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Theology and Narration:
Reflections on the “Narrative Theology”-Debate and Beyond*

“... that God himself demands narration.”
Eberhard Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt* (1977)

1. Introduction

Narrative is a central element in the founding document of Christianity, the Bible. The Bible tells stories: of the creation of the world and of the human race, of the destiny of the chosen people of Israel, of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, of the early Christian communities and of the end of the world. For this reason if not for any other the theological reflection of Christian faith will of necessity be concerned with narration. Theology has the task of rendering these stories intelligible in and to its contemporary world—both as individual narratives and in their overall context as the *one* story of God’s dealings with creation. The narrative quality of the biblical writings is, however, only one of the reasons why storytelling is a pre-eminently theological theme. The Christian tradition that grew out of these narrative foundations has itself produced a wealth of stories, which together constitute the history of the church (or rather of Christianity)—a history that unquestionably, and not only from a perspective critical of religion, reads in part as a ‘crime story’ (K.-H. Deschner). Episodes of this story are told and retold in Christian religious education, in school classes or in preparation for confirmation. The sermon is another locus of narration, frequently in the form of an interpretive retelling of an episode from the life of Jesus—himself a storyteller, as the parables demonstrate. Finally, storytelling is of decisive importance for the individual Christian: why a Christian lives thus and not otherwise is the stuff of narrative: a tale interwoven with the story of Jesus and those other stories that derive from it.

In this rudimentary overview ‘history’ and ‘storytelling’ are used in a broad, integral sense. This does, nevertheless, indicate that the concept of narration—which does not immediately suggest a relation to theology—is of

* I am indebted to Dr. Barbara Piatti (Zürich/Prag) for her comments on this essay and Joseph Swann (Wuppertal) for his translation.

central importance to that discipline and to the church that it serves. Christianity, it is sometimes said, is in its essence a ‘storytelling community’—its deep structure is narrative:

Storytelling is basic for faith because only in the act of telling can our story be bound in with that of God and Jesus; because this story must be told; and so that it can be told as an unfinished story into which the faithful write their own stories and, in so doing, carry the story forward. Thus at its elemental level Christian faith has a ‘narrative deep structure’. (Arens 1988: 24)

Narration, then, is a recurrent topos of theology. It is not, however, the only way in which theology speaks, nor is it the only mode of speech relevant to theology. *Theo-logy*, in the broad sense of ‘God-talk’, takes on many different forms, concretized in the multiple categories of myth, hymn, gospel, vision, psalm, legend, prayer, creed, confession of sins, song, sermon, dialogue, catechism, tract, commentary, concordance, law, review, essay, dogma etc. The series is manifestly one of increasing abstraction, with the language of prayer situated worlds away from academic discourse on ‘the problem of God’.¹ The decisive difference is not simply a matter of form and style: the *mode* of utterance is different. Thus, where academic discourse speaks *of* God, prayer (also) speaks *to* him: the speech mode of prayer is one of witnessing or confessing, which involves the subjectivity of the speaker to an incomparably higher degree than does the act of academic writing.

The awareness of the inherent multiplicity of ‘God-talk’ has generated theological schemes and orders of immense variety. Taking up the distinction just mentioned, Hermann Deuser (1999: 22ff.), for example, suggests a three-fold division of *religious*, *theological* and *confessional* language. *Religious* language (paradigmatically in prayer) is a vital enactment of faith, while *theological* language is an academic reflection on faith (and thus on religious language), and *confessional* language is situated somewhere between the two as the language of church teaching, bound up with the institution² and combining the implicit theology of religious language with its explicitation in theological language. Again, there is an evident scale of abstraction here, with prayer as the “first and immediate expression” of faith, the confession of faith (or creed) as “its more general and repeated form”, and theology as the “critically reflected” expression of that form. (That this sequence can be readily inverted is also apparent: a concrete act of faith in the form of prayer may well be based on a creed that itself incorporates much theological reflec-

¹ I. e. from theological reflection on the being of God, more precisely his reality, essence, and action.

² See the *Confession of Faith of the German Lutheran Church*, the *Baptist Confession of Faith* (1677/89), or the *Account of Faith* (1977) of the Union of Protestant Free Churches in Germany.

tion.)³ Another way of expressing this scale would be to speak of *object language* and *metalanguage*. In these terms theology is a metalanguage, meta-‘God-talk’, a type of utterance that refers back to and assumes into the methodologically controlled discourse of science the immediacy and multiplicity of the religious and confessional modes. As the critical reflection of these other modes theology *ideally* impacts upon them in its turn.

Applied to narration, Deuser’s modal scale raises the key question of the level at which storytelling takes place. That it occurs *de facto* in religious language is clear—prominently (though not exclusively so) in the biblical narratives. But does it also play a role in confessional and theological language? Put like that, the issue is one of description. It becomes theologically interesting—if not hazardous—when the *descriptive* perspective is joined by a *normative* one and the question arises: *should* narration play a role—given that it can and does so—at these more abstract levels?

Reduced to its lineaments, that is the frame within which discussion of the relation between theology and narration generally occurs: *prima facie*, narration appears to be one mode of ‘God-talk’ among others. The aim of the following reflections is to demonstrate in what sense and on what grounds it has been termed *the* neglected *central* mode not only of religious but also of theological language. This task can only be undertaken on a modest scale in the present context. Accordingly, despite the many areas of theological concern in which, as has been indicated, storytelling plays a significant role, the present argument will confine itself to the impact of the concept on modern Protestant *systematic theology* in German.⁴ This immediately excludes two other widely ramifying areas of discussion: *biblical criticism* (both Old and New Testament research)⁵, and *practical theology*⁶. Here too, however, narration has a role to play, for it focuses the question of the openness of these sub-disciplines to new parameters—which, in turn, impinges on their very legitimacy.

³ That the spectrum of religious articulations includes (not just marginally but *essentially*) non-verbal forms such as image, dance, glossolalia, silence etc. is an aspect that can only be touched upon in this context.

⁴ *Systematic theology* (or *dogmatics*) is concerned with the doctrinal development of the contents of belief. It covers such areas as God, creation, Jesus Christ (christology), the trinity, sin (hamartiology), redemption (soteriology) and the last things (eschatology).

⁵ Specifically what has been called ‘narrative exegesis’ (see Marguerat/Bourquin 1999).

⁶ *Practical theology* is concerned with the day-to-day practices of the church, including church services and preaching, church leadership, counselling, social work and religious education. It is what Schleiermacher called “the theory of practice”. For a general introduction to the theological subdisciplines and their interrelations see Deuser (1999: 177-184).

After an initial survey of the debate that has taken place among German-speaking theologians around the concept of ‘narrative theology’ (2)⁷, I aim to draw a provisional balance (3) more closely involving the perspective and terminology of literary criticism. The significant absences that become evident in this context indicate the holistic—and by the same token polemic—nature of the theological view of narration. These reflections lead (4) in the direction of a remarkable contribution made by the literary scholar Klaus Weimar, who sees narration and theology as engaged in an entirely different type of systematic relation: Weimar has demonstrated how central theologoumena recur in a covert fashion in the distinctions and categories of narratological theory. His observations provide an appropriate springboard for my concluding reflections on the topic (5). So far as the manner of presentation is concerned, the overall aim of this article is to report on a field of discourse at the interface of theology with literary science rather than to provide an independent contribution to that discourse. To do this in 2008 is to revive a discussion whose heyday lies somewhat in the past. Nonetheless, the mode of report selected here may indicate its continuing topicality.

2. Research: An Overview

2.1 The “Narrative Theology” Project (Weinrich, Metz) ...

Considering the many theological contexts in which storytelling plays a significant role, it may come as a surprise to learn that—in the German tradition at least—the concept of narrative theology was a real discovery, not only at the descriptive but also at the *prescriptive* level. For narrative theology, when it came, was the name of a critical theological programme containing several quite heterogeneous strands.⁸

The beginning of the debate can be precisely dated to May 1973 and the appearance of an issue of the progressive Catholic periodical *Concilium* devoted to “The Crisis of Religious Language”. It contained two essays, printed side by side, which sketched out the contours of the later discussion. The first of these was, remarkably, not from a theologian at all, but from the well-known linguist Harald Weinrich. Indeed he seems to have been the first to use (in the title of his essay) the controversial compositum *narrative theol-*

⁷ The earlier discussion in the English-speaking world has a clearly different emphasis. See for a general overview Wenzel (1998). See also Comstock (1987), Hauerwas/Jones (1989) and Loughlin (1996).

⁸ The survey that follows is defined by its focus on the explicit concept of ‘narrative theology’, albeit to the exclusion of many other contributions that bear on the issues involved.

ogy.⁹ The second text, “Brief Apologia for Storytelling” came from the pen of the Catholic fundamental theologian Jean Baptiste Metz (1973).¹⁰ Both writers intended to launch a programmatic line of thought, but with different emphases. Where they agreed was in the underlying thesis that not only theological discourse but present-day society *as a whole* had entered a “post-narrative” phase (Weinrich 1973: 331; cf. also Metz 1973: 336)—hence Metz’s formulation of his thesis as an apologia.¹¹ They both saw theology as particularly affected by this crisis; for, as Weinrich put it, “Christianity is a narrative community” (Weinrich 1973: 330), an axiom which Metz (1973: 336) qualified with the differentiation: “[Christianity is] not primarily a community of argument or interpretation but quite simply a narrative community.”

For Metz the narrative problem stands in a broader context. Narrative theology is one aspect of the ‘political theology’ programme he conceived in the manner of the Frankfurt School as a critique of contemporary society.¹² He saw narration as a mode of theology sensitive to experience, and especially to unatoned suffering. He speaks in this context of a “memorative-narrative theology” (ibid.: 339) and of the *memoria passionis*—which sets all suffering in relation to that of Christ—as a “dangerous memory” (ibid.: 337) disrupting the argumentative force of the ‘victor’s history’ wherever that occurs. Narrative takes on a virtually sacramental quality as “the medium of salvation and of history” (ibid.), a stance diametrically opposed to a theology that would, on simple theoretical grounds, “banish [narrative] to the sphere of precritical expression” and allocate “all linguistic expressions of faith to the category of objectivizations” (ibid.: 335). To do this, Metz argues, is to render the experience of faith indefinable, and the “exchange of experience” (ibid.) that is the proper material of narrative impossible.

Metz does not, however, (as he is sometimes accused of doing) draw the reciprocal conclusion that argumentation has no place in theology. What he is interested in is a “relativization of argumentative theology” (ibid.: 340). A fundamental trait of his theological programme becomes apparent in his explicit referral of the bond between narrative and experience to Walter Ben-

⁹ Weinrich (1973). The concept itself is a good deal older. In 17th century theology the concept of “theologia historica seu narrativa” was used to distinguish the history of dogma from “theologia dogmatica” in the proper sense. See O. Ritschl (1920).

¹⁰ See also the collection co-edited by Metz in the same year: Metz/Jossua (1973). For an introduction to Metz’s theology see Delgado (2000).

¹¹ This agreement is so fundamental that it requires no further reason – which is all the more interesting in view of the irreducibly anthropological dimension of narrative on which (with Schapp and/or Ricœur) they here and elsewhere insist.

¹² The essay is extant in a revised form in Metz (1977). His project must be distinguished from that of Carl Schmitt’s *Politische Theologie* that has continued to attract interest ever since its initial publication in 1922. See Brokoff/Fohrmann (2003).

jamin,¹³ and in his citation of Martin Buber's collection of *Tales of Hasidim*, together with Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Faith* (which he calls "a great encyclopaedia of tales of hope"; Metz 1973: 335), as examples of the "practical, liberating character of narrative" (ibid.). Storytelling in Metz's view is a specifically Jewish strength, a Jewish virtue reflected in the messianic slant of his thought: for Metz, theology "after Auschwitz" is in radical need of a "Jewish corrective".¹⁴

Weinrich's approach to narrative theology is more openly historical—and it is, for him, a history of decline. The narrative quality of early Christianity is evident from biblical documents; but "in the encounter with the Hellenistic world [Christianity] lost its narrative innocence" (Weinrich 1973: 331). *Mythos* succumbed to *logos* and, despite the narrative strand that runs through the history of philosophy (Augustine, Pascal, Rousseau, Nietzsche), the Christian theological tradition veered definitively towards the "armies of other philosophers [...] who see their task as the construction of systems and theories, as reasoning and debate" (ibid.).¹⁵ What followed was a "generally secular tendency towards demythologization and the banning of story and its telling from the Christian tradition" (ibid.: 331)¹⁶. In a rhetorical twist (of the sort familiar to Asterix and Obelix fans) Weinrich then asks: "Every story ...?" His point is that the ban could never be complete: it inevitably collapses in the face of Easter—a highly interesting theological thesis. The exception marked in the message 'He has risen' becomes "the story of stories, subsuming into itself all other narratable events" (ibid.: 331). Weinrich's secondary thesis, prescinding altogether from de facto storytelling, is comparatively speculative. He argues that the resistance of this central event to demythologization may mean that it *alone* remains to be told as a story—"an important dispensation in a post-narrative time" (ibid.).

The story of decline ends for Weinrich in the "holy or unholy alliance" (ibid.: 333) between theology and modern scholarship—above all in its relation to historiography. If (as Danto maintains¹⁷) historians are also storytell-

¹³ Central here (see ibid., 334) is Benjamin's "Der Erzähler. Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows" (1937). On the general issue of Benjamin's relevance for Metz see Ostovich (1994).

¹⁴ See Delgado (2000) and Müller (1988). The Jewish tradition plays a similar role in Dorothee Sölles' (1988) related project of 'theopoetics' – as opposed to (and critical of) *theology*.

¹⁵ Weinrich himself seems barely to have noticed the problem of idealization latent in the suggestive phrase "from *mythos* to *logos*", especially in relation to the concept of "narrative innocence". Only later did this meet with opposition. For an overview see Wacker (1977: 97ff.).

¹⁶ The concept of demythologization is particularly associated with the New Testament theologian Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) whose powerful but controversial programme – influenced by Heidegger – involved laying bare the Bible's existential "core" of mythical discourse, the *kerygma* with its divine appeal to existential decision, which he considered dissoluble from its linguistic and cultural "shell". See his classic essay: Bultmann (1985 [1941]).

¹⁷ Danto (1968: 111): "History tells stories". Today Weinrich would probably call on the work of Hayden White (1987).

ers, the pathos of their position lies in the assertion that their stories are true. Unable to resist the prestige of the true story produced in a methodologically controlled environment, theology in turn has begun to question the truth-value of its narratives. Yet what U. Wilckens has called its “retreating skirmishes” (ibid.: 332) have concentrated on the periphery—palpably so in the modest results of classic historico-critical exegesis. Here it was easy to satisfy methodological standards—easier at least than it would have been to answer the Easter question “not merely by telling the story, but by telling it with the emphasis of a historian: ‘He has *truly* risen!’” (ibid.)

The sweep of Weinrich’s thought, roughly outlined above¹⁸, functions in his discourse as a background against which his real concern is gradually revealed. His goal is to (at least partially) regain the lost “innocence of the story” in the form of narrative theology. This will immediately call in question “the bond with (academic) history” in whose wake theology “stares fixedly at the single point where a story is tested for truth” (ibid.: 333). What will take its place as a criterion of theological relevance, Weinrich suggests—and here again he is close to Bultmann—is the receptive category of concern (*Betroffenheit*): “Facticity is not the sine qua non condition of a story’s impacting and ‘concerning’ us. We receive fictional stories, too, with concern.” (ibid.) Even as a theoretical science theology need not “small-mindedly deny” (ibid.) its received fund of stories. In sum, Weinrich installs ‘narrative concern’ as a positive alternative to historical truth: this corresponds to the ‘nature’ of Christianity as it is revealed, even after the loss of narrative innocence, in the central event of the resurrection: the event that can only ever be articulated as a story.

If one considers Metz’s und Weinrich’s positions together, it becomes apparent that, for all their differences, they share a *strong* model of narrative theology: narration is not just a mode of *religious* language: it has a significant role to play in *theological* discourse as well. Without entirely disregarding or devaluing conceptual, argumentative thought, both authors stress the point

¹⁸ Weinrich’s position does not fully accord with the exegetical and dogmatic discussions of his day. It was by no means the case that “theologians held the unanimous and virtually unquestioned view that biblical narratives [...] stand or fall on their truth value as determined by the recognized methods of historical scholarship” (Weinrich 1973: 332). It was precisely the historically unanswerable question of the historicity of the resurrection that, beginning with the Enlightenment critique of religion, led to the understanding that historical truth was not necessarily the only criterion of theological relevance. Accordingly, Bultmann’s thesis – whose key utterance was the assertion “Jesus rose again in the *kerygma*” – was received with widespread approval. Bultmann not only bypassed the issue of a methodically convincing historical answer, but declared the underlying (historical) question itself to be theologically insignificant: “If it is the case [that he is present to those who hear him], all speculations about the being of the risen [Jesus], all stories of the empty grave, all Easter legends, whatever portion of historical fact they may contain, are quite indifferent. Belief in Easter means believing in the Jesus present in the *kerygma*” (Bultmann 1960: 27).

that theology can only fulfil its scientific task through (also) telling stories—whether in the spirit of “dangerous memory” of the victims, or in that of safeguarding the existential moment of concern in the face of rigorous historical methods and standards.—Both Metz’s and Weinrich’s theses met with wide acceptance, questions being directed, if anything, not to their programme itself but to its format. Critique, when it came, was (not exclusively but for the most part) in the shape of different and *weaker* models of narrative theology.¹⁹

2.2 ... and Its Critique: Ritschl and Jüngel

Two critiques of narrative theology made a lasting impression on Protestant theology: those of Dietrich Ritschl and Eberhard Jüngel.

For the systematic theologian *Ritschl* (1976: 41), ‘narrative theology’ was a “misnomer beneath which lay a clearly definable programme”. The programme itself he largely shared, but the fundamental distinction he made between theological and pre-theological discourse led him to prefer the broader and less technical term ‘story’; and stories, the title of a 1976 essay put it, are the “raw material of theology”.²⁰ The clear allocation of narrative to a subordinate position allowed Ritschl to distance himself from what he called the “modish programme” (ibid.: 36), in contrast to which he outlined in explicit terms his own understanding of the role (or roles) of theology proper. These were (1) “clarification (in the service of communication)”; (2) “safeguarding coherence (in the service of logic and ethics)”; (3) “reflection on the limited flexibility of contemporary language (respecting tradition)”; and (4) “stimulation of new thinking and the opening of new perspectives” (ibid.: 9). Quite evidently, stories have little to contribute at least to the first three of these tasks: they are situated, Ritschl argued, “‘prior’ to these operations” (ibid.). This was not to disparage the role of “raw material”; Ritschl, too, upheld the central significance of narrative structure in and for the biblical writings; he, too, saw human identity as determined in and by stories.²¹ In this sense theology was “in its essence concerned with stories”; but this did

¹⁹ For the breadth of this debate see Wacker (1977).

²⁰ Along with Ritschl’s essay the monograph contains a far less widely received article by Jones entitled “Das Story-Konzept und die Theologie” (“Theology and the Concept of Story”, 42-68), along with two sermons illustrating that concept (69-75) – typical evidence of Ritschl’s practical bent. The significance of his contribution can be judged by its inclusion (in excerpts) in Härle (2007b). For a self-portrait of Ritschl see Henning/Lehmkuhler (1998), 3-23.

²¹ See ibid., 15.36. Ritschl elsewhere (1984: 49) cites Old Testament scholarship (which he had also at one time taught) as well as psychoanalysis as defining factors in his concept of story. This had not primarily developed in the debate with narrative theology. By his own account he had discussed the theological usefulness of the concept with biblical scholars of his acquaintance from 1958 onwards (ibid., 47). For the precise role of story in Ritschl’s theology see ibid. I B, H; III B, and Ritschl (2005: 81).

not mean that it “should articulate itself in stories” (ibid.: 7). In the light of the fourfold task outlined above, “theology itself”, as Ritschl (1984: 51) axiomatically put it, “is regulative, not narrative.”

Ritschl’s view did not, however, end with this categorical statement; he took up its implications for the story, listing the various forms and functions of what he called that “idiom” (Ritschl 1976: 18), and elaborating on the transition from story (as *one* type of raw material) to the “regulative axioms” (ibid.: 39) of theology. Without going into detail, his reflections on that crucial transition should be mentioned, if only because the rigour and precision of his thought distinguishes it markedly from that of most other writing on the topic. Finally, lest the impression be conveyed that Ritschl had no interest in a theology concerned with life experience and social relevance (in the sense advocated by Metz), it must be stated that, despite his plea for academic rigour in theological thought, his interest in a theology alive and sensitive to the contemporary world was unmistakable.²²

In 1977, a year after Ritschl’s ‘raw material’ thesis, Eberhard Jüngel’s major study, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt* (‘God as Mystery of the World’) appeared.²³ Its subtitle, ‘towards a theology of the crucified in the dispute between theism and atheism’ established a context for narrative and narration entirely different from that postulated by Ritschl. And indeed *Jüngel’s* intention could scarcely have been more fundamental: to put theology on a Christological basis that would speak the language of modernity and take seriously three crucial contemporary problems: the “linguistic impossibility of placing God”, the corresponding and “still increasing unthinkability of God”, and “the inarticulacy of theology” (Jüngel 1992: 2). In the light of what has been said above, the occurrence of the keyword ‘narrative theology’ in this context will not be surprising; it is, however, important to focus the specific role Jüngel accorded to it. Unlike Ritschl, he accepts its basic legitimacy; but like him he

cannot decide [...] whether it is feasible in the form of a rigorous dogmatic theology, or whether a narrative theology does not, rather, belong to the sphere of the church’s practical self-realization with its *Sitz im Leben* in the proclamation [of the gospel]²⁴.

²² See his references to Black Theology (ibid., 33), as well as his assertion that “constructive and decisively important theology today is above all oral” (ibid. 12, note 9) and is current in the countries of the south.

²³ For a concise presentation of the position of the renowned Tübingen systematic theologian see Rohls (1997: 805-810; “Jüngel’s Hermeneutic Barthianism”). See also Jüngel’s statement in Henning/Lehmkuhler (1998: 188-210).

²⁴ Ibid., foreword to the first and second editions, XVII. Ritschl (1976: 39 note 28) had earlier criticized Jüngel’s use of the concept in his classic essay “Metaphorische Wahrheit. Zur Hermeneutik einer narrativen Theologie” (‘Metaphorical Truth: Towards a Hermeneutics of Narrative Theology’, Jüngel 1974).

Irrespective of this (admittedly central) question, Jüngel gives great prominence to the story topos, and—in contrast to the other authors mentioned—he does so in the context of dogmatic thought in the strictest sense. Towards the end of his book the decisive proposition 19 opens the section concerned with the Christological foundations of theology, the ultimate goal of Jüngel's entire argument. Here he returns to the triple question outlined above, in the form of the “thinkability”, “effability” and “humanity” of God. He announces his programme in the title of the section: “The humanity of God as a story to be told. Some prior hermeneutic reflections”; for it is the humanity of God in Jesus Christ that drives the entire reflection on narrative and narration. The event of the incarnation signifies a “change of time [...] and history” (ibid.: 413); if this significance is to be articulated at all, it must be in a linguistic mode appropriate to the event. The language of God's humanity must be

structurally geared to expressing time and history. [...] This is, however, the case in the mode of narrative, which genuinely unites articulacy and temporality in a single order and, along with interjection and evocation, can best claim to represent an autochthonous language. God's humanity enters the world in the act of storytelling. Jesus tells of God in parables before he himself is proclaimed a parable of God. (ibid.)

Jüngel's careful and thorough rooting of the need for theological narrative in the complex of the incarnation sets him over against Metz (ibid.: 425f.) and—at a critical level—Weinrich (ibid.: 419ff.). His subtle argumentation touches on the recurrent issue of the implications of *narrative theology* for *theological narration*. If “the thought that seeks to understand God [...] is repeatedly thrown back on narrative” and must “itself embark on narrative” (ibid.: 414), the need inevitably arises to clarify whether that proposition is also necessarily narrative. For Jüngel, Metz and Weinrich this is not the case. That Metz (1973: 336) quotes a Hasidic story²⁵ and Weinrich (1973: 329) opens his deliberations with an apocryphal New Testament text is merely a stylistic gambit: their apologias themselves are consistently argumentative. In fact, the problem of self-referentiality manifestly increases to the extent that narrative is recommended as an alternative to the shortcomings of reasoning and argument, and this is bound to impact the strong models of narrative theology more acutely than the weak model proposed by Ritschl. One might be tempted to call the tension in these strong models a “performative contradiction” (Habermas). At all events the issue of argument versus narration focuses the need to clarify the definitions and relations of the two opposing

²⁵ The instance quoted for the all-changing impact of narrative is, interestingly enough, precisely *not* taken from ‘real life’. This strengthens the suspicion that narrative is here “ultimately devalued into a post factum illustration of the properly argumentative discourse of theology” (Sandler 2002: 530).

modes. How otherwise could one begin to follow Jüngel's (1992: 414) statement: "Thinking of God can only be thought of as a conceptually controlled storytelling of God?" (see *ibid.*: 428)

Despite his critical stance vis à vis Metz and Weinrich, and his initially professed "uncertainty", Jüngel - if we take this dictum seriously - evidently also proposes a strong model of narrative theology. Indeed this is demanded (at least as an ideal) by his whole approach. To bridge the gulf that consequently opens between ideal and practice he appeals to what might be called the exception-clause of genius, citing the case of his own teacher, Karl Barth. It was Barth's "specific genius", he writes, to create "a genuine bond between argumentative and narrative dogmatics" which "allowed the argumentative power of the story to speak for itself" (*ibid.*: 427, n. 52)²⁶. This move of Jüngel's at least partially draws the sting from the charge of performative contradiction: not everyone is gifted to combine so faultlessly the two modes of discourse; enough, then, that the mass of participants confine themselves to the conceptual argument that is their natural *métier*.²⁷

2.3 From Mainstream to Backwater

The positions taken by these authors, and their implications for the various disciplines of theology, attracted much attention, discussion and critique in subsequent years.²⁸ But a mere decade after the appearance of Metz and Weinrich's essays, Bernd Wacker could, in his "Towards a Balance" (1983), accept the verdict of the religious pedagogue Helmut Anselm (1981: 117) that "narrative theology was for a short time on everyone's lips. Today it seems already a thing of the past." The decline in interest after the mid 1980s in both Protestant and Catholic circles was undeniable, and when in 1997 the Catholic theologian and Germanist Knut Wenzel published his dissertation *Zur Narrativität des Theologischen*²⁹ ("On Theological Narrativity") it aroused little interest, despite the fact that Wenzel sought a solution to a repeated stumbling-block: the theological indeterminacy of the central concepts of narration and narrativity. Unsurprisingly, he calls on Paul Ricœur, whose approach to narratology is in any case close to theology (see e. g. Ricœur 1995), arguing that the indeterminacy in question is theologically well founded:

²⁶ For Barth's own position on narrative see Wacker (1977: 73-81).

²⁷ It should be mentioned here that Jüngel himself published several much acclaimed volumes of sermons.

²⁸ The many essays in practical theology, as well as Dietmar Mieth's benchmark contribution to the development of a 'narrative ethics', deserve special mention. Major works of systematic theology were the exception at that time. For an overview see the bibliography in Wacker (1983: 26-29).

²⁹ See also: Wenzel (1996).

the indeterminacy of the concept reveals itself [...] as an indication of the radical historicity of a theology that—as narrative—not only has history as its theme, but sees itself as a voice within that narrative. Yet again: narrative theology is immersed in its own thematic element of time and history (*Geschichte*)—history understood in its double sense of ‘account’ (*Historie*) and ‘story’ (*Erzählung*). (Wenzel 1997: 15)³⁰

What Wenzel proposed under the programmatic title of ‘Theological Narrativity’ is something which had, up to that point, been lacking: an explicitly reflective narrative theology. The scarcely audible response to his thesis was doubtless due in part to the general shift in thematic focus, but it can be ascribed with even greater conviction to the hermeneutically refined level of his argument. A third factor may have been simply denominational: up to now the discussion had been confined to Protestant theology. Whatever the case, his work receives no mention at all in the latest contribution to the discussion, the 2005 volume of essays *Dogmatik erzählen? Die Bedeutung des Erzählens für eine biblische orientierte Dogmatik* (‘Narrating Dogmatics? The role of storytelling in a biblically oriented dogmatic theology’; Schneider-Flume/Hiller 2005).

2.4 Leipzig Reprise: “Narrating Dogma?” (Schneider-Flume)

The general argument of the volume in question can be discerned in the contributions of one of its editors, the Leipzig systematic theologian Gunda Schneider-Flume.³¹ In her introduction Schneider-Flume (2005a: 3) expressly cites what she calls the “old programme” of narrative theology, an approach she judges to be of “limited legitimacy”, in whose “rejuvenation” the essays presented in the collection are, she makes clear, not interested. On the contrary, the relevance of narrative theology is to be understood here in the context of reflection on the traditional task of dogmatic theology, which remains, for her, “the explication of the scriptures” (*ibid.*). The unmistakably Lutheran slant to this manifesto carries over into the question that forms the title of Schneider-Flume’s own first essay (as it does of the volume as a whole): “Narrating Dogma?”—described in her subtitle as a “plea for a biblical theology”. Schneider-Flume sees narrative theology in the old sense as harbouring two major “dangers and limitations [...] the arbitrariness, or ideological [...] abuse, of narration on the one hand, and the lack of credibility of metanarrative remarked by Jean-François Lyotard on the other” (*ibid.*: 4). However, neither of these deficiencies is further elaborated, nor does it become clear how they are to be avoided in the author’s own approach.³²

³⁰ The German word *Geschichte* is commonly used for both ‘history’ and ‘story’ [trans.].

³¹ But see the painstaking review by Linde (2007).

³² The argument that the “unique history of God” is not a metahistory because it “enters [individual] life-histories as a concrete force” (*ibid.*) certainly constitutes no objection to Lyotard’s understanding of metahistory.

Despite the coolness of this volume towards narrative theology, the diagnosis underlying its reprise of the topic has a familiar ring: Christians suffer from “inarticulacy” (ibid.: 3) vis à vis their faith; the “great dogmatic symbols” (ibid.: 6)—sin, justification, providence, God—no longer adequately express Christian experience. In these circumstances the story is called upon to “break up the[se] great dogmatic concepts” (ibid.: 3). Yet, true to the principle avowed by Ritschl and Jüngel,³³ Schneider-Flume also insists that dogmatic theology, albeit reflecting narrative and, as such, beholden to it, should not itself be conceived in narrative terms. Where she differs from Ritschl is in the scope of what she thinks of in this context as narrative: not *any* corpus of stories but the stories of the Bible. These, for her, are the “material of dogmatic thought” (ibid.: 11).

How dogmatic theology is to be practised as the interpretation and exposition of biblical writings is demonstrated in Schneider-Flume’s (2005b) second contribution to the volume, where she directly confronts the problem, familiar to theologians, of speaking in a single breath of “the many stories of the biblical tradition and the one story of God.” The narrative problem, in other words, appears against the horizon of the ‘scriptural principle’ (*sola scriptura*)³⁴, and even more precisely against that of the unity and centrality of the scriptures. To speak in these terms is to assume the accents of the Reformers, for whom Jesus Christ was the one binding factor within a multifarious biblical tradition. “Take Christ out of the scriptures and what more will you find in them?” Luther had asked³⁵. The significance of the concept of scriptural centring was developed in the form of the doctrine of justification³⁶; as such it underlies all critical theology, including that whose object is the matter of the scriptures themselves.³⁷

The postulate of an underlying unity of scriptural intention has certain problematic consequences for theology. What does it entail, for example, for that portion of the sacred books of Christianity that comprise the Old Testament, the majority of whose writings belong at least primarily not to the

³³ In contrast to the analysis presented here, Jüngel in these terms represents a *weak* model.

³⁴ Viz. of the Reformers’ doctrine that the scriptures are the sole source and norm of faith and consequently also of theology; this contrasted with the Roman Catholic appeal to the authority of tradition as a second norm – see Ebeling (1966). For a fuller treatment of the scriptural issue see Härle (2007a: 111-139).

³⁵ “Tolle Christum e scripturis, quid amplius in illis invenies?” (Luther 1525: 606, 29).

³⁶ I. e. the Reformers’ doctrine that mankind, locked in original sin, can and will be unconditionally set in a rightful relation to God (viz. justified) by grace alone (*sola gratia*), through faith alone (*sola fide*) in the redeeming power of Christ (*solus Christus*).

³⁷ “It is from the platform of the Bible itself that the Bible becomes both addressee and object of critical analysis. Because the authority of scripture is derived from the authority of scripture, Christ’s dealings [“was Christus treibt”, Luther] themselves become the critical standard against which the utterances of scripture as a whole and of its individual books must be measured; it is with Christ that they must match.” (Härle 2007a: 138f.)

Christian tradition at all but to the Jewish³⁸ Above all, however, it was the results of critical historical research that led to what W. Pannenberg has called “a crisis of the scriptural principle”; for what this demonstrated was precisely not the unity but the multiplicity of at times contradictory theological conceptions. Why, therefore, theology should remain subservient to scripture is not easy to establish convincingly—which is why the scriptures tend to play an increasingly background role in recent systematic theological discussion. Aware of this development, and of the advent in their place of what she calls “the generalized religious constructs of subjectivity theory”, Schneider-Flume argues decisively for a new opening of systematic theology towards narrative and narration. Theology, she says, has forgotten what “experiential riches [are lost] by giving up the biblical tradition [...] Faced with this loss, the work of dogmatic theology must concentrate on finding its way back to the biblical stories.” (ibid.)

Nevertheless, rather than engaging immediately in this task, Schneider-Flume turns her attention to a counter-proposition concerned with a modern approach to scriptural centring: Ingolf U. Dalferth’s (1997: 189) thesis that the centre of the scriptures is “external [...] not within the semantic horizon of the biblical texts but within their pragmatic horizon in the work of the Christian church”³⁹. The texts themselves, Dalferth maintains, do not raise the question of a ‘centre’ at all; this arises in the wake of the broader attempt to expound the presence and working of God in the world. For her part, Schneider-Flume utterly rejects the shift from a received principle of biblical interpretation to a fundamental principle of theological hermeneutics. Against Dalferth she hammers home her traditional Lutheran position, exegetically enriched with three biblical “traces of the (hi)story of God”, which she entitles “the realism of mercy”, “hearing the cry for salvation” and “righteousness and vicariousness” (see Schneider-Flume 2005b: 41-50). These three strands of biblical history, she argues, reveal the unity of the story of God within the multiplicity and diversity of the biblical accounts.

Far from deciding the issue, however, her uncompromising riposte provokes more questions about Schneider-Flume’s position. If her ultimate objective is to break up the “great dogmatic concepts” because they are no longer understood, it is not immediately clear how this is to be achieved with the help of *biblical* narratives. That it is they (rather than narratives as such) that are invoked is understandable as a traditional reflex (*sola scriptura*); but at least it should be made clear why the frequently lamented alien quality of the Bible’s textual worlds suddenly no longer presents an obstacle. To put it mildly, is the “prolongation of the Bible story into the present-day world”

³⁸ See Schneider-Flume (2005b: 34, esp. the works listed in note 7).

³⁹ For an exegetical presentation see Weder (NT) and Hermisson (OT) in the same volume. They also attract Schneider-Flume’s criticism.

(Linde: 2007: 1116) really as straightforward as the author maintains? A second objection concerns a similar discrepancy between the proposed definition and solution of the problem. If the “inarticulacy” predicated of “Christians” in their lack of understanding of the “great concepts” (Schneider-Flume 2005a: 3) is as truly global a phenomenon as it is made out to be, it scarcely follows that a “biblically oriented dogmatic theology” will be an appropriate remedy. After all, dogmatic theology is the preserve of academic theologians, and of an academic language that need not and cannot be intelligible to all Christians. A far simpler (indeed banal) appeal would in the circumstances be more convincing: that the pastoral clergy should strive more effectively to communicate a theologically informed and experientially rich religious language to their communities—which does not, of course, reciprocally imply that academic theology can afford to be oblivious of religious language.

3. Interim Balance: Narration—a Holistic-Polemic Concept

The foregoing discussion of some key approaches to narrative and narration bears ample witness to the alterity of theological discourse on the subject. The summary below (which is based on a wider range of publications than those already cited) will attempt an interim balance from a point of view closer to that of literary studies. Doing so, it hopes to shed a closer light on the specific purpose and role of narration for systematic theology. If in the process certain gaps are noted, this should be understood descriptively rather than critically; for in an interdisciplinary context precisely those dimensions (here of the phenomenon of narration) are most interesting that do *not* enter the discourse of the partner discipline, or might even disrupt it. What distinguishes the *theological* discussion of narrative and narration, then, can be expressed in the following propositions:

- In all the approaches so far discussed, the concepts of narration, storytelling etc. are, even in the weak models, consistently positive (rather than neutral).
- For theology the narrative problem is neither merely aesthetic nor stylistic, nor is it purely didactic (and as such a topic for practical theology). On the contrary, it falls (as above all Jüngel’s approach demonstrates) within the purview of systematic theology *in the strictest sense*.
- Nevertheless it is of little interest to any of these approaches how storytelling actually operates. The whole issue is derivative: what is crucial is its status for theology as a whole and/or for the subdisciplines. In other words, the concept of narrative is not differentiated internally but externally, in relation to other competing positions.

- What is undoubtedly lost in the course of the debate is the emancipatory thrust of its beginnings. What for Metz was a keystone of ‘political theology’ is for Schneider-Flume no more than a keyword of traditionally Lutheran ‘biblical theology’.
- The highlighting of narrative tends to overlook the fact that much but not *all* of the Bible falls within that category. The significance of other genres (poetic, legal, epistolary) for narrative theology remains an open question—and one to be addressed above all with regard to by Schneider-Flume’s biblical dogmatic theology.
- Within the narrative theology discourse, storytelling plays the more or less simple role of the good alternative to conceptual argumentation’s bad. Whilst many participants in the debate allow that these are not disjunctive opposites, the point is rarely developed. The programmatically chiasmic bond between the two—narration as a mode of argument, argument as a mode of narration—is passed over in silence, despite the evidence for this within the biblical tradition, evidence quite as obvious as that of the oft-cited *Tales of Hasidim*.⁴⁰ Nor is mention made in this context of Deuser’s ‘confessional’ language as a type of ‘God-talk’ mediating between argument and storytelling.⁴¹
- The alternatives of argument and narration are treated almost exclusively *in abstracto*. Above all the proponents of a strong model of narrative theology ignore the practical consequences of their position. For requirement and performance do not meet: the requirement to narrate demanded of theological language by no means entails an ability to do so adequately (hence Jüngel’s waiver clause for genius).
- The plea for a narrative theology does not carry the same implications for all the theological sub-disciplines. In its strong form it impacts systematic theology most acutely, for here ‘God-talk’ takes on its most abstract and highly specialized terminological form.
- The more exclusively narration is propounded as the optimal mode of ‘God-talk’, the more pressing becomes the reciprocal question of the mode of discourse in which that proposition is framed. Most approaches ignore this self-referential dimension of the problem; those that do ac-

⁴⁰ But see also Landfester’s (2005) historico-exegetical approach.

⁴¹ Petzoldt (2005: 73) crucially asks if the opposition between concept and narrative has not been overly hasty. In the field of academic theology, too, it is not concepts but *propositions* (sentences) that characterize dogmatic utterances: “A dogmatic utterance is only completed when the dogmatic concept is joined with a predicate to form a sentence or judgment. [...] The utterance can only enter scholarly discourse once it is expressed as a judgment. In this respect the utterances of dogmatic theology must also fulfil the propositional postulate of scientific theory.” Petzoldt’s essay is of particular interest in being the only one to take a critical stance towards the volume’s overall programme.

knowledge it are content, like Jüngel, with a simple indication of the existence of the problem:

- Before argumentative theology can become truly narrative it must develop an ability to reflect on the mode and matter of narrative: it must prove its dialectic and discursive capabilities. If “discourse is again [!] to become narrative [...] it urgently requires a discursive theory of narrative” [Mieth]. (Jüngel 1992: 427)
- The unquestioning assumption that storytelling is a theological virtue derives largely from the notion that narrative and experience are one. Their relation is not further analyzed but itself assumed as a sort of a priori postulate, frequently backed by a classical reference (e. g. to Walter Benjamin, see note 24 above). The categorical premise that concepts are incapable of communicating experience is matched by the assumption that narrative can do this to a high degree. The reciprocal question whether narrative is not itself subject to limitations is not raised, nor is any reference made to the role of experience in non-narrative poetic modes (especially the Psalms).
- Theological assent for narrative and narration invariably regards itself as assent to a mode whose time is past (not just for theology). Thus, Schneider-Flume (2005a: 4) wholeheartedly agrees that ‘we’ live in a post-narrative era, and she, too, appeals to the diagnoses of Benjamin and Adorno without, it seems, adverting to the huge shifts in the media landscape that have taken place since they wrote.
- Ever since its introduction, the concept of ‘narrative theology’ has largely oscillated “between the twin poles of ‘storytelling theology’ on the one hand and ‘theological theory of narration’ on the other” (Wacker 1983: 20).
- The main reason for this oscillation would seem to be the very openness of the concepts of narrative, narration, storytelling etc. Who tells whom what story how and where frequently remains unclear.⁴² Standard literary-critical distinctions relating to the semantics (author versus narrator, *discours* versus *histoire*, fictional versus factual account etc.) and pragmatics of narration (author/work/reader, narration versus narrative, oral versus written narrative etc.) scarcely play a role in the theological discussion. Yet whether we are talking of one of Jesus’ parables or of Proust’s *Recherche* is—quite apart from the question of differing canonicity—a mat-

⁴² A standard observation since Metz (1973: 341) and despite Wenzel (see Wacker 1977: 85ff.). The lack of clear focus inevitably affects the paraphrases given here.

ter of considerable consequence for the phenomenology of both narration and reading.⁴³

- The lack of such differentiation can be seen as the very condition under which narrative and narration can function as a clear holistic alternative to argument. Only as such can it fulfil the polemic function required of it by theological discourse.⁴⁴

4. Analogies: “The God of Texts” (Weimar)

A final reference must be made to an approach that brings narration and theology into an entirely different relation to each other, and from a quite different motive and angle. Far from launching a programmatic thesis or critique (either disciplinary or interdisciplinary), Klaus Weimar’s 1998 essay “Der Gott der Texte” (“The God of Texts”) confines itself to a precise description of a number of striking analogies that appear between the two areas. In this approach literary-critical (and especially narratological) concepts and distinctions finally play a central role.

The title of the essay is initially somewhat confusing; beneath it lies the observation that literary criticism frequently impinges (or draws) upon theology even when it is unaware of doing so. Recognizing God “neither as immediate thematic focus, nor [...] as historical agent or systematic source of explanation” (ibid.: 145), literary criticism nevertheless has persistent and unmistakable recourse to “procedures and concepts that—at least in earlier times—were part and parcel of theology” (ibid.). Three areas in particular attract Weimar’s attention: the doctrine of *inspiration*, the *analogical* mode of interpreting and, above all, the concept of *author*. In each case his argument proceeds identically, a sketch of the theological dimension of the concept being followed by examples illustrating its less obvious literary-critical analogue.

Thus the theological doctrine of inspiration, he argues, (like its poetological counterpart) postulates a type of *heteronomous* utterance: one in which *two* voices, that of a divine and of a human author, speak, the latter (whether orally or in writing) articulating the will of the former. It is an ordering that recurs (albeit variously) in the predilection of literary studies to

⁴³ Ritschl’s *story* becomes an umbrella term “embracing the suffering in Chile or Angola” as much as the “story of Abraham” or “the story of my child”, irrespective of the profound differences these present as theological raw material (Ritschl 1976: 10, 37). See also Weinrich (1973: 330f).

⁴⁴ The polemic instrumentalizing of the debate within academic theology may be at least partly responsible for the lack of interest it aroused outside that circle. Significantly, the comprehensive bibliography of narratological research published between 1976 and 1978 in successive issues of the *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* carries no reference whatsoever to narrative theology. See Wacker (1983: 30, n. 28).

read texts as *symptoms* of e. g. ‘society’ or the ‘collective unconscious’ or ‘discourse’. Neither the source of inspiration nor its instrument is in such cases personal; in this type of global palimpsest the role of muse or Holy Spirit is taken by an impersonal but all-powerful force. Narratologically the interesting point is that theology, in contrast to poetics, links the blending of the two voices to two different linguistic modes, the divine language of ‘things’ or ‘realities’—the *verbum efficax* within whose outreach word and being, word and world are one (the classical texts being Gen 1 and Ps 33,9)—and human language, whose words symptomatically lack such efficacy. “When the divine language of things enters the human language of words *per inspirationem*, the human author speaks [...] in human words and the divine author speaks through him [...] to the things signified by those words.” (Weimar 1998: 146) The distinction, Weimar (ibid.: 147) argues, recurs in literary scholarship in the “concept of the dual linguistic level specific to literature, current in exemplary form in the narratological distinction between author and narrator. [...] author and narrator are related to each other as divine inspirer and evangelist or prophet”. Heinrich Lee in *Der grüne Heinrich* is in this sense just as much a creation of Gottfried Keller’s as, in Christian belief, mankind is the creation of God. Whilst Heinrich speaks with the words of men, Keller speaks in and through his character’s ‘human’ words the divine word of ‘things’.

The idea that certain texts involve some sort of inspired language underlies a wide range of hermeneutic practices. Heteronomous speech demands interpretive techniques that reveal the higher meaning, the *sensus spiritualis*, ‘behind’ the immediate meaning of the words. Weimar’s point is that the anagogical (including the allegorical) interpretation of texts—a traditional canonical technique of Christian hermeneutics—far from being confined to antiquity or the Middle Ages, is an accepted procedure of modern literary science (see ibid.: 148). The mention of a bicycle pump in a text by Joyce inspires interpretive constructs from phallic symbol to serpent in Paradise that would be unlikely to occur to the (same) reader of a travel journal. Nevertheless, the difficulty of the (still almost spontaneous) jump from *sensus litteralis* to *sensus spiritualis* in the case of the familiar pump is, in comparison with the anagogical reading of a biblical text, heightened by the absence of any *regula fidei* to serve as prop or guideline. Between phallus and serpent (or any further alternative) the reader may waver where he or she will not when confronted with a biblical triad whose reference to the Trinity is canonically guaranteed.⁴⁵

Weimar’s deliberations culminate in his third section, devoted to the role of author—and specifically to the thesis that a traditional idea of God has

⁴⁵ See Bühler (2000) on Luther’s critique of interpretive reasoning.

“slipped into literary studies and taken refuge in the concept of author” (ibid.: 150).⁴⁶ For

whenever one posits a ‘language of things’ as the basis for the meaning of things within a textual world, one must at the same time posit a speaker of that language—namely the author. The author of a literary text stands to the textual world that he or she creates as, in received theological doctrine, God stands to the world that he created. (ibid.: 149)⁴⁷

Citing a passage from Eichendorff’s *Abnung und Gegenwart*, Weimar demonstrates that at least eight of the classical attributes of God are predicable of a human author in relation to the text: omnipotence and omniscience, invisibility and incorporeality, omnipresence and immeasurability, eternity and infinity. Understood as the creator of a textual world—that is to say from the point of view of “textual theory” rather than (as is commonly the case in literary studies) “text-production theory”—the literary author enjoys all these attributes. And Weimar takes the significant further step of ascribing those attributes “also, and in fact primarily, to the reader” (ibid.: 153)—for it is a commonplace that the reader is the real creator of the concrete textual world, however much readers of *Abnung und Gegenwart* may selflessly insist on ascribing the world of that novel to the historical Eichendorff.⁴⁸ With or without this final twist into the aesthetics of reception it remains plausible to speak of the author as the ‘God of Texts’ for the simple reason that the classical doctrine of God has formulated, albeit unawares, a concept of authorship that perfectly dovetails with textual theory.

5. Conclusion

“Contemporary theological dictionaries are treacherous—above all in what they leave out.” (Metz 1973: 334) The opening sentence of Metz’s ‘Brief Apologia’ no longer reflects today’s situation. Recent theological encyclopaedias all contain an article on ‘narrative’, and both the Catholic *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (³LThK) and the Protestant *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (⁴RGG) even carry an independent entry on ‘narrative theology’.⁴⁹ Thanks at least partly to Metz, one can, then, no longer speak in this context of omission. It is nevertheless striking that, even in retrospect, the authors (especially of the systematic sections) of the relevant articles still experience

⁴⁶ Weimar’s argument doubles as an explication of Barthes’ postulate of the death of the author-God: see Barthes (1984: 67).

⁴⁷ Weimar’s concept of God is that of early-modern Lutheran orthodoxy: the texts on which he draws are Quenstedt’s *Theologia didactico-polemica* (1685) and Buddeus’ *Institutiones theologiae dogmaticae* (1724).

⁴⁸ For the background to this see Weimar’s theory as expounded in Weimar (1994).

⁴⁹ See Wenzel (1993) and Arens (2003).

certain difficulties in establishing the scope and locus of narration. Arens (2003: 53), for example, notes once again the dilemma of the “outreach of narrative”: are we talking here about “a, or indeed *the*, genuinely theological method and approach, or are stories merely the ‘raw material’ (Ritschl) of a theology whose processes are themselves argumentative”? Current theological discourse, however, seems better able to live with these uncertainties than was the case thirty years ago. The theological relevance of narrative—especially for a church that confesses allegiance to the *sola scriptura* principle—is generally accepted; what has passed into history is the programmatic foregrounding of ‘narrative theology’, though this does not in turn imply that the problems that gave rise to that program have passed into oblivion. What is the appropriate language of (systematic) theology? What is its ‘raw material’? To what extent is it legitimate for the metalanguage of theology to distance itself from the world-centred language of religion? These questions remain at the forefront of contemporary discussion, and in them the biblically sanctioned mode of narration is present and active, albeit in a significantly altered perspective. Narration today more often features as one aspect of an aesthetic⁵⁰, poetic⁵¹ or poietic⁵² (dogmatic) theology that sees itself as a medially open-ended response to the modern “crisis of the scriptural principle”.⁵³

Be that as it may, it is not the after-life of narrative theology that is at issue here. More to the point is one final but fundamental issue that emerges from viewing the interim balance in the light of Weimar’s “God of Texts”. For the manner in which narration and theology are linked in ‘narrative theology’ raises the prospect of a new and independent type of theology. As we have seen, it is the *function* of narration—above all its polemic function—not its methods that have captivated the interest of theologians. How specific narrative worlds were constructed and with what critical tools they can be described was never of pressing interest. Against this background Weimar’s essay reads—however unintentionally—as a plea for recapturing a lost dimension. Its focus on careful deployment of accepted narratological techniques and methods absolves him in any case from the accusation of functionalism. And without wanting to play off one approach against the other—which (among other things) would fail to do justice to the established *disciplinary* role of narrative theology—one further benefit must be mentioned. For

⁵⁰ See the three-volume *Ästhetische Theologie* (‘Aesthetic Theology’) of the writer and theologian Klaas Huizing (2000-2004). See also Merten (2002) for a sensitive critical presentation of that work.

⁵¹ See Stock’s (1995-2007) to-date seven-volume *Poetische Dogmatik* (‘Poetic Dogmatics’), as well as his essays in ‘pictorial theology’, Stock (1996 etc.).

⁵² See Bayer (1999).

⁵³ See Huizing (2000-2004; 1996). For an overview of these and other approaches see Bauke-Ruegg (2004: 199-254).

Weimar's contribution highlights the price that is paid when the twin poles of narrative theology are joined in a venture whose *primary* motivation is programmatic and polemic. The advantage of his more modest horizon is that it generates results which are of interest to *both* disciplines involved—and why else should literary scholarship be interested in the projects of theology? An awareness of the latent theological dimension of a whole series of critical concepts and procedures opens up new prospects for literary scholars; though whether this breakthrough will be accompanied by joy at the discovery of new relations or fear and trembling in the face of concepts already shed by theology centuries ago is hard to say. For theologians, the prospect is similar. They can perceive their own concerns all the more clearly through the lens of another discipline, but to do so involves a parallel ambivalence. This may be illustrated in a single example: for theology today, the concept of narration is almost sacramental, its connotations wholly positive, its outreach virtually unlimited. It will be interesting to see if this evaluation is affected by an awareness of the limits imposed by the terminology, categories and concepts of literary narratology. It is at least thinkable that advertence to the limitations of individual narrative *perspectives* (described, for example, in such categories as voice and focalization) might introduce a measure of scepticism towards the unlimited power of narration and narrative *as such*.⁵⁴

A number of literary scholars and theologians apart from Klaus Weimar have shown an interest in the relation between theology and narration from a more closely narratological point of view, where (in contrast to narrative exegesis) the textual corpus is not restricted to biblical writings. If it were not for the grandiose overtones of such a term, one might think of their contributions as paving the way for a new and welcome *analytical 'narratheology'*.

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⁵⁴ For a substantial critique on this point (expressly directed at Weimar) see Stoellger (2009).

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