FIVE

Narrative
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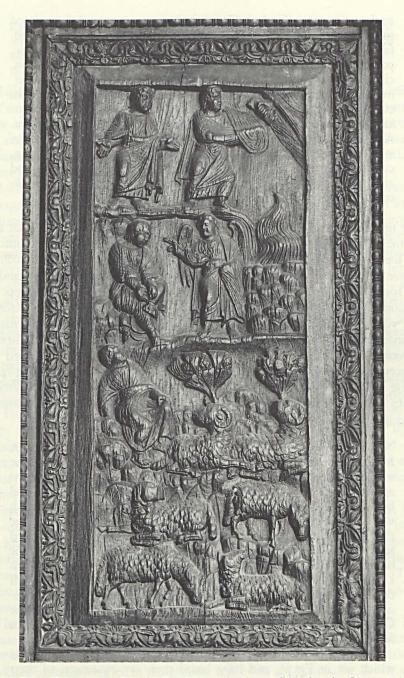### Translated from the German by David Britt

Let us begin with a beginning. The early fifth century relief that forms the starting point of this discussion is to be found on the church door of Santa Sabina in Rome (Plate 5.1). It marks the beginning of a series of panels in an identical format, which make up a small Old Testament cycle consisting of episodes from the lives of Moses and Elijah. This row of panels must also be interpreted in its vertical context: above it runs another, analogous series containing episodes from the life of Christ. We must therefore assume that the panel containing the Calling of Moses was matched in the row above by a scene from Christ's life, now lost (Nativity and Annunciation to the Shepherds).

Which immediately leads us to interrupt our consideration of beginnings and to note that narratives—even narratives of beginnings—seldom come in isolation and are seldom "original." This relief belongs together with other narratives, and in itself it refers back to a narrative text: a text that exists in a fixed, canonical form but still remains—in Erich Auerbach's phrase—heavy with the weight of its becoming. Within that text, different versions of oral narrative overlie and interpenetrate each other; and its set, congealed form, in the Book of Exodus, is not by any means the last word. After the oral versions comes the text; then come the translations and retellings, the transpositions into other languages, cultures, and media.

Let us assume, for a moment, that the relief in question stands at the beginning of the iconographic tradition. That tradition in itself stems from a long chain of transmission: oral narration; Book of Exodus; translation into Greek, into Latin (Old Latin, Vulgate), and into an explanatory verbal brief for the sculptor; translation into bas-relief. To complicate the line of transmission still further, we must also build in the idea of typology. The life of Moses partly functions as a type, a pre-text, which is recapitulated and fulfilled on a higher plane in the figure of Christ. This is what the structure of the door makes so beautifully clear: the life of Moses functions horizontally as part of a story, and as part of the endless repetition and transformation of the "same" story; and it functions vertically as a "type," as the template for new stories.

This is narrative in its most basic and apparently most natural form, as a transcultural, transhistorical, and transmedial phenomenon. Roland Barthes:

> The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances—as though any material were fit to receive man's stories. Able to be carried by articulated language,

5.1 *Calling of Moses,* A.D. 432–44. Panel from the doors of the church of Santa Sabina, Rome. Bildarchiv Foto Marburg.

spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances, narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio's *Saint Ursula*), stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself. (Barthes 1977, 79)

It may well be true that narrative "is simply there, like life"; but that does not mean that it is like life. It deals, as this relief does, with heightened, intensified life. And in Judeo-Christian terms a beginning is heightened by becoming a scene of calling, a vocation. The fact of this, and the manner of it, stand for the special form of communication attendant on a special relationship: the relationship between God and the nation of Israel. Werner Zimmerli refers to the "vocative character" possessed by this shared history of God and nation. He interprets the "acts of the Lord" in relation to Israel—his self-manifestation in events—"as Yahweh speaking to his people through history: a word that expects an answer from man" (Zimmerli 1956, 17). This basic principle can of course legitimately be applied to those specific narratives in which God literally speaks to those chosen by him and summons them to serve and follow him. In Exodus 3, this process is systematically prepared and intensified:

Now Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian: and he led the flock to the backside of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb. And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burned. And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I. And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground. Moreover he said, I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face: for he was afraid to look upon God.

And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them

up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey. . . . Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt.

Exodus 3 is thus the classic instance of a *récit de commencement,* as defined by Pierre Gibert (1986). Two actors meet, one human and one superhuman; there is no third party to act as witness, since in this case the angel functions as a helper or hypostasis of the divine principle. The latter takes the initiative, by summoning the human interlocutor to perform a task which far exceeds his capacity and competence, but which he nevertheless undertakes.

Both in the text and in the relief, these structural elements are neatly arranged in sequence. First, the chosen recipient of the divine summons has his initial position defined. Moses is pasturing the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro, on Mount Horeb. Then comes the encounter with the Divine (which appears in the middle register in two forms: as a burning bush, and as an angel or personification of the voice of the Lord, who speaks to Moses and commands him to take off his sandals). Then comes God's charge to Moses, interrupted—as in other Old Testament accounts of divine vocations—by objections from the receiver of the summons. The process concludes with a binding consent and a binding acceptance (Moses speaking and listening, on the left of the uppermost register; Moses receiving the scroll of the covenant from the hand of God, on the right).

Northrop Frye has declared the episode of Moses and the burning bush to be the ideal starting point, the initial image, of the whole biblical narrative. If the Hebrew Bible could begin here, Frye argues, this would eliminate the tricky question of how a bad world could stem from a good Creator: "In the burning-bush story, a situation of exploitation and injustice is already in existence, and God tells Moses that he is about to give himself a name and enter history in a highly partisan role, taking sides with the oppressed Hebrews against the Egyptian establishment" (Frye 1983, 114).

Frye sees the new beginnings implicit in Exodus 3 as revolutionary, with still-unresolved consequences for the thought of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Marxism. He names three of these consequences: "First, a belief in a specific historical revelation as a starting point. . . . Second is the adoption of a specific canon of texts, clearly marked off from apocryphal or peripheral ones. . . . Third is the dialectical habit of mind that divides the world into those with us and those against us" (Frye 1983, 114).

The Santa Sabina door relief does more than justice to the critic's high assessment of the potential importance of this scene as a beginning. Indeed, it even exemplifies his second point—which may seem surprising, since this has no direct authority either in the biblical text or in the context of Frye's argument. What has Exodus 3 got to do with the establishment of a canonical tradition?

What happens in this scene is simply that sacred history (*Heilsgeschichte*) makes one of its periodic fresh starts, a recapitulation of the structural formula of the covenant. And this situates the narrative, both as a whole and in its parts, within a context of promise and fulfillment, annunciation and event. God himself refers to this when he identifies himself as the "God of thy father," who has established his covenant with earlier generations.

The concept of the covenant has a cardinal importance in the structural study of narrative. Thus, Algirdas Julien Greimas and Joseph Courtés have this to say, under the heading "Contract":

> The contract, which is initially concluded between the giver [here God] and the receiver [here Moses, as the representative of Israel], governs the narrative ensemble, in that the course of the narrative takes the form of the execution of that contract by the two parties to it. The course followed by the subject of the action, which represents the receiver's contribution, is answered by the sign of approval shown to the recipient by the giver. (Greimas and Courtés 1983, s.v. "contract")

This concept has often been put under excessive strain; but here, in this relief, it has been taken literally. The pictorial narrator summarizes, as it were, the outcome of the dialogue between God and Moses by materializing it in the shape of a scroll. He does this for the sake of a "good" story, without any explicit sanction from the text; but it cannot be said that he is violating the spirit of that text. Implicit (in the etymological sense of rolled up) in God's promise of a covenant is not only the freeing of the people from slavery in Egypt, and their arrival in the Promised Land—an entirely pragmatic sign of divine approval—but also the next and culminating act of the establishment of the covenant: the giving of the tablets of the Law to Moses on that very same Mount Horeb or Sinai, which is a symbolic sign of divine approval. This brings us back to Frye, because everything that happens here is the material from which Moses will write—in scroll form—the books of the Pentateuch.

To return to the initial figure of Moses with his sheep: he is—as a good beginning requires—in a transitional state. In body and in function, he remains anchored in what has gone before; but his look and his posture involve him in the action above his head, which has himself as its object. It is significant, first of all, that the artist departs from the text by showing him in a "retentional," seated posture. The Moses of Exodus 3 is thoroughly active: he leads the flock; he comes to Mount Horeb; he talks to himself, telling himself to go to the burning bush; and so on. In the relief, he is comfortably seated, no doubt in order to take in the events above his head without shifting the center of gravity of the image away from its starting point. By so conspicuously sitting tight, he conveys the level and phase of the history of Israel that aims at possession and locates itself in pastoral closeness to nature.

At the same time, however, Moses looks around and upward, because it is within him that the decisive shift takes place: from sitter to leaver; from possessor to man possessed; out of the purposeless contemplativeness of pastoral life to the purposeful, arduous path of secession. Or, as we might also put it, from the static to the ecstatic; from earthbound origin to purposive beginning. Thanks largely to the lowest register of the panel, the pictorial narrative conveys a transformation that mediates a whole array of polar opposites, from shod/unshod, by way of sitting/standing, passive/active, profane/sacred, to man-and-beast/man-and-God.

This brings us to a number of principles of narratology, which center on the concepts of transformation, desire, and lack.

1. *Transformation.* Narrative is a form of expression that deals with transformations. In their poetics, the ancients recognized this, but their basically qualitative approach made them interested not in actual situational change (*metabole*), or time-as-process, so much as in specific and (shall we say) maximal forms of transformation: abrupt reversal (*peripeteia*), sudden recognition (*anagnorisis*), misfortune (*pathos*). They recognized change solely in terms of a dramatic change for the better or for the worse. Modern aesthetics takes a far more neutral and descriptive approach. This is illustrated by Arthur Danto's (1968, 236) tripartite formula for an event, defined as a transformation in time and of time:

(1) X is F at time t_1;
(2) E happens to X at time t_2;
(3) X is G at time t_3.

Danto's schematic presentation takes as its subject a historical or fictional character or characters, X; in the present case, of course, X is Moses. The outcome of the transformation is the difference between F and G (or $F \neq G$), the (undoubtedly momentous) difference between Moses the herdsman and Moses the man of God. Moses herding flocks (1) and Moses with divine vocation (3) constitute the *explananda:* what the story seeks to explain. What explains these (the *explanans*) is item (2): the process of vocation, the step-by-step release of Moses from the "state of nature."

The pictorial narrator chooses to show all three stages in one single pictorial field: the mode of narration defined by Franz Wickhoff (1912) as "the continuous style." But even in the alternative mode—Wickhoff's "distinguishing style," which establishes a 1:1 equivalence between unit of time and unit of narrative—time past, time present, and time to come must all be implicitly present. Lessing pointed this out in his *Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (1766):

From a Nature in constant mutation, the artist can never adopt more than a single instant; and the painter can adopt that instant

only from a single viewpoint. . . . Clearly, that single instant, and that single viewpoint in that single instant, cannot be chosen fruitfully enough. But nothing is fruitful, except what gives free rein to the imagination. The more we see, the more we must be able to add to it in our minds. . . .

Painting, in its coexistent compositions, can employ only a single moment of the action, and must therefore choose the instant that is most laden with significance: that which makes most clear all that has preceded and is to follow.

Over two hundred years later, modern action theory, which defines "action as a differential event between past and future," echoes Lessing thus: "An event can be understood as happening in the present, only if one can see some way into its immediate past and its immediate future. The same is all the more true of actions" (Luhmann 1981, 60).

For Lessing's requirement "that, in great history paintings, the single moment is almost always to some extent expanded," the phenomenology of Husserl supplies the terms "retentional" and "protentional." Our awareness of time experiences the moment—the "position in time"—as something filled with retentions and protentions: memories and expectations. These are the "action contexts, which constitute the meaning of individual actions" (Luhmann 1981).

As important as the concept of the "action context" is the concept of "difference." We may not judge everything—as the ancients did in their poetics—in terms of dramatic contrasts (happy/unhappy); but we do expect that in a narrative—and above all in a compressed, pictorial narrative—in which the action makes a difference, that difference is seen through thematic contrasts; and this is the case in the relief under discussion.

2. *Desire*. Narratives are about protagonists striving to attain a goal, that is to say an object of value, which they attain or do not attain. This goal, whether material or ideal, may be self-imposed; or they may have had it imposed on them by a higher power, a "transcendental giver"—as in the present case. Along the course (*parcours*) which they have to pursue in order to reach their goal, and on which they carry out a taxonomically limited number of schematic actions (journey, test, combat, etc.), the protagonists are aided or resisted by other "actants," their so-called helpers or adversaries.

This is a greatly simplified version of a structural model derived from the Russian morphologist Vladimir Propp (1968) and elaborated by Greimas and his school. This approach works with formalized action elements (Propp's "functions") and action roles (Greimas's "actants"). Its linguistic character is easy to recognize: the narrative is construed as a sentence, with a subject, a verb, and an object. Taking the principles of desire and transformation together (as Greimas suggests), we can say that all transformations lead to a conjunction or a disjunction, or to one followed immediately by the other. The subject either receives something (such as a scroll bearing God's promise of the covenant) or is deprived of something.

The critical factor—the motor, as it were—of this rather static-looking system is the desire (or obligation) to act. With its motive power provided by the sense of lack, this desire moves the story forward out of equilibrium into disequilibrium or vice versa, so that the subject, in two senses of that word, is constituted. The statement "there is no subject without desire" cuts both ways: without desire, the story has no subject in the sense of "theme" and no subject in the sense of "protagonist."

3. *Lack.* Another model, very much more formalized and less fully worked out, reduces narratives to the following formula: "Lack–Lack Liquidated." Crude though this is in form, I want to introduce it here, because of its importance for what follows. Between the two positions, lack on one side and lack liquidated on the other, there lies an indeterminate number of actions and events, which lead either to a conclusion or to an intermediate stage at which a new sequence begins.

It will readily be seen that this third formula is more specific than the first (transformation) and less specific than the second (desire related to "actants"); but also that it cannot be obtained without a transformation's taking place, since by definition the state of affairs at the end is not identical with that at the beginning. It also requires an absent object of value, together with the motive impulse to gain it. In the course of the story, the object of value is transferred, so that the receiver moves from the debit to the credit side of the balance.

The text of Exodus 3 belongs within the context of the servitude of Israel in Egypt: undoubtedly a situation of lack, which inspires Yahweh, Moses, and the nation of Israel to yearn for liberation—though admittedly the Israelites are reluctant to tear themselves away from the "fleshpots of Egypt" or to undergo the hardships of the Exodus. Even Moses—and this is the subject of the relief panel—has to be persuaded to want change; he has to be dragged out of his comfortable situation. To define the initial lack, and to bring it to the attention of the protagonists, can perfectly well form the subject of a narrative, and of a vocation narrative in particular. Narrative development does not reside in action alone, but also in understanding and in giving to understand.

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All these definitions, illuminating and helpful though they are, have one central deficiency. They convey the assumption that narrative exists in isolation: the narrative that narrates itself. Structural narratology tends to overlook the fact that narrative is a form of communication. There is only narrative by somebody and for somebody. Or, to put it more generally, with Sartre: "Art exists only for and through the other."

Narratology must take this into account by perceiving its object in its three main aspects at once: as *narrative* by a *narrator* for an *audience.* In the history of narratology, the sequential order of these three aspects emerges as an order of precedence. Most investigations—whether structural analyses or inquiries into the history of genres, of motives, or of presentation—have concerned and

still do concern the narrative itself. Then come investigations of the author and the narrator. It is only in the past twenty-five years that there has been a growth of interest in the dialogue between narrative, narrator, and audience.

The result is an expanded and integrative concept of narrative, very roughly as follows. A narrative is transactional, and not only in the previously described sense "that it mediates *exchanges* that produce historical change[:] it is transactional, too, in that this functioning is itself dependent on an initial *contract* between the participants in the exchange" (Chambers 1984, 66), those participants being the reader or viewer on one side and the narrator on the other. There is more to the covenant represented by Exodus 3 than the action as described. When we see, at the end of this brief narrative *parcours,* that a giver hands a scroll to a recipient, then this embodies another theme, that of what has been called the "narrative covenant": the covenant between the giver and the receiver of the narrative.

The relevance of insights derived from communication theory becomes evident if, for instance, we follow Evelyn Birge Vitz (1989) in making the following modification to the transformational model: "It is crucial—for there to be a 'story'—that the transformation be *awaited:* awaited if only by the narrator and *us!* And it is crucial that it be 'the' transformation: not just *any* transformation will do."

Vitz accordingly defines "story" as "an utterance in which an *awaited* (or desired) transformation ocurs." Her description of the Subject/Desire concept is equally acute: "I take the Subject to be the character (or a character) with respect to whose desires we consider the events and the other characters: a Subject is he whose interests and desires we regard as the (or a) frame of reference."

Again, the lack–lack liquidated scheme, too, must be paraphrased, and not only in proportion to our readiness to identify with the lack that one or more figures suffer. There is, in fact, a structural analogy between the subject and the reader/viewer of a narrative: they are fused like Siamese twins by their shared state of lack. The recipients of the narrative feel a lack because they have not yet heard or read it to the end: they are not sufficiently initiated or sufficiently astute to predict what happens next. Even where they know a lot more than the characters in the narrative, they suffer from another form of lack: they do not know when or how the information deficit suffered by the characters will be remedied or in what way this will influence the course of the action. Only at the end does the structural analogy lose its validity: whatever the outcome for those concerned in the story, the viewers/listeners/readers always have a gain to set against a loss: they gain an ending and lose a story. A new lack, and a good reason for starting the next story.

In other words, the approach based on the grammar of narrative needs to be modified in the light of the aesthetics of reception and communication. Narration does not consist in moving actors between opposing "terms" and

along a schematized *parcours:* it does this, but for the sake and with the help of its intended audience. This brings us to a celebrated distinction, which for many years has been articulated in terms of the paired concepts of *inventio/ dispositio* (classical rhetoric), *fabula/sujet* (Russian formalism), *histoire/discours* (Todorov), *story/discourse* (Chatman). This is the distinction, in Jonathan Culler's words, between "a sequence of actions or events, conceived as independent of their manifestation," and "the discursive presentation or narration of events." The key word here is "presentation." This distinction was originally applied only to the dual structure of the narrative, already mentioned, which takes *story time,* the "time-sequence of a plot," and uses devices of condensation, extension, segmentation, and transposition to carry it over into *discourse time.* But this takes no account of the communicative aims and the "evaluative function" (Labov) of such manipulations. Presentation must therefore embrace *all* of the means, and the conditions, that govern the transaction with the recipient of the narrative.

In this context, I would like to expand on one contribution made by art history. At the turn of the century, the analysis of pictorial narratives was much farther advanced than that of literary narratives. The archaeologists Franz Wickhoff and Carl Robert, and the art historians August Schmarsow and Dagobert Frey (the latter in the 1920s), concentrated on narrative form: i.e., the formation of narrative units, and the way in which pictorial narrative deals with the issue of time-lapse and narrated time—distinguishing, continuing, completing (Wickhoff), cyclic sequence and cyclic linkage (Schmarsow), and so on. At which point, art history rested on its laurels and largely missed out on the rise of structuralism and of hermeneutic approaches. This unfortunate state of affairs has tended to obscure the fact that Alois Riegl, in his last work (published in 1902 under the title *Das holländische Gruppenporträt*), had laid the foundations of a method of analysis that was to be revived from the 1970s onward in the discipline of film studies, with the use of such terms as diegesis, gaze structure, and "scopic regime" (Metz).

In his book, Riegl discussed a number of narrative paintings, but his principal concern (as the title indicates) was with group portraits and specifically with the question of how group unity is generated "by the linking psychological and physical functions of the figures." Riegl was the first to show that this internal communication is governed by the conditions of a "communicated communication." The painting can convey group cohesion only through specific kinds of relationship with the viewer. This relationship may be one of open interaction (Riegl calls this "external coherence"); or it may employ what Michael Fried calls "the fiction of the nonexistence of the viewer" (Riegl calls this "internal coherence"). Communicated communication means presented, represented communication.

Film analysts took up this idea, not only because looks supply the material whereby the relationships between characters are explained and narrated, but

because the mobile camera can of course slot itself into this network of glances and supply the viewer with a variety of "point-of-view identifications": "the spectator looking with a character, from near to the position of his or her look; or as a character, the image marked in some way as 'subjective' " (Heath 1981, 119).

Literary analysis, too, recognizes a variety of categories of perspectival presentation. From distinctions among types of narrator or narrative situations (authorial narration, third-person narration, first-person narration, etc.), which refer to the distancing or active involvement of the narrative medium itself, the available spectrum ranges by way of the narrative postures that define the narrator's information status—whether better, equally well, or less well informed than his or her characters—to the techniques of "focalization," of which more anon. All this has given rise to a whole subdiscipline of narratology in which art history has a very limited role, because the creations with which it deals are so much more static and unmediated than the film or the novel.

Visual art sets out to be an agent of optimal, unconditional visibility. It seeks to bring things and actions closer, not to push them away. We are meant to stick as closely to art as we do to the bas-relief I have been discussing, with its substitution of height for depth. There are exceptions to this, of course. One of these is Netherlandish mannerism; another is the deliberate reaction in late nineteenth-century painting, when British and French painters explored the possibilities of perspectival narration, principally by artificially limiting the visual field and adopting startling angles of sight. In relation to these, the relief under consideration represents the mainstream. For instance, the narrative perspective is largely neutral, so that we do not see the scene in "vision with" the narrator. We see the narrative just as if no intermediary existed to create a perspective. In spite or perhaps because of this, the conception and disposition of the image are not without importance.

In late antique and medieval art, communication is not so much communicated as taken as a theme: the viewer is meant to learn more about the possibilities of communication between God and human beings, and between human beings, and also about the conditions that govern access to communicative situations. In the present instance, the fact that we are allowed to witness every stage of the process of divine vocation has a value of its own: for, as a rule, "solitude as a setting for the transfer of divine knowledge to human agents is a familiar topos. God prefers to hold his conversation with isolates" (Saint Shapin).

Another noteworthy feature is the didactic thoroughness with which all the events shown are imbued with thematic significance; the successive phases of this vocation episode are marked out, as it were, as stages in the development of human culture, so that the result is a brief history of communication. Below, still immersed in his pastoral state, Moses is all *stupor,* all wonderment. In the register above, he is the recipient of a verbal message: he is addressed, he hears,

and he reacts. His new state is no longer one of wonderment but one of intentness. In the third scene he himself talks with God. We might also say, since the narrative form of the continuous style affords no place for any interlocutor, that Moses is all speech, all communication. In the fourth and last scene, he receives a written document from God: the party to a conversation has become a party to a contract. This opening sequence is also remarkable for its scope and consistency: from natural being to historical being; from mute, ahistoric origins to the pact with God, which also constitutes the social contract of the nation of Israel. No integrative perspective holds sway here: the narrative is studded with different "centers of attention," "focalizers," or "sources of vision," as Genette (1980) and Bal (1985) call them.

In programmatic terms, the relief begins with an individual turning his attention away from himself and his own present state to something else, which in this case is not altogether easy to define: the burning bush, the angel, the voice, the next phase. But what happens at this juncture, in the second register, has even more of a programmatic impact than the beginning. Here the angel, with his forefinger gesture, addresses and singles out an individual, who is "interpellated," in the sense of Althusser's theory of the "formation of the subject." The subject of the narrative is the subject: the analogous formation of our own identity through processes of perception and identification.

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