ordering of words and of the structures of meaning that are constructed out of those words, we encounter in every instance the same artistic trait: it is consciously fashioned to provide a perception free of automatization; the goal of the creator is that this artistry be seen and it is made “artistic” so that perception will linger on it in order that it reach to its greatest possible force and duration, so that things will not be perceived spatially but in their continuity. . . . According to Aristotle, poetic language must possess the characteristics of foreignness, strangeness; it is often of foreign origin, Sumerian in Assyrian, Latin in medieval Europe, Arabian in Persian, old Bulgarian as the foundation of Russian literary language [to which may be added Ugaritic in Psalms]; or it is an elevated language as in folk-songs that approach literary language. Here, too, belong the archaisms of poetic language, the complex language of the *dolce stil nuovo* (xii cent). . . . L. Jakubinskij . . . pointed to the law of complexity for poetic phonetics in the particular instance of the repetition of similar sounds. Thus poetic language is a difficult, complex, slowed-down language. . . .

Thus we arrive at a definition of the poetic as retarded, bowed language. It is composed language. Prose [by which he means non-artistic language] is ordinary language: economical, easy, regular (*dea prosae* is the goddess of childbirth, free of complications).<sup>28</sup>

Let us not depend, however, upon the insight of one critic alone. I call your attention to what a practicing poet, Edith Sitwell, wrote of her sequence “Façade”:

It was said that the images in the poems were strange. This is partly the result of condensation—partly because where the language of one sense was insufficient to cover the meaning, the sensation, I used the language of another, and by this means attempted to pierce down to the essence of the thing seen by discovering in it attributes which at first sight appear alien but which are actually related—by producing its quintessential color (sharper,

<sup>28</sup> Op. cit., English, 21–24; German, 31–35. The reference to *dea prosae* was completely misunderstood in the English translation.

brighter, than that which can be seen by an eye grown stale) and by stripping it of all unessential details.<sup>29</sup>

Or finally in this connection I remind you of Ian Ramsey's concept of the increasing oddness of religious language, an oddness that inhibits automatization and allows new meaning to break out at last. It is from this or these concurrent vantage points that we must listen to the text and so doing discover how much we have missed.

All of this and more represent the role of technique on the semantic level of the text. Now I shall further try your patience as I turn to another level, that which structuralists refer to as the deep structure but which I, following for the time being Šklovskij, shall refer to as plot. I do not intend to summarize either of the two essays in which Šklovskij discusses the technique of plot construction, for my intention is neither to exhaust the subject nor you, but rather to tempt or to cajole you into undertaking for yourselves that phenomenological reduction I have discussed earlier. Yet I am bound to suggest something of the breadth of what Šklovskij discussed, before turning to a very specific aspect of that whole. In the essay "The Continuity between the Techniques of Plot Construction and Stylistic Techniques,"<sup>30</sup> he was concerned to show that what is done on the semantic level has its counterpart or counterparts at the level of structure, i.e., plot. He takes us step by parallel step through these two realms. As an example, he suggested that repetition on the semantic level—my examples, the three-fold occurrence of דרך in Psalm 1 or the six-fold repetition of the labial *mem*, etc., in the verse from Judges—has its parallel on the structural or plot level. At the very center of his consideration of the concept of plot is the technique of step construction, that slowing down so that one may experience rather than merely recognize.

Practical thinking aims at generalization, the construction of the broadest possible, most inclusive formulae. Art on the contrary "with its thirst for the concrete" (Carlyle) rests on steps and the fragmentation of even that which occurs as generalization and unity. Repetition with its special case of rhyme is part of step construction as are tautology, tautological parallelism, psychological parallelism, retardation, epic repetition, narrative ritual, *perpetia* and many other plot devices.

<sup>29</sup> *The Canticle of the Rose: Poems: 1917-1949* (New York: Vanguard, n.d.) xvi, but see the whole introduction, "Some Notes on My Own Poetry," pp. xi-xxxviii, for deep insight into the nature of poetic language.

<sup>30</sup> "Svjaz' piemov sjuzetoslozenija s obscimi priemami stilja" ("Der Zusammenhang zwischen den Verfahren der Sujetfügung und den allgemeinen Stilverfahren") in *Texte der Russischen Formalisten*, 36-121. A helpful but partial English translation of this essay is to be found in *Russian Formalism* (ed. Bann and Bowlit; New York: Barnes and Noble, 1973) 48-72. It bears the title, "The connection between devices of *Zyuzhet* construction and general stylistic devices (1919)."

In short, the plot exhibits structurally all of the devices the story—fabula is Šklovskij's term—exhibits semantically.

Rather than remain in the realm of abstract, I shall attempt to listen with you to a text from the point of view of the technique of plot construction. While I may occasionally attend to the semantic level and technique there at work, my primary interest is plot technique. The name of the plot is "The True Heir" and it is well-known to you.<sup>31</sup> It begins . . . where? That is a problem. "Tief ist der Brunnen der Vergangenheit. nicht unergründlich nennen?" Thus did Thomas Mann begin his tale of *Joseph and His Brothers*.

Very deep is the well of the past. Should we not call it bottomless? Bottomless indeed, if—and perhaps only if—the past we mean is the past merely of the life of mankind, that riddling essence of which our own normally unsatisfied and abnormally wretched existences form a part. . . . For the deeper we sound, the further down into the lower world of the past we probe and press, the more we find that the earliest foundations of humanity, its history and culture, reveal themselves unfathomable. No matter to what hazardous lengths we let our line they still withdraw again, and further, into the depths. There thus may exist provisional origins, which practically and in fact form the first beginnings of the particular tradition held by a given community, folk or communion of faith; and memory, though sufficiently instructed that the depths have not actually been plumbed, yet naturally may find reassurance in some primitive point of time and personally and historically speaking, come to rest there.<sup>32</sup>

This being the case, I too like Mann's hero shall begin *in medias res* by quoting a genealogy or part of one:

When Terah had lived 70 years, he begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Now this is the line of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor and Haran; and Haran begot Lot. Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terah, in his native land, Ur of the Chaldeans. Abram and Nahor took to themselves wives, the name of Abram's being Sarai and that of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah. Now Sarai was barren, she had no children.

Here then we have the *dramatis personae* and, if we listen carefully, more than that, the beginning of the plot. If Terah is to have an heir it will be, apparently, Lot, for Haran's other children are daughters and Abram's wife is childless. This supposition seems underscored in the next verse:

Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot, the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together

<sup>31</sup> The title is, of course, borrowed from Philo. I have picked up the plot at Gen 11:26 and followed it only through Genesis with a nod at the end to Ruth 4:18-22 and Matt 1:1-17. Actually, as I construe the plot, Moses the Levite and Joshua and Saul the Benjamins are "false assumptions." I have not provided verse citations.

<sup>32</sup> *Joseph und seine Brüder* (s.l.; Fischer Bücherei, 1967) 1.5; *Joseph and His Brothers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943) 3-4.

from Ur of the Chaldeans, for the land of Canaan; but when they had come to Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah came to 250 years; and Terah died in Haran.

Abram is certainly Terah's heir, Nahor having been left behind with Lot, under the circumstance of Sarai's childlessness (a motif we must hold in mind), Abram's heir. Yet against expectation we read: "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation, I will bless you; I will make your name great; you shall be a blessing." What this first divine visitation (another motif to which we must constantly attend) does is to emphasize Abram's heirship without necessarily saying anything about Lot's status. That status as heir is apparently underscored by the words: "Abram went forth as the Lord had commanded him, and Lot went with him." In terms of plot, I designate this the "teasing motif of the presumed heir."

They set out now for their original destination, the land of Canaan that may or may not be "the land that I will show you." No sooner do they arrive than Lot, the heir presumptive, vanishes from the narrative: "They set out for the land of Canaan; they arrived in the land of Canaan. Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, the terebinth of Moreh." Here there is a second divine visitation, this time with the clear implication that Lot is not the heir: "to your offspring will I give . . .," and the disclosure that "the land that I will show you" is "this land." Abram moves about in the land—Lot is not with him—journeying "by stages toward the Negeb."

At this point it is helpful to look at the role of time in the plot.

Literary time is purely contractual; its laws are not identical with those of prosaic time. . . . Shakespeare inserted scenes in this way. Inserted into the main action, they divert us from the passage of time and even though the inserted dialogue (understandably with new characters) lasts but several minutes, the author held it possible to pick up the action (likely without the dropping of the curtain . . .) as though hours or even an entire night has passed.<sup>33</sup>

I noted this, for although there are some time-markers, in Gen 12:4 Abram's age is given as seventy-five; in Gen 16:3 we are told that he had lived in the land ten years, which would make him eighty-five; in Gen 16:16, following the birth of Ishmael he is eighty-six; but in the very next verse, Gen 17:1, he is ninety-nine. This suggests that prosaic time, in this case historical time, is of no particular interest to the author. We are facing literary time whose pace is determined by the requirements of plot. Thus the thirteen year gap between Gen 16:16 and Gen 17:1 is a non-scene that allows us to move rapidly to the next plot episode.

<sup>33</sup> Šklovskij, "Parodijnyj roman: 'Tristram Sendi' Sterna" (Sterne's Tristram Shandy: Stylistic Commentary), *Texte*, 1.244-99; *Russian Formalist Criticism*, 25-57.

To return to Abram's journeying "by stages toward the Negeb"; this is brought to a close by "a famine in the land"—another motif used later on to forward the plot. Abram and Sarai descend into Egypt where Sarai is abducted by the ruler. Although I use the term "abducted" I do not consider it to be a motif but rather one of the modes of presenting a significant motif, "the chosen wife." This motif reappears in the Isaac episode and in the Jacob sequence. Here, and in its repetition in chapter 20, it is intended to indicate and to emphasize that Sarai is destined to be the mother of the true heir. The sister-not-wife stratagem that ostensibly is intended to deliver Abram from danger heightens the tension by suddenly placing her in jeopardy; were she possessed sexually by Pharaoh she would be excluded from that role. Divine intervention on her behalf emphasizes her significance.

The return from Egypt is accompanied by a return to the scene of Lot who is still, despite the promise and despite Sarai's escape (she is still childless), the putative heir. "But now," wrote Speiser, "the two must part since each requires a large grazing and watering radius for his flocks and herds."<sup>34</sup> In terms of pastoral economics this may be so; in terms of plot, hardly. The two must part in order that Lot be removed from further consideration. He has served his teasing role and must now, as an heir of Terah, be given a portion and be dismissed from the plot although not from the narrative. He will reappear in a diversionary, i.e., a retarding, novella later on.

Now, indeed it would seem, is the propitious moment for the advent of the true heir; instead, the plot is retarded by a long diversion, the tale of the war with the five kings and the encounter with Melchizedek. Yet even the detour may serve a further purpose in terms of the plot. Abram's renunciation of spoil suggests that the true heir is to receive nothing that is not a part of the divine gift. His inheritance is not to be commingled with anything else. This motif will appear again.

This episode is followed by the third encounter with Deity in which there is a reaffirmation of the gift. Abram replies that he has no offspring, that his slave will be his inheritor, Lot having been disposed of. To this the reply comes that his "very own issue shall be his heir." The reaffirmation of the gift, "this land," is sealed by a covenantal act and by the disclosure of events that are to happen to his descendants in the future. Yet the immediate sequel is: "Sarai, Abram's wife, did not bear for him," and the teasing motif of the presumed heir is renewed. Sarai presents her slave woman to Abram; she conceives his "very own issue." Is the promise fulfilled? Is this child to be his heir? Sarai, whom we have been led to believe is the chosen wife, is apparently displaced and in her angry response so mistreats Hagar that she flees, only to be met by a

<sup>34</sup> E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1964) 98.

divine messenger who reassures her that she is to bear a son; the heir? although the remainder of the message is less than reassuring. Hagar bears a son, Ishmael. Abram has his heir! Here the matter rests for thirteen unreported years. Then, as noted, in Abram's ninety-ninth year there is a fourth encounter with the Deity, to renew once again the covenant, to confirm the gift and to confound the conclusion that Ishmael is the heir with the promise that he, now Abraham, shall father and Sarai, now Sarah, shall bear the true heir. Abraham's response, "he laughed and said to himself . . .," introduces a motif that echoes through several changes, one almost immediately. In this episode the promise to Hagar thirteen years earlier concerning Ishmael is now made to Abraham. He too is an heir although not the true heir. A fifth, veiled encounter with Deity occurs in the narrative of the three men, in which Abraham's laughter is echoed by Sarah's: **והצחק שרה**; re-echoed by Deity's question: **למה זה צחקה שרה**; re-echoed again in Sarah's denial: **לא צחקתי**; culminating in Deity's reproof: **כי צחקה**. This, of course, belongs to the semantic level but it serves to tie this episode to that previously noted and to one yet to come.

Once again we are at a point of high expectations. Are we now to hear: "And Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham"? No, again suspenseful retardation intervenes; the long novella of Sodom and Gemorrah in which Lot reappears and which is introduced by a dialogue between Deity and Abraham and concluded by the dalliance of Lot's daughters with their drunken father, echoing a much earlier occurrence of that motif, deeper in the well of the past. Following this there is yet another retardation. Once again the threat to the chosen wife is repeated—remember repetition is a well-established technique—in the Abimelech abduction episode. Only then: "Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age." At last, the true heir! With his birth the laughter motif echoes: **ותאמר שרה צחק עשה לי אלהים כל השמע יצחק לי** "And Sarah said, 'God has given me good reason to laugh and everybody who hears will laugh with me.'" The true heir is the bringer of laughter. Finally in the episode of the dismissal of Ishmael, long prepared for, it is heard again; a puzzling echo, in Šklovskij's words, "form-made-difficult": **ותרא שרה את בן הגר המצרית אשר ילדה לאברהם מצחק**. I shall leave it untranslated with only the comment that its real meaning, hidden under a series of word-plays, may be that Sarah sees that the son of her rival, Hagar, has been and may continue to be **מצחק**, the joy of his father to the exclusion of her son **יצחק** who is for her the joy-giver.

This is followed by a reappearance of Abimelech and a verse marking an indefinite passage of time: "And Abraham lived as an alien in the country of the Philistines many a year." This is, however, more than a time-marker, for it says that despite repeated promises, the gift, the land, is not yet Abraham's. This must be kept in mind as we plunge into

the next episode. Abraham who does not possess the land is threatened with the loss of the true heir at his own hand in the tension-ridden story of the binding of Isaac. That disaster averted, the next episode of the plot of the True Heir is announced, once again in a genealogy. "After this Abraham was told, 'Milcah has borne sons to your brother Nahor: Uz his first-born, then his brother Buz, and Kemuel father of Aram, and Kesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlapth and Bethuel; and a daughter Rebecca has been born to Bethuel.'"

Before this cycle moves forward, the first cycle must be brought to an end. Sarah dies and Abraham purchases, in a seemingly overdrawn episode, the cave of Machpelah for her burial place. In this episode we hear echoed the motif of the rejection of any gift other than the divine gift: "Abraham . . . weighed out the amount Ephron had named. . . . Thus the plot of land . . . became the legal possession of Abraham." He acquired by purchase what was his by promise.

At this point the first episode of the second cycle, the journey to Aram-Naharaim begins, built on the motif of the chosen wife, who has already been named: Rebecca. With this the first cycle is concluded by the death of Abraham, set between two genealogical tables. In the first, Abraham fathers another family—is there distant laughter?—whose members are "given presents" and sent out of his son Isaac's way, confirming him as the true heir. The second table notes the descendants of Ishmael, who had joined his brother at their father's burial, and their dwelling places outside of the land, a further confirmation of Isaac's status as true heir.

As indicated, the second true heir cycle began with the genealogy in Gen 22:30. I do not, however, intend to follow it through and shall make only two comments for I wish to turn to a far more intricate plotting in connection with the sons of Jacob. Although, to quote Speiser, "Isaac . . . can scarcely be described as a memorable personality," remember that in plot personality is of no great significance. The second cycle is, however, something more than (again to quote Speiser) "a restful interlude between the story of Abraham and the story of Jacob."<sup>35</sup> The very same tension with false starts and retardations is there, although the number of episodes is certainly fewer. Further, the repeated episode of deception with regard to the chosen wife rather than being a mere faded triplet of that motif suggests, coming as it does after the birth of the twins, that Rebecca, far from being an ancillary figure now that the children are born, is to play a significant role in the unfolding of the plot.

We turn now to the plot of the True Heir as it is laid out in the third cycle, that of the sons of Jacob. To begin with, the cast of characters has enlarged considerably, making the task of plotting far more complicated.

<sup>35</sup> Speiser, *Genesis*, 182.

I do not intend to examine the development of this cycle of the plot from its beginning, for brilliant as it is, I have already gone on too long. What I want to point out is the way in which the apparent heirs are removed and how a false lead is constructed.

Jacob had twelve sons (and a daughter); eight by his two wives, i.e., six by Leah and two by Rachel. He had, as well, four sons by two concubines. They are, however, never involved in the plot. Their turn as heirs could come only as the eight sons of the two wives were removed. The narrative makes it clear that from Jacob's point of view the true heir is the elder son of the chosen wife, Rachel, i.e., Joseph. The author acquiesces in Jacob's fancy and removes the oldest son, Reuben, the apparent heir, through the Bilhah episode. Simeon and Levi, the next two in line, are removed from consideration by the violence of the Shechem episode. Of Judah, the next in line, we are after his birth told nothing. He appears only toward the end of the narrative of the selling of Joseph and then in an equivocal role. We wonder: has he by suggesting the sale of Joseph lost his claim to the heirship? Or, as Šklovskij wrote: "Exposition, preparation for a new character always occurs after we pause in perplexity over a strange word or an exclamation from that character."<sup>36</sup> The plot is complicated by the return of Reuben to a significant role through his more forthright intervention on Joseph's behalf. Now the episode of Judah and Tamar intervenes, ending with the birth of her twins. In terms of plot construction we still face two possibilities: either Judah, through the Tamar episode, joins his older brothers in the ranks of the disqualified, or, as indicated in the citation from Šklovskij, we are being told that Judah somewhere along the way is to play a significant role. He is a "new character." I shall move on rapidly. The extended Joseph novella is a superb example of what Šklovskij wrote of as laying "the ground for possible false assumptions." We are riveted on Joseph, yet the possibility of strange reversal is adumbrated in the first encounter of the brothers with Joseph in Egypt. Again, Reuben, the set-aside first-born, asserts himself, and even stranger, it is Simeon, another rejected heir, who is thrust forward by his voluntary imprisonment. But once again, in the second encounter with Joseph, Judah is given pre-eminence through his speech. Indeed, in terms of plot, we have the confrontation between the two possible heirs, Joseph and Judah. We leap ahead to yet another complicating episode Jacob is in Egypt; his beloved son—the true heir?—is restored. Time passes; Jacob lies on his death-bed and his grandsons, Joseph's half-Egyptian sons (remember Ishmael, Abraham's half-Egyptian son) are brought to him for blessing. Which is the true heir? It is Ephraim upon whom the right hand is laid. The true heir? To answer that we must turn to Jacob's Testament; but before doing so, let me call your attention to

<sup>36</sup> *Texte*, 1.251; *Russian Formalist Criticism*, 30.

an episode I left behind: the early confrontations between Joseph and his brethren over his dreams. Joseph says: “Suddenly my sheaf stood up and remained upright; then your sheaves gathered around and bowed low [וַתִּשְׁתַּחֲוּינָה] to my sheaf.’ His brothers answered, ‘Do you mean to reign over us? Do you mean to rule over us?’”

Now let us hear Jacob’s Testament concerning Judah: “Your father’s sons shall bow low [יִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ] to you.” It is Judah to whom the brothers shall bow. All the scraping and fawning before the Egyptian Joseph was a sham. Judah is the true heir! Is it Judah? Yes, but . . . back we go to the Tamar episode, to the genealogy: “She bore two sons one of whom was called Perez.” Then ahead we leap, over many equally intriguing episodes to the end of the Book of Ruth: “Now these are the descendants of Perez. Perez was the father of Hezon, Hezon of Ram, Ram of Aminadab, Aminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, Obed of Jesse and Jesse of David.” The same genealogy with the same purpose is found at the beginning of the Gospel according to Matthew.

I have burdened you with this particular, even peculiar account of a story well-known to you because, to return to the thesis propounded much earlier, it seems to me that one of the ingredients in the failure of the fiction we call the Documentary Hypothesis was its inability or its unwillingness to understand and interpret how the text was put together. Seams and joins are the best we have been able to come up with. “The magnificent robe” was, in Nietzsche’s words, “torn . . . into tatters” without attending to the question of how in the first place the robe was woven. A description of the plot is, on the other hand, an attempt to show how indeed the “author” worked. Šklovskij, describing a particular novel to which I shall revert, wrote:

This entirely heterogeneous material, burdened by voluminous excerpts from the works of various pedants, could undoubtedly have torn the novel apart. For that reason it is drawn together by means of pervading motifs. A particular motif may not be fully developed or realized but from time to time it is recalled; its realization is always put off until later. Yet only its presence during the entire length of the novel ties its episodes together.

At the conclusion of the essay he wrote, “Too often one confuses the concept of the plot with the description of events, that is, with what I provisionally call Fable. In reality this Fable is only the material out of which the plot is fashioned.”<sup>37</sup> But, to see only the Fable and never the plot; to be concerned only with the Fable and what it may be saying outside of the plot, if one can discover that, in our case the history of Israel as disclosed by the Fable, has become and is a significant source of our disillusionment, if not our crisis.

<sup>37</sup> *Texte*, 1.297–98; *Russian Formalist Criticism*, 57.

Dare I quote from the novel Šklovskij analyzed, a novel whose author tells us along the way what he is doing? I may offend some who will find the juxtaposition of Holy Scripture and an 18th-century novel by a rogue Anglican parson intolerable. To them I can only say in the words of Psalm 119, *מכל-מלמדי השכלתי* “from all who would teach me have I learned.”

From Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*:

By this contrivance the machinery of my work is of a species by itself; two contrary motions are introduced into it, and reconciled, which were thought to be at variance with each other. In a word, my work is digressive, and it is progressive too,—and at the same time. . . . Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine;—they are the life, the soul of reading!—take them out of this book, for instance—you might as well take the book along with them;—one cold eternal winter night would reign in every page of it; restore them to the writer;—he steps forth like a bridegroom,—bids All-hail; brings in variety, and forbids the appetite to fail.

All the dexterity is in the good cookery and management of them, so as to be not only for the advantage of the reader, but also of the author, whose distress, in this matter, is truly pitiable. For, if he begins a digression,—from that moment, I observe, his whole work stands stock still,—and if he goes on with his main work,—then there is an end of his digression.

—This is vile work. —For which reason, from the beginning of this, you see, I have constructed the main work and the adventitious parts of it with such intersections, and have so complicated and involved the digressive and progressive movements, one wheel within another, that the whole machine, in general, has been kept going; and, what’s more, it shall be kept a-going these forty years, if it please the fountain of health to bless me so long with life and good spirits.<sup>38</sup>

Shall our “author” have been less ingenious in his plotting for our entertainment“?

This then is a fiction I propose for our consideration as we seek for some sense of satisfaction. Why? In way of response to some words I long ago read. In the October 1956 issue of *Harpers Magazine*, the Phi Beta Kappa Poem, Harvard, 1956, by John Holmes, was published. Its title is “The Eleventh Commandment” and it is herewith offered in part as the motto of this paper. It begins:

When Moses came down from the mountain and the cloud,  
He came alone down the rocks, and there alone a while,  
The air above him empty and all still, he stood.  
There had been trumpets in the fire, he was whole.  
He was Moses, older than old, remembering what he saw,  
Saying to himself, a white light in his face,  
What he must say to the people, remembering the law.

<sup>38</sup> Bk. I, chap. 22.

A little later on:

Moses would say everything God had said to him  
 To the people waiting in the valley below to hear,  
 The cubits of the tabernacle he would build for them,  
 The cornering, the colors. But there was one more  
 Command more than ten. Only an auditor  
 Very old, an old man with Moses' many years,  
 Could know after the ten one more.

Finally:

So Moses brought the eleventh commandment down,  
 Knowing his will stir, his blood hasten  
 That the word be said aloud, the word be known,  
 That on it all men might take hold and fasten  
 On it, and hear it in all tongues: Listen.  
 He lifted the tablets up before them saying  
 The word that gave them all words: Listen.<sup>39</sup> °

<sup>39</sup> "To be a teller of tales is no mean feat. To be a hearer of tales, too, is a high accomplishment, a noble art." Silberman, "'Habent Sua Fata Libelli': The Role of Wandering Themes in Some Hellenistic and Rabbinic Literature," in *The Relationship Among the Gospels* (ed. W. O. Walker; San Antonio: Trinity University, 1978) 218.

° To the memory of my teachers, Jacob Zallel Lauterbach and Julian Morgenstern.