

Narrative Pathology or Strategy for
Making Present and Authorization?
Metalepsis in the Gospels

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Dedicated to Peter Lampe, on his sixtieth birthday

A first reading of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, by Laurence Sterne, from the middle of the eighteenth century, presents curious features. For instance, numbered chapters appear in muddled order, the typography contains spidery lines or omissions in the form of long asterisks, and ultimately the reader is asked to close the window of the protagonist, Mister Shandy, and put him to bed. Such narrative phenomena surprise, irritate, or even shock us. Should we regard them as narrative pathology or narrative strategy? If strategy, what are the forms, implications, and effects of it? And does this strategy occur in early Christian literature?

Until 1972 the phenomenon had not yet been given a precise name in the scholarly literature.¹ This was first achieved by Gérard Genette, who called it “*métalepse narrative*” and thus interpreted a concept from classical rhetoric in an original fashion.² He defines metalepsis as “any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator into the diegetic universe (or by

This paper was originally submitted in German, was translated by me (SRJ) at Eisen’s request, and was subsequently revised in English by Eisen for additional clarity in communicating her ideas.

1. For a survey of the literature and a terminological guide, see Sonja Klimek, *Paradoxes Erzählen: Die Metalepse in der phantastischen Literatur* (Paderborn: Mentis, 2010), 17–72.

2. On the conceptual history of metalepsis see Ruurd Nauta, “The Concept of ‘Metalepsis’: From Rhetoric to the Theory of Allusion and to Narratology,” in *Über die*

diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe), etc., or the inverse.”³ Genette emphasizes that this involves a paradoxical contamination between the level of narration and the level of story, which are separated by “a shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells.”⁴ In other words a transgression of borders takes place, and interventions occur, sometimes from top to bottom (top down) and sometimes from bottom to top (bottom up). This “produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical . . . or fantastic.”⁵ Already Jorge Luis Borges, who termed this narrative strategy “reflections” (*Spiegelungen*), had drawn far-reaching conclusions: “Such reflections suggest that if the figures of a fiction can also be readers and spectators, we, their readers and viewers, might be fictitious.”⁶

Such conclusions resonate strikingly in an age of postmodern and virtual worlds. It is increasingly difficult to avoid the suspicion that one is “just a figure in a gigantic media conspiracy.”⁷ While Genette in his earlier work still offers a quite simple definition of metalepsis, this changes in his essay *Métalepse: De la figure à la fiction* (2004).⁸ Here he expands his study of metalepsis beyond narrative texts to examine the ways it is employed in paintings, theater, film, and television. A good example from the art world is the painting *Escapando de la crítica* (1874) by Spanish artist Pere Borrell del Caso. It is a late example, following the pattern of the Dutch portraits of the seventeenth century, in which the figure in the painting

Grenze: Metalepse in Text- und Bildmedien des Altertums, ed. Ute E. Eisen and Peter von Möllendorff (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013), 469–82.

3. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 234–35.

4. *Ibid.*, 236.

5. *Ibid.*, 235.

6. “Solche Spiegelungen legen die Vermutung nahe, daß, sofern die Figuren einer Fiktion auch Leser und Zuschauer sein können, wir, ihre Leser und Zuschauer, fiktiv sein könnten.” Jorge Luis Borges, “Befragungen,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, trans. Karl August Horst, vol. 5.2 (Munich: Hanser, 1981), 57. Unless otherwise specified, all translations of quotations from German are by Sara R. Johnson.

7. “Nur eine Figur in einer gigantischen medialen Verschwörung zu sein.” Achim Hölter, “Das Eigenleben der Figuren: Eine radikale Konsequenz der neueren Metafiktion,” in *Komparatistik: Jahrbuch der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft 2007*, ed. Christiane Dahms (Heidelberg: Synchron, 2008), 42.

8. Gérard Genette, *Métalepse: De la figure à la fiction* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2004).

steps over the painted frame and thus crosses the boundary into the world of the observer.⁹ Genette characterizes such phenomena as transgressions that defy logic. He ultimately applies them to the grammatical subject of narratives. Every narrative that presents itself as an “I-narrative” is already regarded by him as a prime candidate for metalepsis. Above all, he now incorporates the phenomenon of feedback between extratextual reality and the textual world. Examples of this are when actors are so closely identified with the roles they have played that they are no longer accepted by their audience in any other role, or when spectators accost an actor in the street and even insult him or her because she or he embodies a role that has incurred their disgust. These are far-reaching indications of the powerful effect of fiction, and they demonstrate how strikingly fictions affect human perception.

The phenomenon of narrative metalepsis is not confined to modern literature; even in Genette one finds occasional glimpses from the literature of antiquity. Irene de Jong published a groundbreaking initial investigation of the subject in 2009.¹⁰ In 2011, at an international conference on narrative metalepsis in ancient discourse, examples from ancient literature and art were brought together: Akkadian, Egyptian, Hebrew, and rabbinic literature; the art of the archaic Greek world; pagan Greek literature from the classical, Hellenistic, and Roman imperial periods; and Roman historiographical literature as well as early Christian literature.¹¹ The conference demonstrated that the phenomenon is so widespread and pervasive that it suggests the existence of fundamental metaleptic sensitivities in ancient literature. Ute E. Eisen and Peter von Möllendorff give an elementary definition of the phenomenon: “Metalepsis is a vertically oriented transgression and interaction of entities of different levels of representation in a work of art.”¹²

9. For more examples of metalepsis in other works of art, see Klimek, *Paradoxes Erzählen*, 73–116.

10. Irene de Jong, “Metalepsis in Ancient Greek Literature,” in *Narratology and Interpretation: The Content of Narrative Form in Ancient Literature*, ed. Jonas Grethlein and Antonios Rengakos (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), 87–115.

11. The conference took place February 4–5, 2011, at the Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen in Germany. See the collected papers published by Eisen and von Möllendorff, *Über die Grenze*.

12. “Die Metalepse ist eine vertikal gerichtete Grenzüberschreitung und Interaktion von Instanzen differenter Ebenen der Darstellung im Kunstwerk.” Eisen and von Möllendorff, “Zur Einführung,” in Eisen and von Möllendorff, *Über die Grenze*, 1;

Narrative metalepses are met in different forms and intensities, concern different aspects, and generate different effects:

(1) The most direct manifestation of metalepsis is the apostrophe,¹³ meaning a direct address that either takes place from the extradiegetic narrator top down or (in the case of the second form, see below) from a character bottom up.

(2) The second form of apostrophe, from a diegetic character bottom up, occurs when “characters announce the text in the text,” which has metatextual implications.¹⁴

In modern literature these two forms of metalepsis destabilize the realism of the story, while in ancient literature the reverse can be observed: it enforces the status and authority of the speaker (narrator or character). The effect is that “for an instant, the distinction between the—temporal and spatial—universes of the narrator and the narrated world collapses,”¹⁵ and the impression of simultaneity, immediacy, and authenticity arises. Crucial moments of story and discourse can be highlighted by this meta-leptic strategy.

(3) A less direct and more widely used form is the blending of narrative voices and worlds.¹⁶ In the case of blending narrative voices, the speech has double relevance, that is, a meta-leptic process of blending together the speech of a character and the narrator. It is ambiguous and leads to a subtle blending of narrative worlds.

It has the effect that the speech or performance of either a character or the narrator gains a subtle double relevance for both worlds, the world of the discourse and the story world. The effects are similar to those of the apostrophe but less obvious and more subtle.

(4) The intensity of narrative metalepsis can be navigated by loose end technique or fade-out, which we define as a metalepsis that is not marked

see also Eisen, “Metalepsis in the Gospel of John—Narration Situation and ‘Beloved Disciple’ in New Perspective,” in Eisen and von Möllendorff, *Über die Grenze*, 318–21, and 320 for an illustration concerning the levels of representation.

13. For more information, see de Jong, “Metalepsis,” 93–97; and Eisen and von Möllendorff, “Einführung,” 5, with references to further contributions.

14. De Jong, “Metalepsis,” 98–99; Eisen and von Möllendorff, “Einführung,” 5.

15. De Jong, “Metalepsis,” 96.

16. For more information, see de Jong, “Metalepsis,” 99–106; and Eisen and von Möllendorff, “Einführung,” 5.

with an endpoint.¹⁷ This metaleptic technique provides for a sustained and intensified blending of narrative worlds.

(5) The intensity of metalepsis furthermore depends on duration and impact. Temporary metalepsis is traditionally called rhetorical, while on the other hand prolonged metalepsis with impact on the plot or the discourse is termed ontological metalepsis.¹⁸ Whereas a rhetorical metalepsis only “opens a small window that allows a quick glance across levels,”¹⁹ a window that closes after a few sentences, the ontological metalepsis shows the narrator physically present in the story or a character performing on the level of discourse.

(6) Metalepsis concerns inter- and metatextual as well as medial aspects, which are to be found in metaleptic strategies that, with narrative sophistication, reflect and simultaneously enact the textuality and the transmission of their own narratives.²⁰ Metaleptic functions mediate between textuality, orality, and autopsy, and enhance the authority and credibility of the narrator or a character.

(7) Concerning functional aspects and effects of metalepsis, it can be observed that in ancient literature metalepsis is intended not to disturb and destroy, as in modern literature, but rather to intensify the illusion of reality and contribute to mimetic stabilization.²¹ Metaleptic interventions top down or bottom up as well as the blending of narrative voices evoke with greater or lesser intensity the impression of the immediacy or the simultaneity of the separated worlds. We want to term this as a strategy for

17. For loose end technique, see Siegmar Döpp, “Metalepsen als signifikante Elemente spätlateinischer Literatur,” in *Über die Grenze*, ed. Eisen and von Möllendorff, 441. For fade-out, see De Jong, “Metalepsis,” 106–13; see also Eisen and von Möllendorff, “Einführung,” 6.

18. Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 207; see also Eisen and von Möllendorff, “Einführung,” 6.

19. Ryan, *Avatars*, 207.

20. See Eisen and von Möllendorff, “Einführung,” 6–7.

21. For the functional aspects and effects of metalepsis, see *ibid.*, 8. De Jong, “Metalepsis,” 115, emphasizes that in ancient literature metalepsis is “for the most part serious (rather than comic) and ... aimed at increasing the authority of the narrator and the realism of his narrative (rather than breaking the illusion).” See the collection of examples from different ancient literatures in the volume by Eisen and von Möllendorff, *Über die Grenze*. For a modern comparison, see the epic theater of Bertolt Brecht, where the act of calling attention to the stage setting makes it clear to the audience that they are watching a play.

making present (*Vergegenwärtigungsstrategie*). By this strategy the credibility and authenticity of the narrator or characters are stabilized, which in turn authorizes the whole narrative.

In what follows, examples of metaleptic strategies in early Christian literature that are found in the Gospel of Mark, in Luke-Acts, and in the Gospel of John will be examined and conclusions drawn.

Metalepsis in the Gospel of Mark

Metaleptic strategy can be detected at the beginning of the second chapter of the Gospel of Mark in the scene of the healing of the paralytic (Mark 2:1–12).²² The reader is puzzled by the speech of the character Jesus (vv. 8–11). It is introduced by the formula (v. 5) “he said to the paralytic” (λέγει τῷ παραλυτικῷ) and followed by the statement “Child, your sins are forgiven” (τέκνον, ἀφίενταί σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι; v. 5).²³ The words are repeated two more times in his reaction to the scribes’ objection to his forgiving sins (vv. 9, 10). Jesus says (v. 9): “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven’” (τί ἐστὶν εὐκοπώτερον, εἰπεῖν τῷ παραλυτικῷ· ἀφίενταί σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι), and then says in his statement about the Son of Man followed by the repeated introduction formula from verse 5 in verse 10: “‘But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’—he said to the paralytic—” (ἵνα δὲ εἰδῆτε ὅτι ἐξουσίαν ἔχει ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἀφίεναι ἁμαρτίας ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς—λέγει τῷ παραλυτικῷ). How can the sudden change of grammatical person in verse 10 be explained?

Rudolf Pesch appropriately observes in his commentary on Mark 2:10: “The narrator steps out of his distant role and speaks directly commenting through the mouth of Jesus before linking back through a repetition of verse 5 λέγει τῷ παραλυτικῷ (prepared in v. 9 εἰπεῖν τῷ παραλυτικῷ) to the miracle story, which now is used as a proof.”²⁴ Despite this he offers form- and source-critical explanations: the autonomous miracle story (vv. 1–5, 11–12), he argues, was later enlarged by the debate about the forgiveness of sin and the Son of Man (vv. 6–10). Pesch supposes that the sudden use

22. David du Toit, “Entgrenzungen: Zu metaleptischen Strategien in der frühchristlichen Erzählliteratur,” in *Über die Grenze*, ed. Eisen and von Möllendorff, 294–97.

23. Biblical translations follow, with small modifications, the NRSV.

24. Rudolf Pesch, *Einleitung und Kommentar zu Kap. 1,1–8,26*, vol. 1 of *Das Markusevangelium*, HThKNT 2.1 (Freiburg: Herder, 1980), 160.

of the phrase “Son of Man” is here intended as a christological title derived from later early-Christian tradition, reflecting Jesus’s ministry from the perspective of death and resurrection.²⁵

In the actual debate about reading the gospels as consistent narratives it is more appropriate to explain verse 10 in terms of narrative strategy. Narratologically it can be analyzed as a blending of narrative voices and as speech with double relevance. Through metaleptic strategy, the speech about the Son of Man gains a programmatic function. It is introduced with “so that you may know,” includes the affirmation “that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,” and continues with an abrupt change of the addressee: “he said to the paralytic.” From a metaleptic point of view, the address in the second-person plural can be interpreted as an address with double relevance: the words are spoken by Jesus, but at the same time it can be interpreted as the narrator’s speech. Through this narrative strategy of blurring the lines between intra- and extradiegetic narrative, the statement is doubly addressed and authorized. Theologically it is probably no coincidence that this strategy is introduced in the context of the first mention of the term “Son of Man,” with its shocking christological implications, in this case his proclaimed authority to forgive sins, an authority traditionally attributed only to God. The narrator gives the reader, in the mouth of Jesus, instruction and orientation to understand Jesus’s further enigmatic use of the term “Son of Man” in the third person throughout the gospel.²⁶ Moreover, the strategy has a conceptual significance: “The narrator uses the apparent break in syntax as a literary way of getting the reader’s attention and thus draws attention to his lasting presence (as reader and interpreter) in the text. . . . In this way he prepares us for each instance in which, without comment, he exchanges the voice of narrator for the voice of the actor.”²⁷

A second example of metalepsis in the Gospel of Mark is the parenthetical address to the reader in the apocalyptic speech of Jesus (Mark

25. See *ibid.*, 158–60.

26. The fourteen references to the “Son of Man” in the Gospel of Mark are all found in Jesus’s mouth (Mark 2:10, 28; 8:31, 38; 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33–34, 45; 13:26; 14:62; 24:21, 41).

27. “Der Erzähler nutzt den scheinbaren Bruch in der Syntax als literarisches Aufmerksamkeitssignal und macht somit nachhaltig auf seine (die Lektüre steuernde und deutende) Präsenz im Text aufmerksam. . . . Er bereitet so jene Erzählerkommentare vor, in denen er ohne expliziten Hinweis die darstellende gegen eine kommentierende Stimme tauscht.” Du Toit, “Entgrenzungen,” 297.

13:14).²⁸ It is certainly the most prominent passage in the New Testament that can be classified as an apostrophe bottom up. The carefully staged scene depicts Jesus together with four of his disciples, Peter, James, John, and Andrew, on the Mount of Olives, and a simple question from Peter opens the way for Jesus's detailed reply, which also concludes the scene (Mark 13:3–37). Jesus's answer takes the form of an apocalyptic speech to his disciples. In passing, there occurs an apostrophe: "let the reader understand" (Mark 13:14). This passage has long posed a riddle for exegetical scholarship and invited source criticism. The intrusion has been interpreted as a holdover from an apocalyptic discourse, which was inadvertently left in place when the discourse was incorporated into the imagined speech of Jesus. It can more plausibly be interpreted as an instance of metalepsis. It is one of the few shocking instances of metalepsis in the New Testament, in that it brings the mediated nature of Jesus's speech directly before the readers' eyes. Readers know that they are not hearing Jesus's words directly from his own mouth but rather a speech transmitted through a narrator; but the conventional taboo on bringing direct attention to this fact is here broken. The diegetic Jesus shows himself to be conscious of the later written transmission of his words and speaks to the reader from the bottom up. This defies logic, because it awkwardly transgresses the seemingly sacred boundary between the diegetic and the extradiegetic world. Fictitious orality and factual writtenness abruptly collide in the way in which the speech is crafted and instruct the reader how to understand the speech as a whole. The repeated use of the imperative "beware" (βλέπετε, Mark 13:5, 9, 23, 33) now points to a blurring of the boundary between the two audiences (disciples and readers). Likewise, the traditional formula with which Jesus's speech and the scene conclude gains new depth: "And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake" (γρηγορεῖτε, 13:37; also 13:35; 14:34, 37). These indications can be interpreted as a metaleptic loose-end technique within the speech of a dramatic character with which the scene ends (13:37).

What are the effects of such a metaleptic strategy? The words of the diegetic Jesus are *made present* (*vergegenwärtigt*) for the reader for a moment. The figural proclaiming of the text within the text²⁹ in the form of an apostrophe produces a sense that the narrated events and the actual experience of the reader are occurring simultaneously, and the gap

28. With Matt 24:15, Luke 21:20 omits the apostrophe.

29. De Jong, "Metalepsis," 98–99.

between past and present becomes fluid. Through this narrative strategy past and present blur together into a consecutive whole, and a sense of quasi-immediacy is generated.

Metalepsis in Luke-Acts

Luke-Acts is introduced by an explicit and self-aware I-narrator (Luke 1:1–4; Acts 1:1), distinct from the other canonical gospels.³⁰ He informs his no less explicit addressee, the “most excellent Theophilus,” about his goals and the nature of his work, with the use of a narrative “I” in the prefaces to both books (Luke 1:4; Acts 1:1). The narrator himself remains anonymous, but he confidently places his work in the context of competitive literary production (“Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us,” Luke 1:1) and makes the sources transparent (“just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word,” Luke 1:2). Thus he emphasizes his way of investigating more carefully and in a more orderly manner (“after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you,” Luke 1:3), in comparison with earlier narratives that are suggested to be less reliable. He establishes himself as a careful and reliable historian—albeit not an eyewitness. Finally, he formulates his theological goal, the proof of the truthfulness (*ἀσφάλεια*) of the doctrine, in which his addressee, Theophilus, was educated (Luke 1:4). Following this impressive opening statement, which seeks to guide the reader’s understanding of the text, the narrator retreats into the background.

The four relatively short we-passages in Acts become then all the more perplexing (Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28). These passages, too, have often been interpreted by scholars from a source-critical viewpoint as the remnant of a we-source. But when we compare the we-passages with the preface, we can interpret them as examples of metalepsis top down, where the narrator, who has already positioned himself explicitly as extradiegetical and not as an (intra)diegetical eyewitness, abruptly and without warning becomes the companion of his own diegetic actor, Paul. The sudden transgression of the extradiegetical narrator into the narrated

30. For further information, see Ute E. Eisen, *Die Poetik der Apostelgeschichte: Eine narratologische Studie*, NTOA 58 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 63–99 (summary on 95–99).

world makes the world of the narrative and the narrated world for some moments permeable, evoking the simultaneity of the separate worlds of the narrative. This metalepsis is *temporary and without any relevance for the plot* and thus can be termed as rhetorical, but it enhances the authority of the narrator—not only as careful historian but now also as eyewitness of Paul—and intensifies the experience of the reader. Through this strategy the window to the narrated world is open for only a short time, but with the profound effect that the entire Lukan narrative gains increased credibility and authority from this logic-defying metalepsis.

If we look back at the preface, it stands out all the more starkly, in light of the use of metalepsis in Luke-Acts, how carefully the narrator endeavors to distinguish his own work from that of the “many” others who have attempted to capture a narrative of the events. The preface serves to justify and to give authority to both books that follow. The metaleptic strategy in the second book (Acts) intensifies the self-stylization of the narrator in the first book (Luke). Following his eloquent self-introduction at the beginning of his narrative in the first book, to which he explicitly alludes at the beginning of the second book, he inserts himself—against his general proclamation that he gained the material from eyewitnesses but not his own eyewitness experience—into the narrated world briefly several times in the second half of the second book. This paradoxical manner of staging the narrative and guiding the reader’s interpretation of it has exercised a powerful effect. To this day, his role as an eyewitness of Paul’s travels continues to be debated, and this has generally lent greater authority to the whole two-volume work.

Also in the Lukan parables metaleptic strategy can be observed.³¹ To the extent that the voices within the narrated world cannot be clearly attributed to a speaker, one can observe the strategy of the blending of narrative voices, for example in the parable of the great banquet (Luke 14:16–24), which the Lukan Jesus narrates. According to the parable, a man prepares a feast, and when he sends his slave to invite the guests to attend, they all make excuses to decline. The slave reports this to his master, who becomes enraged. He orders his slave to invite first the poor and the lame and then whomever he can find in the streets. Within the fictitious speech of the master to his slave, there occurs at the end an abrupt switch of the addressee from singular to plural: “For I tell *you* [pl.]” (v. 24). As far as

31. On this, see further du Toit, “Entgrenzungen,” 298–302.

this formula is typical of Jesus's speech in the Gospel of Luke, the formula here suggests a blending of narrative voices—the voice of the master in the parable and the voice of Jesus in the gospel. Through this speech, with its double relevance, the narrative planes blur together, and a sense of simultaneity arises between the separate worlds within the narrative. The events of the story of the parable become intertwined with the events of the main narrative, the listeners of Jesus's parable are directly addressed from within the world of the parable, and the readers are invited to identify with the listeners in the main story, which is consistent with the application-oriented nature of the parable form.

Metalepsis in the Gospel of John

Unlike any of the other canonical gospels, the Gospel of John is distinguished by a fundamental metaleptic disposition. This is shown in what follows by the example of the Nicodemus scene and the figure of the beloved disciple.³²

First, metalepsis can be analyzed in the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus (John 3:1–21). The scene opens with a scant characterization of the person of Nicodemus, who is introduced as a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews (3:1). We are further told that he came to Jesus by night and spoke to him (3:2). There ensues a dialogue between the two that is clearly dominated by Jesus.

In this dialogue there occur some anomalies in the change of the addressee. In the speech of Nicodemus, who according to the narrator had come alone, it says (3:2): "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God." The first-person plural at this point can still easily be understood to refer to the Pharisees as a group, to whom Nicodemus belongs and in whose name he seems to speak, for at this point in the narrative of the Gospel of John there have not yet been any confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees or any other members of the Jewish leadership, a circumstance that changes later in the narrative. A few verses later, however, there occurs a much greater anomaly in Jesus's reply, which puzzles the attentive reader. The Johannine Jesus quite suddenly speaks in the first-person plural. He begins his speech with the typical

32. On this and what follows, see further and with additional examples Eisen, "Metalepsis."

“very truly, I tell you” (3:3) and continues by referring to himself in the first-person plural, addressing a second-person plural audience (3:11): “We speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you [pl.] do not receive our testimony.” In the following sentence the speaker Jesus changes back to the logical singular (“I”), but the addressee still remains in the plural (3:12).

In the scholarly literature there has been much speculation about this baffling *we*-passage in the speech of the Johannine Jesus. The most frequent explanation of the *crux interpretum* is the assumption that the Johannine church is here erroneously made to speak, in the *pluralis ecclesiasticus*, most likely as a survival from an earlier literary source. It seems more appropriate to understand this *we*-passage as a metaleptic strategy. Contrary to the two-volume work of Luke, the *we*-passage here marks not the sudden intrusion of the extradiegetic narrator into the narrative but a blending of narrative voices—the voice of Jesus and the *we*-narrative of the Johannine framing narrative (John 1:21). The speech of Jesus thus gains a double relevance. In a flash, the sacred boundary between the extra- and intradiegetic worlds fuses into a present reality. Jesus and the *we*-group suddenly appear as a common witness and thus speak as a collective to those Pharisees and readers who are in danger of refusing to accept their testimony.

The narrative voice of the framing narrative of the Johannine gospel a few times speaks as a collective “*we*” (John 1:14, 16; 3:11; 21:24). This also makes it possible to identify the unexpected “*we*” in Jesus’s speech (John 3:11)—so unlike the usual and emphasized “*I*” of the Johannine Jesus—with the voice of the *we*-narrative. The blending of narrative voices in the speech of Jesus highlights the address to Nicodemus as a member of a group within the diegetic universe, a group that is early in the story characterized as posing inappropriate questions: “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” (v. 10).

It is striking that the paradoxical use of “*we*” in Jesus’s speech ends abruptly after only seven words, but Jesus continues to speak to the addressee in the plural (vv. 11–12). In this way Jesus’s speech continues to have a double relevance—for Nicodemus and for the readers. So it is not surprising that Nicodemus vanishes from the scene, which ends with Jesus’s speech. The metaleptic staging of the speech, which contemplates fundamental existential questions—it deals with “the things of heaven,” with the “Son of Man,” and the “Son of God,” and with nothing less than the future of this world—pushes the reader to identify with it.

The speech of Jesus in the Nicodemus scene is only one example of the subtle character of direct speech in general—and in the New Testament, extended speeches are characteristic of the Gospels of Matthew and John, as well as Luke and especially Acts. For direct speech can be interpreted as “a deliberately delimiting strategy ... in which the boundaries of the narrated world and the narrative world are leveled out by the ambiguity of the textual references.”³³ Narratology has long described how marked direct speech reduces the distance of the reader to what is narrated.³⁴ Through metaleptic strategy, this effect is intensified still further.

The narrative “we” appears at three other points in the Johannine narrative. In the prologue (John 1:1–18) the credo of the narrative is set forth: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (v. 14). It continues in the passage about John the Baptist: “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (v. 16). In these verses the narrative voice is articulated as a collective entity, which functions as a witness to “grace and truth.” By fusing this “we” in the speech of Jesus in John 3:11 with the voice of Jesus himself, the world of Jesus and the narration of it collapses into a single present tense that “speaks,” “knows,” and “testifies” (v. 11), what we term a strategy for making present.

The we-voice appears one last time in the Gospel of John at the end of the narrative with a momentous piece of information (John 21:24a): “This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true.” It reveals nothing less than the author of the gospel, who has literally testified to and written this gospel in truth (v. 24b). In this way the “we” refers to the beloved disciple, who not only acts in the preceding last scene of the gospel (John 21:1–23, esp. v. 7) but is also the topic of the final word of both characters and narrator (21:20–23). The we-voice in verse 24 thus functions as a witness to the eyewitness, the “beloved disciple” (John 13:23, 25; 19:35; 20:30; 21:20, 24), of the witness par excellence, Jesus (John 1:18). The complex narration of the Gospel of John as a whole is characterized by a graded process of testifying to the truth (John 1:14; 21:24).³⁵

The beloved disciple, whom the reader has previously met only as a character within the narrated world, is revealed as witness, transmitter,

33. Du Toit, “Entgrenzungen,” 309.

34. See Eisen, *Poetik*, 110–21, especially 117–18.

35. For more information see Eisen, “Metalepsis,” 323–30, especially 330.

narrator, and author of the gospel, as the “Evangelist im Evangelium.”³⁶ This revelation at the end of the Johannine gospel comes as a shock, especially on the first reading, and casts the entire narrative in a new light. It invites the reader to read the gospel again to learn more about this disciple, who camouflages himself as extradiegetic narrator. The credibility and authority of the gospel is assured and vouched for through the metaleptic interweaving of the extradiegetic narrator and the eyewitness testimony of the very same beloved disciple.

Who is this enigmatic disciple, “whom Jesus loved”? The narrator—if we are to follow John 21:24, he is identical with the beloved disciple—mentions him(self) a total of five times (13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20). In four important scenes he stands on the stage of the narrated world. He is first introduced “as the one who reclined on Jesus’s bosom” (ἦν ἀνακείμενος . . . ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ, John 13:23) at the Last Supper, a description that is three times emphasized in the gospel (13:23, 25; 21:20). This position of intimacy recalls with similar words Jesus’s intimacy with the Father (“who is in the bosom of the Father,” ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς, John 1:18). On the second occasion, the beloved disciple appears as the only male disciple to stand beneath the cross. The dying Jesus assigns to him a new position, which is to remain by the side of his mother, Mary (19:27). In this same scene he serves as a witness to the death of Jesus and to the details that Jesus did not have his legs broken like the other men who were crucified with him but had a lance thrust through his side by one of the soldiers (19:33–34). Aside from the theological reasons for this observation, from a narratological viewpoint it evokes a heightened sense of reality. The narrator himself comments on this scene in the form of an aside to the reader (19:35): “He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.”

It is only against the background of the reader’s knowledge of John 21:24 that the meaning of this address to the reader in 19:35 becomes clear. The testimony of the beloved disciple is framed as an autopsy and placed in the context of proving the truth. The narrator speaks of the beloved disciple as a character in the narrated world in the third person, without revealing that he himself is identical with this character (21:24). Through this strategy the narrator can, on the one hand, assume the position of an omniscient

36. Franz Overbeck, *Das Johannesevangelium: Studien zur Kritik seiner Erforschung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1911), 409.

narrator who has inside knowledge of the mind of Jesus, the disciples, and other characters in the story, and is not subject to the restrictions placed on the knowledge of an I-narrator. On the other hand, he subtly demands the authority of an eyewitness and intimate disciple of Jesus, one who was explicitly “beloved” by Jesus. The act of narrating and the witnessing of the narrated world merge into one present tense in this subversive metaleptic strategy. With Josef Blank, the Johannine theology can be described as a “theology of making present” (*Vergegenwärtigungstheologie*).³⁷

Within the Johannine narrative, we meet the beloved disciple a third time as he races with Peter to reach the empty tomb (20:1–10). He is faster than Peter but generously allows Peter to enter the tomb first (vv. 6–8). Nevertheless, he is the first of the two to recognize the significance of the tomb, since he “believed” (ἐπίστευσε, v. 8). It is all the more confusing, in light of the reader’s knowledge of John 21:24, when the narrator declares in a distancing third-person voice: “for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead” (John 20:9). Does the narrator, who was one of the two disciples, wish to indirectly make it clear to the reader that at the point of discovering the empty tomb, he “believed” but he “as yet ... did not understand” (οὐδέπω γὰρ ᾔδεισαν, v. 9)? Is he quietly allowing his readers, by way of narrative strategy, to participate in his own learning process?

The form of the metaleptic strategy in the speech of Jesus to the disciple Thomas is less complex (John 20:29): “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” The blessing in the second part of verse 29 can be interpreted as a blending of narrative voices, the voice of Jesus and the voice of the narrator. Again, this strategy makes the diegetic universe permeable to the reader, who can identify with the blessing. It also forms the transition to the narrator’s speech: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (20:30–31). For a second time, the narrator speaks directly to his readers (“so that you may come to believe,” v. 31; so already 19:35). He again speaks as an objective reporter about the signs that Jesus performed before the disciples, with-

37. Josef Blank, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, 2nd ed., Geistliche Schriftlesung: Erläuterungen zum Neuen Testament für die geistliche Lesung 4.2 (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1986), 24.

out letting it be known that he himself was one of them. The alert reader knows better.

The fourth and last scene in which the beloved disciple stands on the stage of the narrated world deals with the appearance of the risen Jesus at the Sea of Tiberias (John 21:1–23). It is also the final scene of the gospel. Some of the disciples of Jesus are working on the lake, and the risen Jesus appears at the shore, talking to them without their recognizing him (20:4). Only after a successful fishing haul does the beloved disciple recognize him and confess to Peter: “It is the Lord!” (ὁ κύριός ἐστιν, 21:7). Does the narrator imply that the very beloved of Jesus did not immediately recognize the risen Jesus, just as he did not entirely understand events before? The meta-lectic strategy makes the step-by-step process of coming to understand “the truth” transparent, inviting the reader to identify with that process.

In the Gospel of Mark and in Luke-Acts meta-lectic strategy remains *rhetorical*. In the Gospel of John an ontological metalepsis can be detected because the narrator is physically present in the story as the character of the beloved disciple. Even at the very end of the story the question of the origin and the whereabouts of the beloved disciple is raised within the narrated world. Peter speaks in his last dialogue with the risen Jesus about the beloved disciple (John 21:21) and asks Jesus: “Lord, what about him?” Jesus answers Peter (v. 22): “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?” Jesus’s answer is gruff and off-putting. What this cryptic speech about the beloved disciple means is nowhere made clear. Only one thing is certain: the beloved disciple travels like an undercover agent between the worlds. To this the we-voice (John 21:24) testifies, making the witness of the beloved disciple and the narrator of the gospel all the more authentic, credible, and believable.³⁸

Conclusion

It could be said that early Christian literature displays meta-lectic strategies, if not to say meta-lectic sensitivities. In exegetical scholarship, the passages referred to above have long been treated as examples of narrative pathology and analyzed in the horizon of a source-critical paradigm. But narratology opens up perspectives to decipher puzzling textual phe-

38. For a critique of the historicizing interpretation of this textual strategy by Martin Hengel, see Richard Bauckham, “The Beloved Disciple as Ideal Author,” *JNT* 49 (1993): 21–44.

nomena in terms of narrative strategy and to focus on their functions and effects.

Metaleptic strategies break down the boundaries between (narrative) worlds, mediating between them. They make possible the crossing of boundaries, the interaction and the subversion between worlds. This evokes the impression of immediacy and simultaneity, with the effect of making present (*vergegenwärtigen*). The dissolution of distinct narrative levels has, above all, the effect of stabilizing the authority of the narratives, including the credibility and authenticity of their narrators and selected characters.

In New Testament narratives,³⁹ the smooth blending of narrative voices prevails over the direct and shocking effect of metalepsis. Speeches with double relevance promote quasi-immediacy, which is intensified through the use of loose-end technique. In a sublime manner, it bridges the “the broad and ugly ditch”⁴⁰ between the worlds.

Metalepsis, especially in Luke-Acts and more intensely in the Gospel of John, accumulates metatextual functions and seeks to mediate between textuality, orality, and autopsy. Their attempts to prove truth can be traced directly back to the tripartite conception of the truth content of narrative speech (truth, probability, invention), which is already characteristic of classical Greek epic. The two-volume work Luke-Acts and the Gospel of John show themselves to be particularly anxious to anchor the truthfulness (Luke 1:4) and the truth (John 1:14, 17, and elsewhere) of their narratives in a multilayered textual manner. The credibility of their books and their truth claims, which is being put to the test, is assured by quasi-eyewitness testimony. Metaleptic strategies as a whole are suitable to create smooth and trustworthy transitions between the postulated orality and the literary product, between past and present. They serve not, as in modern literature, to break the illusion of reality, but rather to help form the illusion in the sense of the trustworthiness of what is narrated through the medium of the book, implicitly in the Gospel of Mark and explicitly in Luke-Acts and the Gospel of John.

39. For more examples see Eisen and von Möllendorff, *Über die Grenze*, and in particular the contributions of du Toit, Eisen, and Spittler in the named volume.

40. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, “On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power,” in *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, ed. and trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 83–88, here 87.