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CHAPTER 1

A Peculiar Literature



The new wave of literary studies of the Bible has been gathering momentum now for more than a decade, and it promises to have far-reaching consequences for both biblical and literary scholarship. It is an academic development that may also exert some broader cultural influence, for it can help us, as I argue in detail in chapter 9, to *read* the Bible again, instead of sorting out its components, reconstructing it, and looking for some textual or historical reality that lies behind the text we have. Not surprisingly, however, there is no clear consensus on what the precise object of reading is or on how the reading might most appropriately be undertaken.

Any modern effort to look at the Bible from a literary perspective must grapple with two fundamental difficulties: the peculiar circumstances of the composition and evolution of the biblical text; and the peculiar aims, even the peculiar

objects of representation, toward which the literary art of the Bible is directed. Let me first try to explain how the issues of the text confront the literary critic of the Bible with a whole series of bafflements.

For both the common reader and the critic, the reading of a work of literature is predicated on an assumption of authorship that goes all the way back to the Greek tragedians and to Virgil and that for many centuries was retrojected still earlier, to the constructed authorial figure of Homer. The author, a person with a distinctive sensibility and a distinctive freight of experience, puts a personal stamp on the work, however "mediated," contradictory, or ventriloquistically disguised its formal embodiment may be. A French-inspired vogue in literary theory sought for a while to displace the living author with a notion of the text as a playground of impersonal literary codes, but that view seems increasingly one-sided, and the assumption of ordinary readers about an informing authorial presence is confirmed in the practice of most critics, even at this postmodern moment. The author addresses us with a representation of or reflection on life spun out of the densely tangled stuff of his own lived life, and thus the act of reading is a kind of colloquy—the author speaking, the reader thinking back—between him and us. Authorship is also the implicit guarantee of the unity of the literary work. Joyce's *Ulysses* may leap and slide from third-person omniscience to stream of consciousness, mock-epic, and surreal drama, but as readers, even without a theory of the novel's architectonic unity, we know it is emphatically, extravagantly Joycean from beginning to end.¹

The case is quite different with the Bible, and this has cost all of us would-be literary analysts of the Bible a good deal of perplexity. Biblical tradition itself went to great lengths to hide the tracks of the individual author. There is no proclamation of authorship, no notion of literary contests as among the

Greeks, no hint of any individual writer aspiring to eternal fame through literary achievement (a recurrent topos and governing idea of Western literature). Instead, the writer disappears into the tradition, makes its voice his, or vice versa. In fact, one of our methodological quandaries is that there is no certain means to determine which of these last two alternatives is the predominant one: did the writer have at his disposal an abundance of precisely formulated narrative materials, perhaps orally transmitted, which he synthesized, or did he fashion his verbal artifact from the mere hints of narrative tradition, in a style that arrogated to itself the authority of hoary national memory and divine knowledge? There is no happy way to remove this cloak of traditional or traditionalizing anonymity. Although scholarly analysis has detected a variety of ideological viewpoints in the text and has sought to link these with various social groups and geographical and temporal settings, the fact of the matter is that all such linkages are grounded in conjecture, with the debates on the dating of particular writers or schools contending over centuries, not decades.

The anonymity of the biblical writer and the absence of context for him are enormously complicated by the intricate process of editing through which his work has come down to us. As with any ancient text, local puzzlements abound—scribal glosses, other kinds of brief interpolations, errors in transcription, and at times wholesale scrambling of passages. But what is far graver for the literary critic is that the stories as a rule appear to have been patched together from disparate and perhaps even conflicting literary sources. The process would be somewhat different for different parts of the Bible (with the first four books of the Pentateuch constituting a distinctive entity; see page 215–16), but in broad outline it would look like this: Two or more literary versions of the same set of events circulated in ancient Israel, let us say, in the early cen-

turies of the Davidic monarchy. An editor chose to make one of these dominant but preserved bits and pieces of one or more competing versions and added his own editorial framework and occasional interventions. Still later, probably early in the period of the return from Babylonian exile, a redactor gave final shape to the text, introducing local modifications of wording, adding some editorial framing and bridging, perhaps winnowing out certain materials, perhaps even incorporating bits of old traditions that had not hitherto been part of the text. All this suggests that the story of King David, even if he is one of the great characters of narrative literature, is built on a textual matrix utterly unlike that of any of the later major narratives in the West, where one master hand has shaped the tale from beginning to end.

What is a literary reader of the Bible to make of this morass? One occasionally hears the accusation that the new literary criticism of the Bible represents, not creedally but methodologically, a new fundamentalism: every element of the text is assumed to be integrally linked with every other, and artistically justified. I can think of no contemporary literary critic of the Bible whose work conforms to this description as a matter of principle, though a few may seem at times to confirm it in their critical practice. All of these critics, that is, recognize that there are problems with the received texts, sometimes requiring emendation or other solutions, and that the sundry hypotheses of a composite text are not to be casually dismissed.

Their analysis, however, has repeatedly argued for a surprising degree of artful coherence in the final version of the text—which in historical terms comes down to an argument for the art of the redactor or for that of a powerfully integrative writer using earlier sources whose work the redactor merely polished. If the proponents of what might be called redactorial integralism sometimes display excessive ingenuity

in saving the artistic unity of the text, they nevertheless compel one—especially if one has been trained as a biblical scholar—to read the Bible in a new way because their results are often so good. Works like J. P. Fokkelman's *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, Robert Polzin's *Samuel and the Deuteronomist*, and Meir Sternberg's *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (which contains some of the most brilliant close readings anyone has done) demonstrate in case after case that there is far more that nicely dovetails or complexly interacts in the elements of the received text than has been imagined in the last two centuries of biblical scholarship.

An opposite strategy from that of the redactorial integralists is to build literary readings on the conclusions of the source criticism that has long dominated biblical studies. That is, if the received text, in its authorless, traditional, and actually composite character, resists the modern critic's need for an individual literary imagination with which to grapple, an author can be rescued from the tangle of the text by association with one of the constituent strands or layers or documents identified by scholarship. The strand designated J or E or P, or the Deuteronomist, or the so-called Court Historian of 1 and 2 Samuel, may thus be assigned an individual sensibility, a gender, an artistic and political agenda, and, if the critic is so inclined, a historical and social location.

The most sensationalistic application of this method is Harold Bloom's in *The Book of J*. An inventive, less flamboyant reading of J and E as authors, using similar notions of authorship, is conducted by Leslie Brisman, a Yale colleague of Bloom's, in *The Voice of Jacob: On the Composition of Genesis*. Although the authorial critics have the virtue of forcing us to rethink conventional assumptions about the Bible, their project is fraught with methodological quandaries on a scale that makes the excesses of redactorial integralism seem relatively minor (see chapter 7). It is questionable whether any one of the

strands of the biblical text is really a unitary literary artifact, reflecting a single author and a single moment in time. The difficulties, moreover, in distinguishing between one strand and another on subtle literary grounds like style and sensibility are formidable; they have even led some biblical scholars to wonder whether there actually is an independent E source in the Tetrateuch. And even if one could confidently assume that the hand of an individual author has been identified, all that remains of his—or, for Bloom, her—literary handiwork is not an integral text but the sundry long and short fragments split and spliced and spackled together by the redactor.

David Damrosch, in *The Narrative Covenant*, a thoughtful book that tries both to place biblical narrative in the context of ancient Near Eastern literary history and to keep in view the composite nature of the text, proposes a third way. It is a way with which I partly concur in principle, though sometimes finding myself in disagreement with the implementation of the principle. Damrosch suggests as an apt Oriental analogy for the Bible the *Thousand and One Nights*, a work embodying multiple perspectives that “gives the fullest example of a multifaceted composite artistry produced through a gradual growth of the text.” Although the term *composite artistry* is taken from me, Damrosch argues that the choice I spelled out in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*—between a “confused textual patchwork” uncovered by historical criticism and the “purposeful pattern” traced by literary criticism—is a false one. His own project is “the integration of literary and historical study,” and what that reveals is rather

what might be called a purposeful patchwork, though the image lacks enough dimensions, since several different patchworks are variously interlaced and overlaid. In reconstructing this four-dimensional pattern, we read both with and against the intentions of the various authors involved in the text, and

we are also brought to multiple readings of individual passages. To do full justice to the dynamics of biblical narrative, we must often read a passage three or even four ways at once.²

As a revision of my own formulation, I quite like Damrosch's Baroque image of multidimensional purposeful patchworks. It admirably preserves the sense of the bumpiness of the biblical text, its repeated use of disparate materials, which should be apparent to any careful analyst working with the original Hebrew. (The redactorial integralists, by contrast, tend to speak of the text as though it were a seamless unity, though at least theoretically they know it is not.) There are, however, two points on which I differ with Damrosch. Suspicious of unjustified harmonizing, he sees—perhaps with the horizon of deconstruction in his peripheral vision—the text as an amalgam of conflicting voices. I would concede that this is sometimes so, but I am also repeatedly impressed by the evidence in many instances of a strong synthesizing imagination that has succeeded in making once disparate voices elements of a complex, persuasively integrated literary whole. In this regard, both the broad structural features and the fine literary articulations of the text often compel me to side with the champions of the redactor's art. The other problem for me in Damrosch's approach is that a literary criticism that seeks to take into account “the various authors involved in the text” must be able to discriminate those authors with some confidence, and I would argue that this is often more difficult to do than Damrosch assumes. His book abounds in astute analysis, but sometimes he sees three sources in a biblical story where I see two or only one, and where no doubt some more philologically oriented scholars might well discover four or five. Thus, Damrosch's effort to combine literary and historical criticism shares something of the methodological dilemma of the authorial critics.

Gabriel Josipovici, in *The Book of God*, one of the most resonant of the new literary reflections on the Bible, nicely defines the epistemological quandary that source criticism blithely evades:

The inventors of the documentary hypothesis believed that by trying to distinguish the various strands they were getting closer to *the truth*, which, in good nineteenth-century fashion, they assumed to be connected with origins. But in practice the contrary seems to have taken place. For their methodology was necessarily self-fulfilling: deciding in advance what the Jahwist or the Deuteronomist *should* have written, they then called whatever did not fit this view an interpolation. But this leads, as all good readers know, to the death of reading; for a book will never draw me out of myself if I only accept as belonging to it what I have already decreed should be there.³

The critique of a nineteenth-century bias toward seeking the truth in origins is particularly shrewd. Whether or not we join Derrida in assuming that origins are always intrinsically inaccessible, it is by now clear that when we deal with any ancient text our approach to origins generally must follow a risky road of conjecture from the traces and hints deposited in historical traditions. Though we are aware of a spectrum of possible origins in the Bible, what we most dependably possess is the text framed by tradition as the object of our reading. Now, a sophisticated contemporary reader like Damrosch would no doubt hasten to object that what he is proposing is by no means the death of reading but rather a new model of reading, one that encompasses opposing trajectories of meaning, simultaneously deconstructing and reconstructing the biblical text. That is indeed a heroic undertaking, but it is based in part on that trusting discrimination of divisions in the text deriving from the hermeneutic circle Josipovici describes—deriving, that is, from an analytic imposition on

the text of historical preconceptions that compromise the open responsiveness of reading.

The concluding note of Josipovici's observation points toward a central emphasis of his book on the substantive—as against the textual—peculiarity of the Bible as literature. The Bible is obviously not a book, or set of books, intended to be read for entertainment with an admixture of insight and information as, say, one might read a novel by David Lodge or John LeCarré. Rather, it wants to “draw me out of myself,” using the medium of narrative to transform my sense of the world, urgently alert me to spiritual realities and moral imperatives I might have misconceived, or not conceived at all. Given this radical aim, and given the fact, as one recent analyst has argued,⁴ that there is no explicit evidence of anything like our practice of reading for pleasure in the biblical world, not even a verb that corresponds to *reading* in our sense, how can the categories of literature be applied at all to the Bible?

First, it needs to be observed, as Josipovici himself aptly does, that in the Western tradition the notion of a literature that makes imperative claims on the reader quite transcending the “merely” literary is by no means restricted to the Bible. If we read novels like *Vanity Fair* and *Lost Illusions* for pleasure together with a certain amount of “instruction” about social institutions and moral behavior, there are other novels from the same era, like *Moby-Dick*, *War and Peace*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*, that use their narrative inventions as a means of imposing on the reader a troubling, potentially transformative vision of God, man, history, and nature. The paradox is that for readers to be challenged, disturbed, scared, spiritually prodded, emotionally battered by a book in no way precludes their taking pleasure in what the writer has wrought—the resonance and shapeliness of the language, the vividness of the realization of scene, the moral subtlety of rep-

resented motives and actions and relationships. The drowning of the boy Pip in *Moby-Dick* confronts us with something abysmal, but the haunting prose in which it is evoked mixes cognitive pain with readerly pleasure, and the same could be said for much of biblical narrative, from Jacob's desperate wrestling through the night with the angel to David's anguish over the death of his infant son.

The argument, then, that the Bible has almost no notion of literature as entertainment does not mark it off so drastically from later literatures as might first appear to be the case. And though there are many aspects of the Bible's literary vehicle that are peculiar to it, as we began to see in considering the oddness and unevenness of the text, it must also be stressed that writers in different ages and traditions, after all, have a finite spectrum of formal possibilities available to them, so there will necessarily be many continuities and striking analogies in literary expression from ancient to modern, from China to Peru. A gulf of historical and cultural differences separates the author of the Samson story from Gustave Flaubert, but both have to work with transitions and contrasts between narration and dialogue, with the structuring of narrative through correspondences of incident and scene, with recurring motifs, and with a choice between the representation and occultation of motive. In Flaubert's case, we know that there was a leisured audience that paid good money for his novels in order to enjoy them in the privacy of their homes, and there was certainly no counterpart to such a group in the biblical world. But however public the biblical audience, however pressing the historiographical and religious concerns of the writers, the articulation of the texts they fashioned offers abundant evidence for continuities between their activity and that of later, secular writers. There are certain things you do when you construct a story, whatever its purposes, as there are certain things you do when you design

a building, whether you are an architect of sanctuaries or of pleasure palaces.

Here is a modest but thoroughly characteristic example. When David first flees from Saul (the very beginning of 1 Samuel 20), he comes to Jonathan, "and he said before Jonathan, 'What have I done? What is my crime and what is my transgression before your father that he should seek my life?'" As a link in a historical report, we need to know about this protestation of David's innocence in the face of Saul's hostility and about Jonathan's profession of unflagging friendship to David that will immediately follow. But this bit of dialogue is shaped with considerable artfulness, and it is surely not unreasonable to assume that the reader, or rather the ancient listener, was expected to admire or relish it, for art is after all made for an audience, not just for the effect. Let us note, then, that though Jonathan's affection for David has already been reported, as well as his direct discourse to David (at the beginning of the preceding chapter), this is the very first piece of dialogue addressed by David to Jonathan. What is remarkable, and quite characteristic of the representation of David in the first half of his career, is that it is more a speech than an intimate communication. In the narrator's language, David does not say his words *to* Jonathan, as he would in normal Hebrew idiom, but *before* (*lifney*) Jonathan, just as any actions he has or has not performed take place *before* the king. The implication of the odd preposition is public stance, public address. And, indeed, the words he uses exhibit the studied anaphoric pattern of a piece of oratory: "What have I done? What is my crime and what is my transgression . . . ?"

This cameo appearance of David as self-exculpating orator is beautifully consistent with a pattern I first described in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*⁵: throughout the story of the rise of David, his intimate feelings and motives are kept opaque, while every statement or seeming self-revelation he makes

proves to be a public utterance, possibly calculated for political effect. David's friendship with Jonathan may well be his strongest personal bond, and Jonathan on his part has already shown his readiness to risk a great deal for the sake of David. Yet David's first reported speech to Jonathan is less a *cri de coeur* or personal revelation of friend to friend than a rhetorical performance contrived to make clear to the prince, and perhaps to anyone else who might be listening or to whom Jonathan might report the speech, that David is the guiltless victim of unjustified persecution. The author of the David story has, no doubt, purposes rather different from those of Jane Austen; but because both exploit some of the same formal resources of narrative, it is as true in the Book of Samuel as in *Pride and Prejudice* that the nice modulations of dialogue are subtle indices of characterization and of the definition of particular moments of speech in a complex network of relationships and events.

As long as the specimen is carefully chosen and sufficiently microscopic—the example we just considered comprises three words of reporting speech and eleven of reported speech in the Hebrew text—it is easy enough to show formal correspondences between biblical narrative and later fiction. But I hardly want to claim that a literary critic is confronted with precisely the same issues in Samuel and Genesis as in *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Red and the Black*. In order to highlight the differences, let me cite a more or less adjacent example from 1 Samuel in which both the textual bumpiness of biblical narrative and its concern with a realm not typically treated in later fiction are evident.

When Saul is first anointed by Samuel, he encounters a band of prophets and is infected with their ecstasy or frenzy. Precisely the same event recurs when he is losing his grip on the throne, just after he has driven David away. Since in both instances the episode concludes with a citation of the evi-

dently proverbial saying "Is Saul, too, among the prophets?" it looks as though this narrative doubling—surely an improbability by the standards of later realism—is a consequence, as I dutifully noted in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*,⁶ of an editorial insertion of two competing etiological tales that explained the origins of the saying. Although I also conceded at the time that there might be some thematic purpose in the use of the two versions, I would now shift the emphasis in the light of my understanding of how biblical narrative utilizes disparate materials.

The first occurrence of Saul's encounter with the prophets immediately follows Samuel's prediction of the event to Saul. It is in fact the climactic third in a folktale sequence of three events that Samuel—who calls them "signs"—invokes. First Saul will meet men who will tell him his father's asses have been found; then he will meet three pilgrims headed for the sanctuary at Bethel carrying three kids, three loaves of bread, and a skin of wine. Then he will meet the band of prophets, playing the musical instruments they use to induce a state of trance. (The third sign is linked with the second not only by the association with the sacred but also by a pun: *nevel*, "wine-skin," also means "lyre," the first of the musical instruments mentioned in 1 Samuel 10:5.) Here is the narrative report of Saul's encounter with the band of ecstasies: "And they [Saul and his servant] came there to the hill [or, Gibeah], and, look, a band of prophets was headed toward him. And the spirit of God seized him and he was transported ["prophesied"] in their midst, and so when all who knew him before saw him and, look, with the prophets he was in transport, people would say to one another, 'What has happened to the son of Kish? / Is Saul, too, among the prophets?' And one man there spoke out and said, 'And who is their father?' [The text may be corrupt here.] Thus it became a proverb: 'Is Saul, too, among the prophets?'" (1 Sam. 10:10-12).

I have noted with a slash mark that the parallel questions of the people form the two halves of a line of parallelistic verse: in the Hebrew, there are three accented syllables in each statement, and as frequently happens with proper names in verse, as a substitute for the synonymous parallelism of common nouns, the person in question is referred to once by his patronymic and once by his proper name. I mention the switch into verse because here it is a formal sign of material that appears to have been introduced into the text from a folkloric source. This line of verse codifies the etiological question. The saying itself seems to refer to a surprising conjunction of disparate and contradictory terms, like sow's ears and silk purses or bulls and china shops. The tale of Saul going into a prophetic trance when he falls in with the band of ecstasies is an explanation of the perhaps enigmatic proverb. It should be observed that not all the details of Samuel's prediction appear in the narrative report of the event: no musical instruments are mentioned, and it is not clear that the prophets are coming down from a hilltop altar, as they are said to do in Samuel's predictive version. All this leads one to conclude that verses 10-12 are what biblical scholars call an "independent literary unit" that has been incorporated in the text.

There are still other seam lines in the text. Samuel concludes his prediction of Saul's ecstasy with the prophets (1 Sam. 10:6) by saying, "And you will turn into another man." The actual report of the event makes no mention of this crucial notion of metamorphosis that defines the experience with the ecstasies as a rite of passage into kingliness. Verse 9, in which "God gave him [literally, "turned," the same verb as in verse 6] another heart" *before* the encounter with the prophets, looks suspiciously like an editorial intervention, perhaps an attempt to compensate for the lack of reference to spiritual transformation in the language of the etiological tale proper.

A literary criticism accustomed to work with unitary

texts—say, the finished product of *Madame Bovary* that Flaubert refined out of more than three thousand pages of draft materials—ought not to proceed as though the biblical narrative were the same sort of seamless object. But the literary critic must also resist the notion that the biblical text is a more or less unwitting accretion of traditionary materials, or that the sundry materials can be identified historically and ideologically with sufficient certainty to allow him to describe them coherently as a diachronic "dialogue."

The text as we have it represents something like a collage. The writer—I would argue, even the original writer before the redactor—assumed that the act of literary composition involved, or at least could freely avail itself of, all sorts of texts—historiographical, etiological, genealogical, legal, legendary—circulating in the national tradition. The way the assembled textual collage works would suggest that the audience was conscious of its composite nature, accepted it as a matter of standard literary procedure. In our example, the writer wants to adopt for the initiation of the first king a formula from the dedication scene of the judges (that is, the ad hoc charismatic military leaders in the Book of Judges)—the act of being "seized" (the verb *tzalah*) by the spirit of God that figures equally in Samuel's prediction and in the narrator's report. For that purpose, the etiological tale about Saul among the prophets is nicely appropriate. But the writer also wants to modify the meaning of the formula from Judges. To begin with, it first occurs here in the third of the three predictions made by Samuel, seer and prophet, regarding the new king he has most grudgingly anointed, and, as Robert Polzin has suggested, it may be part of a strategy of assertion of control over Saul by the prophet: Saul is made to look like Samuel's puppet, undergoing everything Samuel says he will undergo, step by step.⁷ The seizure by the divine spirit is only here represented as a kind of contagion from a group of professionals.

Only in this passage, moreover, do we get the idea, through the words the writer puts in the mouth of Samuel, that the descent of the spirit involves a change of identity, not merely an igniting of the self but its displacement by another self.

The writer's sense, then, of the spiritually daunting nature of kingship and of Saul's dubious qualification for it is vividly conveyed by his reshaping of the formula borrowed from Judges. The folktale about Saul among the prophets admirably suits this aim. One may infer that the general procedure for biblical writers using disparate sources was to respect the textual integrity of embedded material and not to trouble about any minor discrepancies with the surrounding story that might ensue. It is not important, for example, that the catalog of musical instruments of Samuel's prediction is absent from the etiological tale (and though they are unmentioned, one is free to imagine them). What is decisive is that the author, in establishing a careful context of his own for the tale, has given it a new meaning, his meaning.

The subject of this narrative, moreover, is an order of experience beyond the scope of most secular fiction. Although the Book of Samuel is one of the most shrewdly realistic political narratives in all of Western literature, behind the brilliantly represented play of personalities and power is a looming worldscape of uncanny forces and divine intentions transcending the realm of merely human politics. Saul is to be the first king of a people that has God's name inscribed in its own. Can any human being be truly fit for such a role? This dedication for kingship—as it proves, a failed dedication—is a shattering event that cancels the old self, flings the man into a spiritual maelstrom undreamed of in the Benjaminite farm of his boyhood. What this means, what it might have meant for the ancient audience, is not easy to imagine. A narrative in many respects compellingly realistic brings us to the limits of rational understanding.

The second occurrence of the tale of Saul among the prophets instructively confirms both the artful use of composite materials and the ultimate uncanniness of the subject of the narrative. David, in flight from Saul, has taken refuge with Samuel at the prophet's headquarters in Ramah. Here the band of prophets is represented virtually as a military contingent. Samuel on the promontory "stands over" the prophets, who appear to form a defensive line around him. Saul sends three waves of messengers, but each in turn is flung into ecstasy, bowled over by the manic power that inhabits the prophets. (A close parallel to this sequence of three waves sent from monarch to prophet appears in 2 Kings 1, where King Ahaziah sends in succession three contingents of soldiers with their captains to the prophet Elijah, who causes the first two to be consumed by divine fire and relents with the third.) Then Saul himself approaches the site, and this is what he gets for his trouble: "And the spirit of God came upon him, too, and he walked along in ecstasy [perhaps, "speaking ecstatically," "prophesying"] until he reached Naioth in Ramah. And he, too, stripped off his clothes and lay naked all that day and all that night. Thus do they say, 'Is Saul, too, among the prophets?'" (1 Sam. 19:23-24).

The duplication of the story in Chapter 10 and Chapter 19 obviously violates probability and linear logic. That is, if the proverb arose from a famous encounter between Saul and the prophets, the incident logically should have occurred either at the beginning of his reign or after his alienation from Samuel's protégé David, but not at both points in his career. How are we to conceive of this seeming contradiction? P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., in his scrupulous commentary on Samuel, duly notes that Saul "is now more a victim of prophetic inspiration than a beneficiary of it." But, with his eye on the evolution of the text, he resists the idea that this thematic antithesis might reflect artistic deliberateness:

We are obliged by these facts [the facts cited include the contradictions between 10:10–12 and 19:18–24] to regard 19:18–24 as a late addition to the narrative in the spirit of the prophetic revision of other materials but of independent origin, which was introduced in order to report another bit of tradition about David, Saul, and Samuel, which may have grown up as an explanation of . . . the saying . . . in circles where the alternative explanation was not known or accepted.⁸

This "obligation" by the facts has a ring of scientific precision, in the classic manner of biblical scholarship, but the empirical basis on which the assertion rests is quite shaky. Does the dramatic power exhibited by the prophets in the story really reflect "prophetic revision" as a matter of the editorial history of the text? Perhaps the story in Chapter 19 does have an "independent origin," but we know nothing of the actual origins or of the "circles" in which the tale is said to "have grown up," and there is no compelling reason for excluding the possibility that the writer himself actually recast the etiological tale he inserted in Chapter 10 in order to make it serve his thematic purposes at this later juncture, in order to use it as a studied antithesis. But what seems to me most misconceived in McCarter's account is his claim that this purported late addition (and do we know it is later than the other tale?) "was introduced in order to report another bit of tradition." The assumption is characteristic of biblical scholarship since the nineteenth century: the text is imagined to be driven by a compulsion to report bits and pieces of tradition, with scarcely any sense that the writer might be purposefully selecting, embedding, reshaping, and recontextualizing bits and pieces of tradition in his own artful narrative. What I would argue for is a reading that takes into account the bumpiness of the text without rushing to break the text down into a series of bumps and disjunctions produced by the sheer momentum of reporting tradition.

The Dutch scholar J. P. Fokkelman, a champion of redactorial or perhaps even authorial integralism, sees the discrepancy between the two tales of Saul among the prophets as a brilliantly pointed antithesis:

The same faculty for the numinous and the same sensitivity for suddenly being lifted into a higher state of consciousness, which occurred there [in 10:10–12] under the positive sign of election, appear here under the negative sign of being rejected and now bring Saul into a lower state of consciousness, a kind of delirium. . . . One belongs with the other, the negative and the positive ecstasy are two sides of the same coin.⁹

Although Fokkelman, unswervingly focused on the discrimination of artful patterns, does not register the composite nature of the text in his critical account, as I think one ought to, he seems to me much closer to the dynamics of ancient Hebrew narrative than McCarter is. The ostensible discrepancies between the two versions of the etiological tale as well as the improbability of a second occurrence of the event fade in the revelatory light of what the writer has achieved thematically and psychologically by introducing two different treatments of the story at different junctures in his plot.

In the second version, there is no mention of Saul's turning into another man. Here Samuel stands quite properly as a kind of commander over the band of prophets because the point of the narrative is the opposition between presiding prophet, brandishing his power, and virtually deposed, powerless king. The rite of initiation and empowering has become a rite of rejection and leveling. The most striking new element in the story is that Saul strips and lies—or perhaps rather rolls—in ecstasy on the ground all that day and all that night. If the writer found this detail in an etiological tale that had general currency, it was a bit of serendipity; if instead he revised the previous etiological tale, it was a brilliant revision.

Time stops for the frantically pursuing king as he is prostrated by prophecy, virtually paralyzed by it, all day and all night. The nakedness reduces him to abject equality with all the other victims of the spirit; and even more significantly, as a recurring motif in 1 Samuel, nakedness signifies divestment of kingship. When Samuel first rejected Saul, the pleading king clung to the hem of the prophet's cloak, tearing it, upon which Samuel declared, "The Lord has torn away from you the kingship of Israel this day" (1 Sam. 15:28). Later, at the cave near Ein-Gedi, David will cut off a corner of the sleeping Saul's cloak and then will be smitten with remorse over this symbolic action. Saul naked among the prophets—surely a new, shocking twist to "Is Saul, too, among the prophets?"—is physically realizing his terrible destiny, which will be grimly completed when his body lies on the battlefield at Mount Gilboa and the victorious Philistines "strip" (the same verb) his armor after cutting off not the corner of a garment but his head.

These observations point to the conclusion that biblical narrative—not just in its microtextual units but also in its larger sequences—evinces an impressive degree of complex compositional artistry, even if the composition involved some cutting and pasting either by the writer or by the redactor or by both. Thus, an order of critical attention honed on a reading of Flaubert and Joyce is in certain respects appropriate to biblical narrative, though of course there are manifest differences in the way the ancient text was produced and in the textual contours of the narrative. Though it may sound odd, we are in fact better readers of biblical narrative because we are lucky enough to come after Flaubert and Joyce, Dante and Shakespeare.

The remaining, powerful peculiarity of the Bible is that it is a literature steeped in the quirkiness and imperfection of the human that is ultimately oriented toward a horizon beyond

the human. In the example we have been considering, the presence of the inexplicable is even more spectacularly manifest in the second version of the tale than in the first. The story of Saul is one of the great portraits of a personality caught in the deadly mesh of politics. The gangling son of a prosperous farmer, moved by filial concern for his father (see 1 Sam. 9:5), perhaps not overly bright, he is at first haunted by doubt as to whether he is fit for the responsibilities of kingship: in the second of the three election stories that the writer deems necessary to represent his rise to the throne, he is "trapped" (*nilkad*) by lottery for the role, and the people find him hiding among the baggage (1 Sam. 10:20–21). Having become king, he suffers a compulsion to seize on signs and portents and to make rash vows, and at moments he is pathetically vulnerable to the fulminations and manipulations of Samuel, the man who anointed him king. Between his rejection by Samuel and the appearance of David, he enters into what looks like a manic-depressive cycle, and David's meteoric rise makes the young man a focus of the troubled king's paranoia. In all these respects, Saul is as persuasive a representation of man the political and psychological animal as any of the most memorable figures in Shakespeare's history plays. But there is something more that impinges on the life of Saul and ultimately determines it, something manifested in our story in the way the spirit—the Hebrew word also means "wind"—devastates him like a dark tornado.

The one thing modern readers should not do, even if they have secularist scruples, in regard to this dimension of biblical literature is condescend to it as "primitive." I also think that a merely psychologizing approach cannot do justice to the imaginative and spiritual seriousness of the ancient writer, though terms like *the unconscious*, *the irrational*, and *the uncanny* that tilt in the direction of the psychological would seem to be the best translation of such biblical moments into

the idiom of our own culture. The Hebrew Bible is animated by an untiring, shrewdly perceptive fascination with the theater of human behavior in the textual foreground, seen against a background of forces that can be neither grasped nor controlled by humankind. (The New Testament tends to reverse the relation between background and foreground or, at any rate, to make the background obtrude more into the foreground.) The Bible has invited endless exegesis not only because of the drastic economy of its means of expression but also because it conceives of the world as a place full of things to understand in which the things of ultimate importance defy human understanding.

Gabriel Josipovici, in the conclusion of his book, beautifully observes this point. Noting how Thomas Mann, midrashically rewriting Genesis and Exodus in *Joseph and His Brothers*, is driven to *explain* everything in the narrative, Josipovici argues that this attachment to graspable truth runs counter to the underlying movement of the Bible. In his view, the most characteristic moments of biblical narrative "bring us face to face with characters who can be neither interpreted nor deconstructed. They are emblems of the limits of comprehension. What is important about them is precisely that they *are*, not that they *mean*."¹⁰ Let me add that such a view of reality and how to represent it in narrative is by no means primitive and ought to appear all the less so after literary and philosophical modernism: the world is seen as offering all sorts of access to human understanding, but there is also no absolute fit between the nature of reality and the human mind. The biblical tale is fashioned in ways that repeatedly remind us of that ontological discrepancy.

There is little to be gained, I think, by conceiving of the biblical God, as Harold Bloom does, as a human character—petulant, headstrong, arbitrary, impulsive, or whatever. The

repeated point of the biblical writers is that we cannot make sense of God in human terms. This perception is especially clear in passages like the two we have been considering in which God himself as a speaking agent does not appear but rather his spirit/wind. The divine spirit, like a high-voltage current, is a dangerous business: it can energize and transform, but it also can paralyze and destroy. In narrative terms, everything is a matter of shifting context. Saul at Naioth in Ramah perhaps still recalls the earlier moment when the spirit exalted him on his way to a kingdom; he certainly fails to understand how drastically the context has changed, the spirit having become a lethal weapon directed against him. On a larger scale, in the great narrative sequence from Genesis to Kings, divine election and the entering into a covenant with God are potentially ambiguous acts fraught with peril as well as with promise. The stories suggest that not only elation and pride but also anxiety and misgiving are appropriate responses to the idea of marrying personal or national destiny with a God whose inscrutable name is an alphabetic permutation of being itself.

I am proposing, in sum, that the Bible requires from the critic both the most fine-tuned attentiveness to its formal articulations and a kind of intellectual humility. It seems more than ever not an antiquarian book or a historical document but a literature that speaks to us urgently, with the power to "draw us out" of ourselves. It is able to do this in part because it scrutinizes the human condition with such a probing, unblinking gaze that is conveyed in the most subtle narrative vehicle, whatever its evolution and its composite character. But it is also able to do this by the boldness with which it represents human figures confronted, challenged, confounded by a reality beyond human ken. The literature of the Bible is still readable because in many of its conventions and formal

devices and strategies of organization it has a deep kinship with other literature that we read. At the same time, the imaginative authority of the Bible is inseparable from its stubborn peculiarity, and a modern literary criticism of the Bible needs to respect that difference even as it revels in the fresh discovery of an ancient literary kin.