

## A TOMB WITH A VIEW: JOHN 11.1–44 IN NARRATIVE-CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>

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### INTRODUCTION

It is one of the more surprising facts of academic life that no one has as yet attempted a detailed literary analysis of John 11.1–44.<sup>2</sup> This narrative text, perhaps more than any other in the New Testament, calls out for sustained aesthetic appreciation. In many ways, John's story of the raising of Lazarus represents the pinnacle of the New Testament literature. It is a tale artfully structured, with colourful characters, timeless appeal, a sense of progression and suspense, subtle use of focus and no little sense of drama. Yet, even in the context of the well-documented paradigm shift from historical to text-immanent approaches to the Gospels,<sup>3</sup> I know of no article or book which has exposed this story to a synchronic and aesthetic interpretation. This article is therefore a long overdue contribution to Fourth Gospel research. In it, I shall be examining John 11.1–44 from the following, recognizably literary, angles: context, genre, form, plot, narrator and point of view, structure, characterization, themes, implicit commentary,<sup>4</sup> and reader response. My hope is that this article helps readers not only to appreciate the riches of John's storytelling, but also demonstrates in accessible terms how to approach the New Testament narrative literature.

### CONTEXT

Chapters 11 and 12 form the conclusion to the Book of Signs

<sup>1</sup> For further examples of this approach see my *John: A Readings Commentary* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Though Gail O'Day has written a chapter on the raising of Lazarus in her *The Word Disclosed, John's Story and Narrative Preaching* (St Louis, Missouri: CBP, 1987) 76–99.

<sup>3</sup> See in particular Stephen Moore's *Literary Criticism and the Gospels* (New Haven: Yale University, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> Alan Culpepper, in his celebrated *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), introduced biblical scholars to the concept of 'implicit commentary' (pp. 149–202).

(chaps. 1-12 of John's gospel). The raising of Lazarus in 11.1-44 is the seventh miraculous sign which Jesus performs. Since seven is a number connoting perfection in Judaism, we can see that it is meant to be the climactic sign. This seventh miracle is not disconnected from those which have preceded it. The sixth sign is mentioned at 11.37 when some of the sceptical Jews ask, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?' Here there is a narrative echo effect<sup>5</sup> with the healing miracle in chap. 9. There are also echoes with the Cana miracle in 2.1-11. This first sign was conducted in the setting of a rural wedding. There the mood was festive. Now, in the last sign, there is a marked contrast. The context is the aftermath of Lazarus' death. Here the mood is funereal. The reader needs to be alert to the connexity between the seventh sign and the miracles before it, particularly those in chap. 2 and chap. 9.

The raising of Lazarus is consequently not a narrative which has been clumsily placed within the gospel. There are both analepses (flashbacks) and prolepses (flashforwards) in the narrative.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, this miracle has a crucial function in the plot of John's story. The beginning of chap. 11 marks the third and final journey towards Jerusalem, the urban setting associated with extreme hostility and danger. The disciples are well aware of the precariousness of this journey because they say, with dismay, 'But Rabbi, a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?' (11.8). As it transpires, the reader will soon learn that it is the raising of Lazarus which finally condemns Jesus. Once Lazarus has been restored to life, some of the Jews report the event to the Pharisees (11.46) who then meet formally to plot his death (11.53). In the plot of the gospel, the Lazarus miracle is therefore pivotal; it is the event which tips the scales of fallible, human justice against Jesus.

#### FORM

The story of Lazarus is the only resurrection miracle in the Fourth Gospel. It has no similarities with the Galilean sea miracles (the feeding of the 5000 and the walking on the sea). It is different from

<sup>5</sup> The term, 'narrative echo effect', comes from the work of R. C. Tannehill. It is used in his *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> See Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 56ff. The terms *analepses* and *prolepses* are taken from the work of Gerard Genette.

the two Jerusalem miracles in chap. 5 and chap. 9 (both the Jerusalem signs are followed by discourse material whilst, in chap. 11, narrative and discourse are masterfully interwoven). There are some formal similarities with the two Cana miracles in so far as a request-rebuke-response structure is arguably visible; the sisters of Lazarus request Jesus' presence at Bethany (11.1–3); Jesus rebukes the disciples for their lack of understanding (11.14–15), before responding with the miracle itself (11.38–44).<sup>7</sup> However, it should be noted that the rebuke in chap. 11 departs from the rebukes in chap. 2 and chap. 4, where it is the one making the request whom Jesus castigates. This further points to the uniqueness of the literary form of 11.1–44.

What we have in the Lazarus episode is a form of miracle story which is different from those forms which the author has already employed. The following table reveals its distinctive nature:

MIRACLE	TEXT	FORMAL SIMILARITIES WITH OTHER MIRACLES
The first sign at Cana	2.1–11	4.46–54. Request-rebuke-response structure, Setting in Cana, description as σημεῖον
The second sign at Cana	4.46–54	2.1–11. Request-rebuke-response structure, Setting in Cana, description as σημεῖον
The healing of the crippled man	5.1–15	9.1–41. Setting in Jerusalem, pool – followed by trial scene, etc.
The feeding of the 5000	6.1–15	6.16–21. The setting (Sea of Galilee) and context (6.1–15 and 6.16–21 are juxtaposed)
The crossing of the sea	6.16–21	6.1–15. The setting (sea of Galilee) and context (6.16–21 follows directly after 6.1–15)
The healing of the man born blind	chap. 9	5.1–15. Setting in Jerusalem, pool – followed by trial scene, etc.
The raising of Lazarus	11.1–44	No obvious parallels except a vague request-rebuke-response structure

What is immediately clear in this summary is that the author has paired up all the miracles in the Book of Signs except the raising of Lazarus! The two Cana miracles are connected, so are the two Galilean sea miracles in chap. 6 (which are actually juxtaposed in the plot) and the two Jerusalem miracles. The Lazarus story therefore stands out for its formal individuality.

<sup>7</sup> The request-rebuke-response structure is visible in 2.1–11 and 4.46–54. C. H. Giblin alerts us to this structural pattern in his 'Suggestion, Negative Response and Positive Action in St. John's Portrayal of Jesus' (*NTS* 26 [1980] 197–211). I have changed the terminology to 'request-rebuke-response' for greater clarity.

## GENRE

The form critic would therefore describe 11.1-44 as a resurrection miracle story from a distinctive miracle tradition. However, the literary critic would want to add more. From a literary point of view, the raising of Lazarus is a predominantly comic story. There are aspects of tragedy in the death of Lazarus, the weeping of the mourners and of Jesus, and in the suggestion that night is approaching (11.9-10). However, the overall movement of the plot in 11.1-44 is upward, towards the happy ending of the resurrection. This is precisely the kind of U-shaped plot which one finds in stories which are ultimately comic (see the resurrection of Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*). It is also arguable that the motif of love in John 11, stressed at v. 3, 5, 11, 36, is part of the author's repertoire of comic ingredients, since love is frequently the most common motive for the protagonists of comedy. We should also note the way in which the disciples play the part of the comic buffoon in John 11. Their total inability to understand Jesus's metaphor of sleep in vv. 11-13, and Jesus' consequent exasperation with them (vv. 14-15), are humorous touches in the narrative. The reader should therefore respond to John 11.1-44 as a comic interlude prior to the dark and tragic intensity of the passion story (chapters 13-19).

## PLOT

A feature which, like the comments on form above, distinguishes this story is its plot. If one looks at the beginning, the middle and the end of the Lazarus narrative, the following plot sequence is discernible:

- Beginning: Jesus is told of Lazarus' illness but delays his journey to Bethany (vv. 1-16).
- Middle: Jesus arrives at Bethany and speaks with Martha and Mary outside the village (vv. 17-37).
- End: Jesus comes to the tomb and raises Lazarus from the dead (vv. 38-44).

What is noticeable about the plot here is the way in which the actual miracle itself is, like Jesus' journey, delayed. Indeed, the miracle is the dénouement, climax and closure of the plot. Everything builds up to it with no little suspense. This is in marked contrast to the other healing miracles in John's story. In the two Cana miracles, the sign occurs in the middle of the plot. The same

is true of the two Galilean miracles. The two Jerusalem miracles have the sign nearer the beginning. Only the Lazarus narrative has the miracle as the end, as the grand finale of the story. This again emphasizes the uniqueness of the form of John 11.1–44.

#### NARRATOR AND POINT OF VIEW

Related to the creation of this plot sequence is the device of ‘focalization’.<sup>8</sup> Focalization is the way in which the focalizer (here the narrator) uses various signals to help the reader gain a certain perspective on a subject. The main *subject* which the focalizer wants the reader to focus upon (‘the focalized’) is Jesus of Nazareth. To understand how the narrator guides us into a particular perspective on Jesus, we need to appreciate the two levels of focalization, which are external and internal. Internal focalization occurs when the focalizer uses signals to give the reader an interior, psychological perspective on a subject (‘the focalized’). In the case of John 11.1–44, there is a certain degree of internal focalization. The narrator/focalizer takes us from an external, physical view of Jesus to an internal, psychological one. Notice the progression from Jesus’ ‘feet’ (v. 32) to Jesus’ emotions (vv. 33, 35, 38). Here the focalizer helps us to penetrate the invisible, interior life of his subject.

By far the most interesting device used by the narrator/focalizer here is external focalization. External focalization occurs when a narrator helps the reader to focus upon the visible facets of a subject (e.g. location, movement). The main subjects of the narrator’s attention in John 11 are Jesus and Lazarus. The journey of Jesus is what the focalizer wants to depict. The tomb of Lazarus is the object which he wants Jesus to ‘home in on’. John 11.1–44 is the story of how Jesus arrives there and performs a great miracle. At the start of the narrative, Jesus and Lazarus are at two opposite poles, far removed from one another. By the end of the narrative, the narrator has mediated this opposition. The gap in the plot sequence is bridged through the subtle and dextrous use of external focalization.

In getting Jesus to the tomb of Lazarus, the key signals for the narrator are spatio-temporal indicators. In the first phase of the

<sup>8</sup> For all the comments on focalization which follow, I am indebted to Michael J. Toolan’s *Narrative. A Critical Linguistic Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 1988) 67–76.

plot ('the beginning'), Jesus is outside Judea. The challenge in vv. 1-16 is 'to go back' to Judea (v. 8, 16). In the second phase of the plot ('the middle'), Jesus is now outside Bethany. In vv. 17-37, this is made clear by the way in which Martha and Mary have to go out to Jesus (v. 20), and by the narrator's comment: 'Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him' (this aside is a fine example of the narrator's use of focalization). In the third and final phase of the plot ('the end'), Jesus is now outside the tomb of Lazarus. In v. 38, the narrator tells us that 'Jesus . . . came to the tomb'. By v. 38, the two objects of the external focalization (Jesus and Lazarus) are now fully 'in focus'.

John 11.1-44 provides us with an excellent example of external focalization. Each phase of the sequence is dynamic; it includes a sense of movement from one place to another. The initial stance of Jesus in each phase is 'outside' somewhere. In phase 1, it is *outside Judea*. In phase 2, it is *outside Bethany*. In phase 3, it is *outside the tomb*. By means of external focalization, the storyteller presents a progression from outside Judea, outside Bethany to outside the tomb. The tomb of Lazarus is the ultimate destination and the true object of focus in the story. The following diagram makes this clear:

Jesus → Phase 1: → Phase 2: → Phase 3: → Lazarus  
                   outside Judea   outside Bethany   outside the tomb

These comments give us some idea of the literary strategies by which the narrator guides the reader into a certain vantage point on the story.

#### STRUCTURE

If the form, genre, plot and point of view of John 11.1-44 are indicative of the author's storytelling skills, the structure of this narrative provides even more evidence of artistry. The author has arranged his material in five sections using the technique of inverted parallelism or chiasmus:

- A<sup>1</sup>. 1-16. Jesus' first response to Lazarus' death (delay and journey).
- B<sup>1</sup>. 17-22. Martha's dialogue with Jesus.
- C. 23-27. 'I am the resurrection and the life.'
- B<sup>2</sup>. 28-32. Mary's dialogue with Jesus.
- A<sup>2</sup>. 33-44. Jesus' second response to Lazarus' death (the miracle).

A<sup>1</sup> and A<sup>2</sup> share the following parallel subjects: Lazarus (by name), Lord (κύριος), Jesus' love for Lazarus, the glory of God, the

Jews, stone, death. Particularly significant is the link caused by the word 'glory', since the semiotic function of the miracle (like all the signs in John's story) is to reveal the glory of God.

B<sup>1</sup> and B<sup>2</sup> are obviously parallel. Martha and Mary respond in exactly the same way ('And when she heard . . .'). They both say, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died' (v. 21, v. 32). Indeed, the repetition of Martha's words on the lips of Mary is a clear signal that the author intends a parallelism here.

This finally leaves us with C as the centrepiece of the story. This is entirely to be expected. The author wants the reader to focus on the debate going on in vv. 23–7, and specifically on the 'I am' saying in v. 25–6.

### CHARACTERIZATION

#### a) *Jesus*

Three aspects of the portrayal of Jesus are worthy of literary appreciation. First of all, the reader should note the theme of elusiveness in John's characterization of Jesus. Jesus' elusiveness in John 11.1–44 operates at the level of presence (Jesus' movements) and language (Jesus' meaning).<sup>9</sup> At the level of presence, Jesus proves elusive in so far as he delays returning to Judea to heal Lazarus, even though the latter is in mortal danger. A number of explanations are always offered by the commentaries (that the soul hovered above the dead body for four days, etc.) but, from a literary point of view, Jesus' hesitation is quite evidently emblematic of his evasiveness, of his reluctance to operate with predictability and according to discernible, man-made time-tables. At the level of language, Jesus' elusiveness is suggested by the exchange of words in vv. 11–15. Jesus warns the disciples that Lazarus is dead but uses the metaphor of sleep ('Lazarus has fallen asleep', v. 11). The disciples fail to understand him so Jesus has to speak to them 'plainly', *παρησια*. This adverb is thematically associated with the presentation of Jesus' elusive language (see 16.25).

Secondly, the humanity of Jesus is emphasized in the Lazarus miracle. Up until now, Jesus has not been portrayed as a man with obvious weaknesses, needs and emotions. In chaps. 2–4, the only human characteristic visible is Jesus' tiredness in 4.7 (although the humanity of this detail is offset by Jesus' apparent disregard

<sup>9</sup> For a full discussion of this theme, see my article in *JSNT* 44 (1991) 20–39, 'The Elusive Christ: A New Reading of the Fourth Gospel'.

for food in 4.32). In chaps. 5–10, there are no indications by the narrator of the physical or emotional nature of Jesus. There are no signs of tiredness or hunger, nor of joy, sadness, and other emotions. Here in chap. 11, the reader is presented with an entirely different picture. In v. 33, the narrator tells us, ‘When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.’ The verb for ‘deeply moved’ is ἐμβριμάομαι, which possibly denotes anger. The verb translated ‘troubled’ is ταραύσσειν, which denotes a deep emotional disturbance. This is followed shortly by the narrator’s laconic statement, ‘Jesus wept’ (v. 35). Here the word for Jesus’ weeping (δακρύω) is different from the weeping of the Jewish mourners (κλαίω, v. 33). Δακρύω suggests ‘bursting into tears’ whilst κλαίω denotes ‘wailing, crying’. Clearly Jesus is portrayed as a man of profound feeling in John 11. This is further stressed by the repeated use of ἐμβριμάομαι in v. 38 (‘Once more deeply moved’).

The sense of humanity in the narrator’s description of Jesus is indeed a surprise, after ten chapters in which such details have been markedly absent. However, we should not be fooled into thinking that the portrayal of Jesus in John 11 is solely intended to underline his humanity. The divinity of Jesus is again evident in the Lazarus story, and this alerts us to a third feature of the characterization of Jesus in chap. 11. As we can see from Martha’s remarks in 11.24, the resurrection of the dead was traditionally expected on the last day of history. Then it would be God who would raise up the departed. However, in John 11 we see Jesus performing this function in the here-and-now of his ministry. Having prophesied the resurrection of the dead in 5.25 (a prolepsis of 11.1–44), and having promised life in all its fullness in 10.10, Jesus now takes on the role of eschatological Life-giver in John 11. By raising Lazarus from death, Jesus is seen doing something which, in traditional Jewish thought, only God himself had the authority and power to carry out. But then Jesus himself is one with God (10.30). That is why he can use the divine name (as he does in 11.25, in the predicative use of ἐγώ εἰμι). Thus, in a narrative which highlights the humanity of Jesus, divine attributes are by no means absent. Jesus may be portrayed as the Word made flesh, insofar as human traits are visible, but he is still the Word who was with God and who is God.

### b) *Disciples*

In chaps. 5–10, it is always the Jews who are the victims of



Johannine satire. It is they who come off the worst when the author uses the literary device of the *misunderstanding*. In 11.1–16, however, it is the disciples who manifest misunderstanding. In a dialogue which is quite obviously comic, they are portrayed as people who are unable to understand even the most transparent of metaphors. When Jesus uses the metaphor of sleep to talk about Lazarus' death (v. 11), the disciples respond with the same superficial literalism which the Pharisees and Jews have shown. They fail to understand a metaphor which was so common it was almost a *cliché*. They say, 'Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better' (v. 12). At this point the narrator thrusts the sword of satire deep into the disciples with a redundant aside: 'Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep' (v. 13). Truly, the disciples are beginning to be characterized in a more negative light than we have seen so far in the gospel. Their lack of courage in v. 8 prepares the reader for their failure of nerve in the passion story. Their failure of understanding prepares the reader for their otiose reactions in the farewell discourses.

#### c) *Thomas*

11.16 is the first mention of Thomas in the gospel. He is referred to always as Thomas *Didymus* (twin). Thomas features in John's story at 11.16; 14.5 and 20.24–9. His statement of false bravado in 11.16 ('Let us also go, that we may die with him') links him with Peter, who makes a similar statement in 13.37, 'I will lay down my life for you'. Thomas and Peter are the embodiments of a certain kind of false discipleship: the kind which promises much in word (in this case, martyrdom) but delivers little in deed (where are Thomas and Peter when Jesus is crucified?). Thomas' words to his fellow disciples in 11.16 are not indicative of a positive characterization.

#### d) *Martha and Mary*

The storyteller again gives women a prominent and lively part in the action.<sup>10</sup> This time it is Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus. Martha appears first. She goes out alone to meet Jesus

<sup>10</sup> See the stories of the Samaritan woman (4.4–42), the anointing of Jesus by Mary of Bethany (12.1–11), Mary Magdalene (20.10–18), all of which depict women fulfilling significant ministerial roles. For further comments, see Sandra Schneider's essay, 'Women in the Fourth Gospel', reprinted in my book, *The Gospel of John as Literature* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993).

and, like the Samaritan woman, is portrayed as one who grows in faith and understanding. In v. 21 she confesses an implicit faith in Jesus as healer by telling him that her brother would not have died had he been present (v. 21). She then confesses her faith in Jesus as someone more than just a healer of the sick by saying, 'I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask' (v. 22). Her faith does not at this point stretch to an expectation of her brother's restoration to life in the Now of Jesus' ministry because she says, 'I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day' (v. 24). However, Jesus guides her from a futuristic to a realized eschatology by saying, 'I am the resurrection.' With this, traditional Jewish theology gives way to a true Christological confession. Martha exclaims, 'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.' With these words, Martha exhibits complete faith (20.31). She has moved from her two 'I know's' (vv. 22, 24) to her climactic 'I believe' (27). She has progressed from a propositional to a personal understanding of resurrection. No longer is resurrection to eternal life an idea in her mind, it is a reality in the person of Jesus and in her own experience.

At v. 28, Martha goes back and calls Mary. In performing these actions, she moves from confessor to witness. Like the Samaritan woman in 4.28, she begins to prove her discipleship by fetching someone else and encouraging them to go to Jesus – in this case, Mary. Mary, Martha's sister, has been sitting at home. The seated position is the traditional posture for someone in mourning (see Ezekiel 8.14). She gets up quickly and goes to the place where Martha had met Jesus. Jesus is still there. She falls at his feet and cries, repeating her sister's cry, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' No more is made of Mary in the Lazarus narrative. There is no progression from partial understanding to complete faith as in her sister's case. These two women exhibit different types of grief. The grief of Martha is one which has room for a growth in resurrection faith. The grief of Mary is a desperate, passionate and forlorn affair. She hurls herself at Jesus' feet. Indeed, the pathos of her response is so intense that Jesus himself is said to weep. In portraying Mary in this wild and natural way, the author shows his concern to depict characters not only as stereotypes of faith response (Martha) but in the most realistic manner possible (Mary).

#### e) *The Jews*

The Jews appear in v. 33. The narrator refers to them as a group of

people who have been mourning with Mary inside Lazarus' home. This comes as something of a shock to the reader after the rather unsympathetic behaviour of the Jews hitherto. They show little concern for the crippled man in chap. 5 or the man born blind in chap. 9. Indeed, they expel the latter from the synagogue. Here, in complete contrast, they are portrayed alongside Mary in her grief. They are shown 'weeping' (v. 33). Indeed, it is in part their weeping which provokes the tears which Jesus sheds. There seems, at last, to be something positive and distinctly humane about the Johannine portrait of the Jews. However, this impression is short lived. In vv. 36–7, the narrator returns to the now expected *σχίσμα* of opinion amongst the Jews. Some say, 'See how much he loved him!' Others respond with sarcasm, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?' (vv. 36–7). This same division of opinion will be repeated in vv. 45–6. Here some of this same group 'put their faith in Jesus' (v. 45) whilst some of them go to the Pharisees to report him (v. 46). Thus, the storyteller will allow no let-up in the relentless satire of Jesus' Jewish opponents in the gospel.

#### f) *Lazarus*

Lazarus is one of those named individuals, like Nicodemus and Nathaniel, who are distinctive to John's story of Jesus. He is the focus of the action in John 11 even though he is dead. It is to his tomb that Jesus travels, risking his life. It is around Lazarus' death that the dialogue revolves. It is his restoration to life which is the climax of the story. Within all this, Lazarus never says a word and only performs one action, his emergence from the tomb. His is an entirely passive role (how could it be any other?), yet much is made of him. He is the only character in the story thus far who is described in a positive, indeed intimate relationship with Jesus. Lazarus is beloved of Jesus. The narrator stresses this in v. 5. The Jews stress it in v. 36. Jesus himself stresses it in his description of Lazarus as 'our friend' (v. 11). Everywhere the author seems to be taking trouble to depict Lazarus as (to use an epithet which we shall see frequently in the Book of the Passion) the Beloved Disciple.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> I have discussed the identification of the BD as Lazarus in my *John as Storyteller. Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992) 78–80, 154–7.

## THEMES

The multi-story texture of this narrative is created not only by the author's skills in the areas we have already examined, it is also established through its thematic subtlety. There are themes in John 11 with which the reader is, by now, very familiar. Not least amongst these are the themes of sending (vv. 3, 42), remaining (v. 6), seeing (vv. 9, 9, 31, 33, 34, 40), light (vv. 9, 10), the world (vv. 9, 27), salvation (v. 12), faith (vv. 15, 25, 26, 40, 42), knowledge (vv. 22, 24, 42), life (vv. 25, 26), and hearing (vv. 41, 42). However, the two themes which are crucial to the narrative are the themes of 'love' and 'glory'.

The love of Jesus for Lazarus is emphasized at a number of points. The sisters send a message to Jesus saying, 'the one whom you love (ὃν φιλεῖς) is sick' (v. 3). The narrator states that 'Jesus loved (ἠγάπα, the first word in the sentence, for emphasis) Martha and her sister and Lazarus' (v. 5). Jesus himself refers to Lazarus in v. 11 as 'our friend' (ὁ φίλος ἡμῶν). When Jesus weeps for Lazarus, the Jews exclaim, 'See how much he loved (ἐφίλει) him' (v. 36). Here the use of the ἴδε formula (literally, 'Behold!') emphasizes the significance of this theme in the mind of the narrator.

The glory of Jesus (δόξα) is picked up as a theme at the beginning and the end of the narrative. Indeed, there is an obvious inclusio between v. 4 and v. 40. In v. 4, Jesus says, 'This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory (δόξα), so that God's Son may be glorified (δοξασθῆ) through it'. In v. 40, Jesus says, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory (δόξα) of God?'

This emphasis upon the *doxa* of Jesus reminds the reader of the semiotic function of the miracles in the gospel. The miracles of Jesus are signs (σημεῖα). Whenever there is a miracle in John's story, the reader needs to become a *semeiotikos*, 'an observer and interpreter of signs'.<sup>12</sup> Just as smoke is a sign of fire, and clouds a sign of rain, so the miracles of Jesus are, to the reader, a sign of glory. They are observable phenomena which reveal a greater reality. The miracle in John 11 is semiotic insofar as it discloses something of the authority and power of the Father and the Son over the great human enemy, death.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of semiotics and the *semeiotikos*, see my section on 'Semiotics' in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (London/Philadelphia: SCM, 1990) 618–20. For a structuralist approach to John, see my article, 'Return to Sender', in *Biblical Interpretation* 1.2 (1993) 189–206.

### IMPLICIT COMMENTARY

The semiotic function of the miracles in John's gospel shows us how the narrator creates different levels of meaning in his story. At the level of carnal, or superficial meaning, the story of Lazarus is a miracle of resurrection. At the level of secret, or latent meaning, it is disclosive of the *doxa* of God and of his Son, Jesus Christ.<sup>13</sup> The challenge for the reader throughout the gospel is to penetrate the secret sense of the narrative. Just as the protagonist's language is elusive to the characters within the narrative world, so the narrator's language is constantly elusive to the careless reader. Both Jesus and the narrator manifest multivalence when the addressee would much prefer transparency. The reader or narratee must take care to hear the quiet, implicit commentary which the narrator provides.

One of the commonest literary devices through which this covert act of communication is continued is irony. The profoundest irony in the Lazarus story is the fact that Jesus' act of giving life leads to his life being taken away from him. The narrator is well aware of this paradox and woos the perceptive reader into this secret sense of his story by using the word ἐκράυασεν in v. 43: 'Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"' This reference to Jesus shouting is a prolepsis of the passion, where the same word is used for the persistent shouting of the Jews for Jesus' death. In 18.40, the Jews are said to shout out (ἐκράυασαν), 'Give us Barabbas!' In 19.6, we read that the chief priests and the officials see Jesus before Pilate. The narrator says, 'They shouted (ἐκράυασαν), "Crucify him! Crucify him!"' In 19.12, Pilate tries to set Jesus free but is thwarted because, according to the narrator, 'the Jews kept on shouting (ἐκράυασαν)'. In 19.15, Pilate tells the Jews, 'Here is your king!' But 'they shouted' (ἐκράυασαν), 'We have no king but Caesar!' These four shouts for death are intended by the narrator as an ironic contrast with Jesus' shout for life in 11.42. They point to the paradox of the way in which Jesus' life-giving actions lead to his own death.

Another means by which the narrator addresses the reader at the level of implicit commentary is through symbolism. In chap. 11, the principal use of symbolism can be found in two enigmatic

<sup>13</sup> Frank Kermode has alerted biblical scholars to the carnal and spiritual senses of narrative in his ground-breaking, *Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University, 1979). See chap. 1 (pp. 1–21).

sayings. The first is in vv. 9-10: 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by the world's light. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light.' Here again we have the archteypal symbols of light and darkness, day and night, used to represent the realms of faith and unbelief, knowledge and ignorance, in which the characters of the gospel live and move. The saying is an analepsis of 9.4, where Jesus says, 'As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no-one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' It is also a prolepsis of 18.4-8 where the arresting party, with lanterns and torches in the darkness, stumble and fall to the ground when confronted by Jesus. What Jesus seems to be saying in 11.9-10 is this: 'I can return to Judea because the hour for my death (the hour of darkness) is not quite upon us. I will therefore not be killed ('stumble') at Bethany because I am still ministering in a season of pre-ordained security (daylight).'

This *mashal* is illustrative of the two-level communication going on between narrator and reader in the gospel. The riddle can, after all, be easily interpreted at an entirely literal level. The challenge is to understand the implicit commentary in these words, to ascend from the earthly meaning of Jesus' words to their spiritual, symbolic sense. This same challenge is thrown down in the second enigmatic saying of Jesus in 11:25-6. Here the language of Jesus moves without warning from the literal to the spiritual and back again, so that only the perceptive reader penetrates the complete meaning of what is said: 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live (spiritually), even though he dies (physically); and whoever lives (physically) and believes in me will never die (spiritually).' The whole saying depends upon the reader's ability to discern the following chiasmus:

a <sup>1</sup> . life (spiritual)		b <sup>1</sup> . death (physical)
b <sup>2</sup> . death (spiritual)		a <sup>2</sup> . life (physical)

If this is missed, the meaning is missed and the implicit commentary of the story is spoken but not heard.

#### READER RESPONSE

These remarks about implicit commentary lead us to an evaluation of our reading of the Lazarus narrative in John 11. If

the brief analysis of the implicit commentary above has shown anything, it has revealed how John's story has been constructed for rereading. The inexhaustibility of its literary subtleties can only be appreciated by those who have read the gospel a sufficient number of times to be aware of narrative echo effects with what is to come (prolepses) and with what has already passed (analepses). Nothing shows the truth of this more than my observations about the shouting of Jesus in 11.42, which is only recognized as an ironic prolepsis of the shouting of the Jews in the passion narrative by those who are rereading the gospel.

That the gospel is designed for constant rereading is indicated by the curious remark by the narrator in 11.2, that 'this Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.' Here the game is given away. The first-time reader is mystified by this comment. He interprets it as an analepsis of something which has already occurred in John's story. In vain he searches the previous chapters for a scene in which Mary of Bethany anoints the feet of Jesus. Giving up, he reads on and finds the relevant episode in the next chapter, indeed at the very start of chap. 12. What the first-time reader interprets as an analepsis is really a prolepsis. Put another way, the narrator makes an analeptic reference to an event which is really proleptic.

How can the narrator do this? If he is teasing the first-time reader, then this would be somewhat gratuitous. But the real reason why he does it is because he is making the assumption that people have read the gospel before, and many times. He can refer to the anointing of Jesus in 11.2 as *if it has already occurred* because the person rereading the gospel already knows of this incident. It is future tense in the story time but past tense in the reader's imagination!

Whilst the first-time reader can certainly enjoy the story for its suspense, movement and comic effect, the person rereading the text consequently enjoys a different aesthetic pleasure: the pleasure of connexity. This is the sense of pleromatic satisfaction when parts of the gospel are seen by the reader in their complex interrelations. This pleasure has to do with fullness (hence 'pleromatic') and wholeness. The narrator has an ideal reader in mind, one who can link microscopic parts into the panoramic whole of his story. Few features of John 11 show this intention more clearly than the way in which the narrator establishes proleptic echo effects with the resurrection of Jesus. When Lazarus emerges from the tomb wrapped with strips of linen and a cloth around his face (σουδάριον), the

person rereading the gospel is supposed to see in this description a prolepsis of the empty tomb. In John 20.7, Simon Peter peers into the empty tomb and sees the head-cloth (σουδάριον) of Jesus lying there. The raising of Lazarus, in the ideal reader's mind, is proleptic of the raising of Jesus.

The narrator therefore has a particular kind of reader in view: one who follows the beginning and the middle of the story always from the point of view of its end. In this respect, narrative form and Christological claim are inseparable. What the narrator creates is a reader whose response is a matter of *realized eschatology*; that is, a matter of living in the end-time of the story even while it is still in progress. As such, form matches content, for in the content of the story Jesus Christ is depicted as the Eschaton-in-person, the one who brings the end of history into the middle of time. Thus the narrator requires of the reader what he believes about Jesus: a realized and personalized eschatology. He requires the ability to see meaning in the story by living from the perspective of its end, indeed with an ongoing sense of the ending. No wonder so many readers find themselves returning constantly to this gospel, not satisfied that they have exhausted its riches.

#### CONCLUSION

Of all the stories in John's gospel, the raising of Lazarus is arguably the one which most resonates with our own experience. The death of a loved one, the passion of grief, the mourning of friends, the hope of resurrection, all these are experiences common to us. This story appeals to us because its events have a 'classic' ring to them.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the characterization of Jesus is appealing. Into this *pathos* walks a Jesus who is both sympathetic in the root sense (*sym-pathos*, 'suffering with'), and yet clearly able to transcend human catastrophe through the power of the resurrection. For these reasons, the story engages our imagination; it elicits an intense response of participation in the narrative world of the text. More than anything else, I would suggest, it is the shadowy figure of Lazarus who draws us into the narrative. Yet the greatest 'gap'<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> 'We all find ourselves compelled both to recognize and on occasion to articulate our reasons for the recognition that certain expressions of the human spirit so disclose a compelling truth about our lives that we cannot deny them some kind of normative status. Thus do we name these expressions, and these alone, as "classics".' – David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (London: SCM, 1981) 108.

<sup>15</sup> For an excellent treatment of this concept, see chapter 6 ('Gaps, Ambiguity and the



in the story is the narrator's omission of any response from Lazarus. The silence of Lazarus is more deafening than the cry of Jesus. The reader, having imagined his way into the events of the story, is left asking, 'How did Lazarus feel? What ever happened to *him*?' The novelist Morris West (who has had an abiding fascination with the figure of Lazarus) has asked this question in his novel, *The Clowns of God*. I shall end with his fine speculation:<sup>16</sup>

Think about the details: the sisters in grief, in fear of what might be revealed when the tomb was opened. *Iam foetet*, they said, 'Already he stinks!' Then the tomb opened, Jesus called, Lazarus stepped out, still wrapped in the cerecloths. Have you ever thought how he must have felt, as he stood blinking in the sunlight, looking anew on a world from which he had taken his last leave? . . . Nothing could ever be the same as it was before.

Reading Process') in M. Sternberg's *Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana State University, 1985) 186–229. Sternberg writes: 'From the viewpoint of what is directly given in the language, the literary work consists of bits and fragments to be linked and pieced together in the process of reading: it establishes a system of gaps that must be filled in' (p. 186).

<sup>16</sup> Morris West, *The Clowns of God* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1981) 300–1.

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