

**NARRATIVE STRATEGIES
IN THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES**

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**Submitted for the degree of Ph.D.
June 1996**

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The working premise of this thesis is that the book of Ecclesiastes can be studied with confidence as a narrative text for the purpose of analysis. The first part, then, seeks to flesh out those qualities of the text that are narrative qualities: the presence of events, first-person narration (autobiography in particular), plot and motif.

The second part explores the strategy of the frame narrator, who provides a structure that both limits and opens up possibilities for readers. That narrator is in a position of tension in that on the one hand he validates Qoheleth's radicalism by appearing to find his words worth relating. Even words of praise are offered. On the other hand, from the summary of the epilogue, I argue at length, it is clear that the frame narrator did not agree with Qoheleth's approach to wisdom, God and tradition, bound as they were to his wholly different epistemology. Further, the strategy of framing occurs on many levels, and one of its consequences is the bringing into question of the reader's relation to the framed material, as well as the relation of the framer to the one framed. The interpretive possibilities arising from the tension in these narratorial relationships are explored in detail.

The third part explores the strategies of Qoheleth, the disillusioned rationalist and story-teller. Here is addressed the fact that in reading Ecclesiastes an interaction seemingly takes place, one in which the reader feels the concern of identity and of the formation of Qoheleth's character. In the guise of Solomon that concern is ironic (almost satirical) and somewhat playful. In the establishment of his self as the central concern of his narrative, Qoheleth shows that although he passionately observes the world's transience and absurdity he desires (again with irony) that his image would be fixed and remembered. After exploring such elements of self-expression, the linguistic characteristics and ideological categories of Qoheleth's quest are surveyed. Included in this investigation are the element of physicality in Qoheleth's language and the identification of the actors in the quest; the Subject, Object and Power (or Sender) in particular.

Although I do not categorically argue that Ecclesiastes can *only* be understood as narrative, the point of the whole is to experiment with what happens when a text is investigated with confidence in its narrative quality. This redresses an interpretive imbalance in Qoheleth-studies in that while there are some scholars who refer vaguely to Ecclesiastes as a story (although usually by implication), and others who make real assumptions about Ecclesiastes' narrative quality, virtually none attempt to critically examine that quality or to demonstrate it with any degree of conclusiveness with the aid of narrative criticism.

In loving memory of my mother, Penny
(1943–1990)

*Sweet is the light,
and it is good for the eyes to see the sun...
Remove vexation from your heart,
and take away pain from your body,
for youth and the prime of life are fleeting.*

—Ecclesiastes 11.7, 10

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Authors who always refer to their works as "my book, my commentary, my history", sound like solid citizens with their own property who are always talking about "my house". They would be better to say: "our book, our commentary, our history", seeing that there is usually more of other people's property in it than their own.

—Blaise Pascal (*Sayings*, 1)

Pascal's truism extends to the sometimes less obvious influence of friends and mentors through the years. It is therefore with appropriate gratitude that I begin by thanking Professor Sean McEvenue, a valued friend whose encouragement to me as an undergraduate to read the Bible critically and yet with *jouissance* and even love has had a lasting impression on me. I am also grateful to my Ph.D. supervisor, Philip Davies, who, throughout the duration of my study, has not only been generous in his time and comments but has helped me constantly to see the forest for the trees of my work. And thanks must go to my friend and colleague John Jarick, with whom I have enjoyed many a mini Qoheleth-seminar, and whose comments from a reading of the final draft have proven invaluable.

If it is possible to thank a group of people significantly then I must make the attempt. Thank you to my friends at the Sheffield University Department of Biblical Studies, many of whom have made the trials of studentship far more enjoyable than they would have otherwise been (Ruth Anne, Mark, Becca, Richard—the class of 91–95). Also, thank you to the staff, in particular to Alison Bygrave and Gill Fogg who endured many a forgotten form that I should have filled out a week ago.

Thank you to my parents, Dennis and Rose Christianson, who year after year have sent their encouragement and support over the miles. Finally, more thanks than I can express are due to my wife, Sonya Christianson, who has carefully read the majority of this thesis and offered her insightful comments (and rightly insisted on the deletion of not a few commas). Even more impressively,

she has had no choice but to live with the Preacher at every waking moment and yet she has listened patiently to my incessant monologues and has still not had me committed to a Home for Beleaguered Qoheleth-Readers. Sonya, by gracing me with your friendship, laughter and love you have imparted joy to my few days under the sun.

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AbrN</i>	<i>Abr-Nahrain</i>
<i>AEL</i>	Lichtheim (ed.), <i>Ancient Egyptian Literature</i>
<i>ANE</i>	Ancient Near Eastern
<i>ANET</i>	Pritchard (ed.), <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i>
<i>ASTI</i>	<i>Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute in Jerusalem</i>
<i>AUSS</i>	<i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>
<i>AUUSSU</i>	Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. <i>Studia Semitica Upsaliensia</i>
<i>BDB</i>	Brown, Driver and Briggs, <i>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
<i>BHS</i>	<i>Biblia hebraica stuttgartensia</i>
<i>BLS</i>	Bible and Literature Series
<i>BRev</i>	<i>Bible Review</i>
<i>BT</i>	<i>The Bible Translator</i>
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
<i>BTF</i>	<i>Bangalore Theological Forum</i>
<i>Bto</i>	<i>The Bible Today</i>
<i>BZAW</i>	Beihefte zur ZAW
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>CL</i>	<i>College Literature</i>
<i>CR:BS</i>	<i>Currents in Research: Biblical Studies</i>
<i>CritInq</i>	<i>Critical Inquiry</i>
<i>CTR</i>	<i>Criswell Theological Review</i>
<i>DCH</i>	Clines (ed.), <i>The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i> , I
<i>Enc</i>	<i>Encounter</i> (Indianapolis)
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>Exp</i>	<i>Expositor</i> (London)
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>GR</i>	<i>The Germanic Review</i>
<i>HAR</i>	<i>Hebrew Annual Review</i>
<i>HS</i>	<i>Hebrew Studies</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>HudR</i>	<i>Hudson Review</i>
<i>ICC</i>	International Critical Commentary
<i>ISBL</i>	Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature
<i>ITC</i>	International Theological Commentary
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JAC</i>	<i>Journal of Advanced Composition</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JBR</i>	<i>Journal of Bible and Religion</i>
<i>Jpst</i>	<i>Journal of Psychology and Theology</i>
<i>JQR</i>	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>

<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSOTSup</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KJV	King James Version
<i>LAE</i>	Simpson (ed.), <i>The Literature of Ancient Egypt</i>
LXX	Septuagint
<i>MLN</i>	<i>Modern Language Notes</i>
MT	Masoretic Text
NCB	New Century Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NIV	New International Version
OLA	Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta (Uppsala)
OTWSA	Ou Testmentiese Werkgemeenskap in Siud Afrika
<i>PRS</i>	<i>Perspectives in Religious Studies</i>
<i>PrtRev</i>	<i>Partisan Review</i>
PTMS	Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series
<i>RL</i>	<i>Religion in Life</i>
RSV	Revised Standard Version
<i>RTF</i>	Bauer <i>et al.</i> (eds.), <i>Remembering for the Future</i>
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
<i>SBTh</i>	<i>Studia Biblica et Theologica</i>
SCT	Studies in Continental Thought
<i>SIAN</i>	Gammie (ed.), <i>The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
TBS	The Biblical Seminar (Sheffield Academic Press)
<i>TDOT</i>	Botterweck and Ringgren (eds.), <i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
TLB	The Living Bible
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
<i>TrinJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
<i>TZ</i>	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
<i>VTSup</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum, Supplements</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZDMG</i>	<i>Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i>

INTRODUCTION

A Chopin prelude always is saddening, and Milton's "L'Allegro" never fails to liven up a leaden day. Koheleth, however, merely brings defeat and gladness into sharper outline in their relationship to each other, and does not deny or praise one or the other.

—Elizabeth Stone¹

In the history of biblical scholarship Qoheleth's inconsistencies and strange sayings have long been hung on the lines of academic and popular works of all sorts for the world to see. Indeed, it is a rare thing to read an introduction to a work on Ecclesiastes that does not begin with airing them out again, and to state that the book is "perplexing", "enigmatic" and so forth is bordering on an insult to the reader's general knowledge. This work, however, does not rest on the fact that Ecclesiastes presents problems to readers. Rather, it is simply an experiment in what happens when a text is investigated with confidence in its narrative quality. Such an approach need not be contrived.

Many would admit (as we shall see in Chapter 1) that Ecclesiastes has "narrative elements", "narrativity", "narrative threads" and so on. However, few if any regard such elements to be suggestive of the book's overall quality. While the various wisdom themes and narrative elements vie for the reader's commitment, the latter are rarely allowed predominance. If Ecclesiastes is such a double-sided mirror, what determines the form of the reflection? The decision lies ultimately with the "viewer". What, then, happens when *narrative* elements are viewed as constitutive of the whole, as opposed to, say, the structure of wisdom sayings or the relationship between themes of wisdom/folly and birth/death, or indeed to any elements commonly found in a collection of wise sayings?

By enlisting the help of narrative criticism I will examine seriously that

¹ "Old Man Koheleth", *JBR* 10 (1942), pp. 98-102 (99).

reflection of story which has previously only been glanced at. Central to my approach is the concept of "strategy", one I consider more useful than the more common approach of structure. (Many have attempted to delineate the book's structure in order to discipline or rationalize its overt contradictions.²) By strategy I mean simply a scheme for achieving some purpose, an artful means to some end. *Narrative* strategy is the function a narrator intends to fulfil by the use of a narrative device, technique or overall design. More specifically, states Wolfgang Iser, it is the "panoply of narrative techniques available" to the author, the ultimate function of which is "to *defamiliarize* the reader" with topics and language that are old while familiarizing the reader with what is new and particular to *this* story.³ I include under the rubric "narrative strategy" elements such as first-person narration, framing and characterization. Sometimes my investigation is particularly structural, sometimes not. For example, while it is clear that the frame narrative suggests a structural strategy, the same cannot necessarily be said of first-person narration (or more precisely, the construct of self with which Qoheleth narrates). The concept of strategy therefore has the advantage of including structural considerations as well as those that are not

² One of the most influential structural studies is A.G. Wright's "The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth", *CBQ* 30 (1968), pp. 313-34 (supplemented by two later articles: "The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited: Numerical Patterns in the Book of Qoheleth", *CBQ* 42 [1980], pp. 38-51; "Additional Numerical Patterns in Qohelet", *CBQ* 45 [1983], pp. 32-43). His conclusions have been widely accepted and the work seen as a truly structuralist approach to Ecclesiastes, as evidenced by its presence in bibliographies representative of structuralist approaches to the Bible; for example, Robert Polzin, *Biblical Structuralism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977); R. Barthes *et al.*, *Structural Analysis and Biblical Exegesis* (PTMS, 3; trans. A.M. Johnson, Jr; Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1974). For summaries of attempts to discern a structure in Ecclesiastes, see Wright, 1968, pp. 314-20; M. Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions* (JSOTSup, 71; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), pp. 19-28; J. Crenshaw, "Qoheleth in Current Research", *HAR* 7 (1983), esp. pp. 48-56; S. Breton, "Qoheleth Studies", *BTB* 3 (1973), pp. 38-40.

³ W. Iser, "Narrative Strategies as a Means of Communication", in M.J. Valdés and O.J. Miller (eds.), *Interpretation of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), pp. 101-102.

evidently so.

The question remains as to how I can justify a general narrative-critical approach to a text that is not commonly regarded as a narrative. Hence the purpose of the first section ("The Narrative Quality", Chapter 1) is to establish the veracity of the statement, "Ecclesiastes can be studied with confidence as a narrative text for the purpose of analysis." That statement has arisen from a reading conjecture: that Ecclesiastes relates the story of Qoheleth (an assumption I have found present in many readings of Ecclesiastes). To flesh out that conjecture I will review four features of Ecclesiastes. Two are common to all narrative texts—the presence both of events and of plot—and two serve as indicators of a narrative quality but are not limited to narrative texts—first-person narration and motif.

The second section ("The Frame Narrator's Strategy", Chapters 2-6) isolates the frame narrator (in 1.1-2; 7.27; 12.8-14) as a character in his own right. More specifically this section explores his strategy, which is partly to provide a structure that both limits and opens up possibilities for readers. That narrator is in a position of tension in that on the one hand he validates Qoheleth's radicalism by appearing to find his words worth relating. Even words of praise are offered. But from the summary of the epilogue, I argue at length, it is clear that the frame narrator did not agree with Qoheleth's approach to wisdom, God and tradition, bound as they were to his wholly different epistemology. The strategy of framing occurs on many levels, and one of its consequences is the bringing into question of the reader's relation to the framed material, as well as the relation of the framer to the one framed. The interpretive possibilities arising from the tension in these narratorial relationships are explored in detail.

The third section ("The Narrative Strategy of Qoheleth", Chapters 7-9) explores the strategies of Qoheleth, the disillusioned rationalist and story-teller. Here is addressed the fact that in reading Ecclesiastes an interaction seemingly

takes place, one in which the reader feels the concern of identity and the formation of Qoheleth's character. In the guise of Solomon that concern is ironic (almost satirical) and somewhat playful. In the establishment of his self as perhaps the central concern of his narrative, Qoheleth shows that although he⁴ passionately observes the world's transience and absurdity he desires (again with irony) that his image would be fixed and remembered. After exploring such elements of self-expression, the linguistic characteristics and ideological categories of Qoheleth's quest are surveyed. Included in this investigation are the element of physicality in Qoheleth's language as well as the identification of the actors in the quest, the Subject, Object and Sender (or Power) in particular. The final outcome of the quest is a redemption of Qoheleth's youth and folly in which Qoheleth implicitly invites readers to take part.

⁴ I use "he" since all verbal forms relating to Qoheleth are masculine (with the majority of commentators I take MT's feminine form of *אמרה קהלת* at 7.27 to be a misconstrual of the masculine form of *אמר הקהלת*), and the narrator of 2.8b; 7.26-29—and other passages—likely has a male orientation. As a character, Qoheleth (as well as the frame narrator; cf. 12.12) is a "he". Narrators, however, are not always characters.

Chapter 1

ECCLESIASTES AS NARRATIVE

One might argue, as Mieke Bal, that no narrative theory is capable of describing "all the aspects of a narrative text",⁵ and that it is therefore justifiable to approach any text that has narrative aspects (or "narrativity") with the tools that narrative criticism offers. While not disputing this, my purpose here is to go further than such an approach allows. Rather, I will investigate the possibility that Ecclesiastes meets certain narratological criteria that would commend it as a narrative text for the purpose of analysis, and not merely as a text with elements of narrativity.⁶

1. *The Narrative Assumption*

[Qoheleth] is "disillusioned" only in the sense that he has realized that an illusion is a self-constructed prison. He is not a weary pessimist tired of life: he is a vigorous realist determined to smash his way through every locked door of repression in his mind.

—Northrop Frye⁷

[Qoheleth's] own personal experiences seem to supply the key to his outlook... He is a free-lance humanist... There may have been many a melancholy streak in his nature that disposed him to look at the shadier sides of life. He is the original "gloomy dean". He had hung his harp on the weeping willows and it moaned in the breeze.

—John Paterson⁸

⁵ *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (trans. C. von Boheemen; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p. 9.

⁶ This will be pursued in the same spirit in which Bal herself goes on to delimit her definition of what constitutes a narrative (or what she would call a *fabula*), presumably so that she is able to make similarly decisive judgments about texts (*Narratology*, pp. 11-47).

⁷ *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Toronto: Academic Press Canada, 1982), p. 123.

⁸ "The Intimate Journal of an Old-Time Humanist", *RL* 19/2 (1950), pp. 245, 250-51.

Qohelet constantly interposes his consciousness between the reality observed and the reader. It seems important to him that the reader not only know what the truth is, but also be aware that he, Qohelet, saw this, felt this, realized this. He is reflexively observing the psychological process of discovery as well as reporting the discoveries themselves.

—Michael Fox⁹

Qoheleth is an "intellectual" in a sense otherwise unknown to the Old Testament. In his remorseless determination to probe the nature of things he belongs to a new world of thought, though...his sense of God's transcendence ("God is in heaven, and you upon the earth", 5:2) is a Jewish inheritance which distinguishes him quite radically from the secular philosopher.

—R.N. Whybray¹⁰

I wish...that I could have spoken with Qohelet face to face, seen his emotion as he told his story, noted the tone of his voice, where he smiled or was tearful, whether he was hesitating or agitated, silent or effusive, have him repeat his tale, and note the variations, what he added and what he suppressed, what were his conflicts and his dreams especially...

—Frank Zimmermann¹¹

Each of the above statements presents a unique characterization of Qoheleth. To Frye he is a realist embarked on a critique of the way of wisdom. To Paterson he is a journal-keeping humanist. To Fox he is a seeker of truth eager to communicate his experiences. To Whybray he is a distinctly Jewish philosopher. To Zimmermann he is a melancholy story-teller. To each of them Qoheleth is a character who (according to Ecclesiastes) interacted with the world and left it with his consequent thoughts and judgments about it. In each instance the tendency is to assume the presence of a cohesive narrative character at the heart of Ecclesiastes.

So why is Qoheleth, to many readers, seen clearly as a character who interacted with the world? Is it because Ecclesiastes is a narrative?; that is, because it is "the representation of real or fictive events or situations in a time

⁹ *Qohelet*, p. 93.

¹⁰ *Ecclesiastes* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 7.

¹¹ *The Inner World of Qohelet* (New York: Ktav, 1973), p. ix.

sequence"¹² that tells the story of Qoheleth? Of course, quotations about Qoheleth as a character are not in themselves evidence that Ecclesiastes is a narrative. For perhaps Ecclesiastes is only a group of *משלים* collected and placed in a relatively random order by a redactor(s), all loosely structured by a frame narrator/epilogist/editor.¹³ But if the above quotations show anything it is the justification of the question, Why has Ecclesiastes been understood to be otherwise?¹⁴ While the narrative *assumption* is often made, relatively little effort has been given to legitimate it. A brief survey will help to show what I mean.

Leland Ryken affirms that Ecclesiastes reads "much like a story", citing some of Qoheleth's narrative style as evidence.¹⁵ Less committedly, J.G. Williams admits that there is in Ecclesiastes the use of a kind of narrativity which is merely common (and necessary) to the poetics of all wisdom literature.¹⁶ Also, there has been some significant study of the *Ich-Erzählung* of Qoheleth

¹² G. Prince, *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative* (Berlin: Mouton, 1982), p. 1. This definition is distinct from two other uses of the word: (1) The *subject* of the narrative discourse; i.e., the actual events themselves (akin to what I call "story" below), (2) The event of narrating itself (see also G. Genette, *Narrative Discourse* [trans. J. Lewin; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980 (1972)], pp. 25-27). After a great deal of reading I settled on Prince's definition as representative of definitions of narrative; that is, most definitions suggest that events in the relation of time are fundamental to a narrative. What *qualifies* such an entity (i.e. narration, plot etc.) will be further explored below.

¹³ Take, for example, John Barton's statement: "[Ecclesiastes is sapiential wisdom with a frame narrative], not a narrative overweighted with sapiential advice" (*Reading the Old Testament* [London: SCM, 1984], p. 132). For a convenient summary of redactional hypotheses which imply a similar sentiment, see Crenshaw, "Qoheleth in Current Research", pp. 45-46.

¹⁴ My introductory quotes have been profusive to make a point. The point is that such writing about Qoheleth is common. Similar statements about the narrative quality of Ecclesiastes can be found in many academic works, and one may take those I have here supplied to be representative.

¹⁵ "Ecclesiastes", in *idem*, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987), p. 321.

¹⁶ "Proverbs and Ecclesiastes", in R. Alter and F. Kermode (eds.), *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (London: Collins, 1987), pp. 273-75, 277.

which assume a cohesive narrative element at work.¹⁷ While not specifically narrative in approach, many studies have reviewed literary aspects of Qoheleth. For example, Edwin Good's "The Unfilled Sea: Style and Meaning in Ecclesiastes 1:2-11", sets much emphasis on Qoheleth's sophisticated uses of common narrative devices.¹⁸ Also, there is Frank Zimmermann's widely, in my opinion, neglected psychoanalytic study. In order to carry out his study he must (and does) presume that the whole book is autobiographical, "a complete representation of Qohelet himself".¹⁹ Harold Fisch has offered a stimulating review suggesting sophistication in Qoheleth's use of irony. In doing so he relies heavily on the notion of an autobiographical coherence in Qoheleth's narrative.²⁰ Finally, Michael Fox's article, "Frame-narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet",²¹ is the only study I know of which explores "the literary characteristics of *Qohelet* as narrative".²²

Such a brief survey shows that there are some, such as Ryken, who refer vaguely to Ecclesiastes as a story (although usually by implication), and some, such as Zimmermann, who make real assumptions about Ecclesiastes' narrative quality. It is a narrative assumption that has not been thought possible in work on Proverbs and yet has had not a few advocates in work on Job. However, no one

¹⁷ E.g., O. Loretz, "Zur Darbietungsform der 'Ich-Erzählung' im Buche Qohelet", *CBQ* 25 (1963), pp. 46-59; P. Höffken, "Das EGO des Weisen", *TZ* 41 (1985), pp. 121-34. Also, cf. Bo Isaksson, *Studies in The Language of Qoheleth* (AUUSSU, 10; Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1987), chapter 2.

¹⁸ In J. Gammie *et al.* (eds.), *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978), pp. 59-73. See also, P. Viviano, "The Book of Ecclesiastes: A Literary Approach", *Bto* 22 (1984), pp. 79-84; and M. Payne, "The Voices of Ecclesiastes", *CL* 15 (1988), pp. 262-68.

¹⁹ *Inner World*, p. xiii; also, cf. pp. ix-xiv.

²⁰ Fisch, H., "Qohelet: A Hebrew Ironist", in *idem*, *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (ISBL; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 158-78, esp. pp. 158-59.

²¹ *HUCA* 48 (1977), pp. 83-106. The article is reprinted in a shortened form with no modification as regards the narrative approach in *Qohelet*, pp. 311-21. His work has been helpful in laying some foundation for my own and I shall draw upon it accordingly.

²² "Frame-narrative", p. 83.

(with the possible exception of Fox) has examined that narrative quality critically in Ecclesiastes, or attempted to demonstrate it with any degree of conclusiveness with the aid of narrative criticism.

2. *Events and a Proleptic Plot Afoot*

The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.
—L.P. Hartley²³

The story of any narrative can be "transformed" into any medium: comic book, pantomime, film and so forth. For example, the story of Jesus (consisting of selected events, settings etc. from the Gospels) has been transformed into several types (stained glass, film, theatre etc.) of narrative discourse, each showing that story can be transferred from discourse to discourse. Similarly, the text of Ecclesiastes (its narrative discourse) is the tangible expression of its story.²⁴ That Ecclesiastes has been rendered as music,²⁵ poem,²⁶ slide show,²⁷ series

²³ *The Go-Between* (Penguin: Middlesex, 1958), p. 7.

²⁴ Narratives are structures (discourses) "independent of any medium", having "wholeness, transformation, and self-regulation" (S. Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* [London: Cornell University Press, 1978], pp. 20-21). This implicitly strict division between content and form has been criticized. For example, Wayne Booth argues that it is not legitimate to see events as simply "clothed" in the form of narrative discourses. For this does not give justice to the real author who is far more complex in using his or her privilege to "telescope" certain events while "expanding" others, and is hence more in control of the shape of events as manifested in their narrative discourse (1983 Afterword to *The Rhetoric of Fiction* [Middlesex: Penguin, 2nd edn, 1983], pp. 437-38). In other words, there is no such thing as "pure" transformation of content to form. Obviously, this is not the place to enter such a basic and hence large debate. Suffice to say that while I agree with Booth that there is no such thing as "pure" transformation, the operative distinction (as long as we are aware of its limits) in Chatman (and others) is useful. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (*Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* [London: Methuen, 1983], pp. 6-8) concludes similarly.

²⁵ For example, the classic 1960s rock song, *Turn, Turn, Turn!* (music written and words adapted by Pete Seeger; performed by The Byrds). Although I recall reading about a classical music suite based on Ecclesiastes, unfortunately I have been unable to locate the reference.

²⁶ For example, *Ecclesiastes: Rendered into English Verse by F. Crawford Burkitt* (London: Macmillan, 1936). The first "verse" reads, "Bubble of bubbles! All things are a Bubble! What is the use of all Man's toil and trouble?" (p. 9).

of woodcuts²⁸ and sketches²⁹ points at least to its transferability. Although not all forms demonstrate a narrative quality, the central events of the text to which I will be making reference are often evident.

Events, in any given text, are the most important distinctive quality that earns the title "narrative", for events are the fabric of which stories are made. An "event" is most simply described as "something that happens". Also, events entail a change from one state of affairs to another. This takes place in most verbal statements. Borrowing Seymour Chatman's term, such verbal phrases are "process statements".³⁰ While a process statement is an event, by itself it is not necessarily a narrative event. If verbal action were the only criterion the definition would be far too loose to be of value.

Events (actions) are only meaningful in relation to at least one other event in the relation of time. Narrative events are thus "made" before the reader. This shows that the event in question has *functionality*. My own use of the word takes on board two of Mieke Bal's criteria for narrative events: *change* and *choice*.³¹

²⁷ For example, R. Short's photo-essay of *Ecclesiastes, A Time to Be Born—A Time to Die* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

²⁸ For example, Stefan Martin's series of wood engravings, in J. Blumenthal (designer), *Ecclesiastes, or The Preacher* (New York: Spiral Press, 1965). There is an example on p. 69, below.

²⁹ As can be seen from any number of attempts to augment *Ecclesiastes* with sketches demonstrating its narrativity. For example, see the illustrations of Emlen Etting, in *Koheleth: The Book of Ecclesiastes* (New York: New Directions, 1940).

³⁰ So Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, pp. 32-33. Rimmon-Kenan challenges Chatman's distinction, wanting to include "stasis" statements (statements that only describe the state of things and are therefore not events; e.g. "Bob is hungry") in the definition of an event. She argues that "an account of an event may be broken down into an infinite number of intermediary states...[for example,] 'He was rich, then he was poor'", and that this implies a process of change, meeting Chatman's criterion (*Narrative Fiction*, p. 15). There are certain stasis statements (as her example) which imply change and can therefore be considered process statements.

³¹ So Bal, *Narratology*, pp. 13-16. I have chosen not to use Bal's criterion of *confrontation* (pp. 16-18). This criterion demands that every event have a subject, predication and (direct) object. The subject and (direct) object must be "confronted by each other" (p. 16). Furthermore, both the subject and (direct) object must be agents of action. This means that Bal can say that "Liz writes a letter" meets such a criterion (p. 17). For it can be implied that a letter represents a person and that therefore two agents

The two concepts are closely related. An event must be functional in (produce *change* in or have an effect upon) the larger sequence of events that I have called a narrative. This can only be accomplished through the *choice(s)* made by characters in the narrative. Narrative events can have different types of functionality according to their context. Again, to borrow from Chatman, there are two types of such functional events: kernels and satellites. A *kernel* is an event that initializes narrative motion.³² Kernels create the possibility for a change of story-line. That they do assumes their functionality to other events. If kernels are not in relation to another event in time, by which they can raise a question or further the plot, they are logically expendable. If they are logically expendable they have only an "immediate functionality". Such events are *satellites*; that is, one or more events that are directly related to the kernel but do not themselves further the story-line. The satellite is "always logically expendable".³³

Does Ecclesiastes have functional narrative events? First, it must be established that the text in question narrates an event; that is, that it meets the basic criterion of verbal action, change. Every time Qoheleth makes his opinion known, or relates what he has done in order to come to a certain conclusion, there is a *process* of change at hand. The first explicit appearance of this is in 1.12-13a.³⁴ "I am Qoheleth.³⁵ I was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I set my

of action confront each other in the narrative. But in my view this is included in the criterion of functionality. The letter can only be significant if the agent it represents is of any consequence in the larger structure of events. At any rate, functionality can only occur if at least two agents of action (not necessarily human) are involved.

³² *Story and Discourse*, pp. 53-56. Kernels "[advance] the plot by raising and satisfying questions...[and are] nodes or hinges in the structure, branching points which force a movement into one of two (or more) possible paths" (p. 53).

³³ *Story and Discourse*, p. 54.

³⁴ While I consider 1.1-2 to be an implicit event (see Chapter 3.2) I have chosen to discuss 1.12-13a for the sake of clarity, as it is the first explicit narrative event.

³⁵ "I am Qoheleth" (as opposed to the usual, "I, Qoheleth...") seems the best translation of אֲנִי קֹהֶלֶת. This is the first self-introduction of the book and would hence deserve the slight pause this translation offers (so also, Fox—for the same reason, but

heart to investigate and to search out by wisdom all that is done under the heavens." The subject, Qoheleth, describes himself in a stasis statement: "I was king". During the time of his reign that the statement refers to, Qoheleth gave his heart (לב) to investigate and to seek out (תורר, "spying out" or "evaluating"; see Num. 13.32; 14.34 [of land]) an object; namely, "all that is done under the heavens". I will not investigate here the real Object of Qoheleth's quest (for this, see Chapter 9.3, below). What matters for now is the criterion of change. Qoheleth's state of knowledge at this narrative level is given a quality of self-determination, of the inevitability of change.

Second, functionality must be established in order to show how this event is meaningful in the larger structure of events. This event finds an immediate functional counterpart at 1.14: "I observed all the deeds that have been done under the sun, and behold, everything is absurd³⁶ and a pursuit of wind." The narrator, Qoheleth (unchanged from 1.3), has temporally linked two narrative events. Ecclesiastes 1.12-13a and the event of 1.14 are separate, and yet the former begs the conclusion: the event of finding what is searched for.³⁷ A storyline, however small, has been created and the criterion of functionality met. But does Qoheleth's seeking at 1.12-13a function as a kernel event? Qoheleth announces his intention to inform himself about what we must assume he did not know. His quest was "successful" (he observed successfully all that is done under the sun) and his findings could have been expressed in a variety of ways: as moral treatise, as "the bare facts", even as "evil" report. At Num. 13.32 we are

also on the grounds that it resembles "the opening of various royal inscriptions", *Qohelet*, p. 174). Cf. Joseph's dramatic self-introduction, אֲנִי יוֹסֵף (Gen. 45.3; cf. also, 2 Sam. 19.23—of a king).

³⁶ On translating הַבָּל as "absurd", see Excursus 1.

³⁷ To understand this as conclusive, כֹּל-הַמַּעֲשִׂים שֶׁנַּעֲשׂוּ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם at 1.14a is taken to be equivocal to כֹּל-אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשֶׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם at 1.13bα. "Under the heavens" and "under the sun" are interchangeable throughout Ecclesiastes (see 2.3, 11; 3.1; cf. 5.2 [see n. 43, below]). Hence, the conclusion (וְהִנֵּה...) of the investigation is that the object of 1.14aα is absurd and a pursuit of wind.

told that the report of the spies was evil (or "cunning", רִבְיָהּ), which implies that a good report was possible. Qoheleth's seeking, like the spies' report, forces the logic of the story (eventually) to take a particular direction. His seeking creates numerous possibilities in the direction of the sequence of events and is hence a kernel event. By claiming that he set his heart to discover things by wisdom, Qoheleth limited the scope of his quest while at the same time opened wide the possibilities for story-direction and for the imagination of the sequential reader (i.e., the reader who reads this text for the first time, attentively, from beginning to end).

Obviously, events can have more than one functional counterpart. There are several in 1.12-13a that the sequential reader discovers as the narrative line unfolds. Indeed, every subsequent observation is "covered" by the event of investigating "all that is done under the heavens".³⁸ While it could be argued that such a functional poetic is necessary to the opening verses of any book of wisdom literature, this would depend on the strategy at hand. The prologue to Proverbs (1.1-3 in particular), for example, states the purpose of the entire "book":

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel.
 To know wisdom and instruction,
 and to understand the sayings of insight.
 To acquire instruction in wise dealing,
 righteousness, justice, and integrity.

By this the reader realizes that the purpose is primarily a didactic one.³⁹ Content

³⁸ For example, after the highly observational ch. 2, cf. 3.10, 16ff.; 4.1, 4, 7; *passim*.

³⁹ That the infinitive constructs here may be taken to be purpose clauses (e.g. לִדְעַת = "in order to learn", so the sense of RSV and other translations) is evidenced by the fact that there is no other referent for the infinitives except the opening phrase, "The proverbs of Solomon", without which the infinitives "to know" etc. would stand rather meaninglessly on their own. Thus each of these verbs and their nouns should be seen as qualifying the purpose of the מוֹשְׁלִים. The infinitives which qualify the meaning of Eccl. 1.13, however, have an altogether different function.

is given precedence over story, and the functional poetic of events is neither present nor necessary here.⁴⁰

Other functional events in Ecclesiastes may here be indexed. Both the location of the event and the location of one event to which it is functional are shown. The selection of one event from each chapter shows that functional events are a *feature* of the book as a whole.

*Narrative Events in Ecclesiastes*⁴¹

<i>Place</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>I</i>
1.2	Speech-act of Qoheleth (FC = 1.12; cf. 1.16; <i>passim</i>)		X
2.1	Test of עמורה (FC = 2.2-10; cf. 3.22; 5.18 ⁴²)	X	
3.16	Observation of משפט (FC = 1.13; 3.17; cf. 5.8)	X	
4.1-2	Observation of עשק (FC = 1.13; 4.3-4; cf. 5.8; 8.9)	X	
5.1	Shift to present; ⁴³ admonition (FC = 12.9; cf. 8.2-4)		X
6.3-6	Didactic pericope ⁴⁴ (FC = 6.1; cf. 4.13-16)	X	

⁴⁰ This is not to say that there are not events in the book of Proverbs. Events are present as early as 1.7, 8 and following, but these are not functional to the whole.

⁴¹ E = explicit; I = implicit. Here is a plain example which demonstrates the distinction: E = "Someone reported Qoheleth's words." I = "The words of Qoheleth." The latter is an implicit form of the former explicit event. This can also be thought of in terms of the classic distinction between telling (E) and showing (I). Wayne Booth argues persuasively that showing is, in fact, a form of telling (*Rhetoric of Fiction*, chapter 1, esp. pp. 18-20, 25-27). FC = functional counterpart. It is worth noting here that there is some non-narrative material in Ecclesiastes, particularly the two blocks of wisdom sayings in 7.1-14, 19-22 and 10.1-4, 8-20. Even these passages, however, are set firmly in a narrative context (see below, Chapter 1.5).

⁴² In referring to ch. 5 I use the English versification which is one verse ahead of the MT.

⁴³ The shift in narration at 5.1 (and the examples of 7.13-14; 11.9) constitutes a narrative event in that the shift occurs not only in the external structural level (of discourse) but in the narrative diegetic level (of story) as well. That is, that Qoheleth speaks suddenly to a character in the text not mentioned before (i.e. an implied reader) can be seen as an event of narration. It is because the reader can, in a sense, visualize Qoheleth changing his narrative stance that this meets the change criterion. The functionality criterion is met in comparing 5.1 to 12.9b: "He [Qoheleth] continually taught the people knowledge..." From this statement the didactic quality of this and other addressee passages can be made sense of in a narrative context—that is, in the context of what Qoheleth *did*: his story.

⁴⁴ A didactic pericope such as this (and the examples of 4.13-16; 9.13-15) is a virtual mini-story within itself (pericope). This particular pericope has its own characters (the man of 6.3a-b, 4, and the stillborn [הנפיל]; cf. Job 3.16] of 6.3c, 5) and events functional to one another (the living [6.3a], dying [6.3b] and consequential experience [6.4] of the man and the "experience" [6.3c, 5] of the stillborn).

<i>Place</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>I</i>
7.13-14	Shift to present; admonition (FC = 12.9; cf. 7.10)X		
8.16	Test of חכמה (FC = 1.13 [reiteration]; 8.17; cf. 7.23)	X	
9.13-15	Didactic pericope (FC = 9.16; cf. 4.13-16)	X	
10.5-7	Observation of רעה (FC = 1.13; cf. 5.13; 6.1; <i>passim</i>)	X	
11.9	Salient shift to present (FC = 12.9; cf. 9.7-10)		X
12.8	Conclusion/summary (FC = 1.3, 13; <i>passim</i> ; cf. 1.2)	X	

figure 1.

Undoubtedly functional events are the most important feature of narratives. These separate the classified ads from the *roman*, the academic essay from the quest epic and the collection of sayings from the autobiography. When functionality is present in a text, the whole work necessarily exudes another feature: plot. The element of plot (which is not possible without functional events) is essential to any narrative. As Chatman puts it, "A narrative without a plot is a logical impossibility... [The issue is not so much that a given work has] no plot, but rather that the plot is not an intricate puzzle, that its events are 'of no great importance'..."⁴⁵ What, then, is the "great importance" of events in *Ecclesiastes*? Is there something, for example, that instigates a readerly desire for resolution, or expansion of some generating thrust or idea?

Events constitute plot when they are arranged in an ordered time sequence of some kind (in fact, any functionality constitutes a type of plot in that all functional events happen within a time sequence). The arrangement of events is what gives a plot its particular type of suspense or narrative desire—a shape.

If plot may be said to be the product of tension between events (partly the result of the quality of their respective time relationships), in *Ecclesiastes* it is the time element that creates that web of tension. This is anachrony; in particular, *prolepsis*. Gérard Genette says of prolepses that "Repeating prolepses...scarcely appear except as brief allusions: they refer in advance to an event that will be

⁴⁵ *Story and Discourse*, pp. 47-48.

told in full in its place."⁴⁶ Take, for example, the reflections of Scout, the primary narrator in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*:

When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow. When it healed, and Jem's fears of never being able to play football were assuaged, he was seldom self-conscious about his injury... When enough years had gone by to enable us to look back on them, we sometimes discussed *the events leading to his accident*.⁴⁷

Here the reader is clued into future events not yet narrated but that have already had their effect on the narrator. Such a prolepsis creates an initial tension in the plot.⁴⁸ Likewise, it is the implication of Qoheleth's age at the moment of his narration that forms the proleptic element in *Ecclesiastes*. That is, by stating his observations at the outset in a past aspect, the reader is aware that it is "old man Qoheleth" who is reflecting on his youth, the younger persona of the experiencing Qoheleth.⁴⁹ By placing his statements in the preterite Qoheleth places himself in a future stance, and places the reader both in the narrative telling *now* and in the time of his narrated world. Whenever the preterite is used the reader could easily prefix the sentence with, "When I was younger..." The

⁴⁶ *Narrative Discourse*, p. 73.

⁴⁷ *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1964 [1960]), p. 9 (italics mine).

⁴⁸ Compare the prologue of Ben Sira: "...my grandfather Jeshua, after devoting himself for a long time to the reading of the Law...was led to write on his own account something in the line of instruction and wisdom... You are therefore *invited* to read it through..." (*The Apocrypha* [trans. E. Goodspeed; Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1938], p. 223). Although the Translator (the narrator here) does not allude to a particular event, he does suggest a causality in its production which, he implies, increases the instructional value of the book. This initiates a readerly desire.

⁴⁹ The aspect of old age is discerned in 1.1-2 and 1.12 ("I was king"; the description of Qoheleth as Solomon [see Chapter 7] may imply the perspective of old age; cf. 1 Kgs 3.14; 11.4). Also, the test of toil in ch. 2 implies a great amount of time to have elapsed in order for Qoheleth to have become great and surpass all who came before him (2.9; cf. 1.16). Passages such as 7.15; 8.16 and 9.1-3 also assume a wealth of experience at Qoheleth's disposal. This perspective is, of course, enforced by the extensive use of the preterite which always keeps Qoheleth's narrative stance in a reflective mode (see Chapter 8.4). Finally, Qoheleth's injunction to remember one's creator in the days of youth "before the years draw nigh when you will say, 'I have no delight in them'" (12.1; cf. 9.7-10; 11.9-10), assumes (or even requires) from its narrator a life of deeply felt experience.

narrative stance, then, is one which generates a readerly desire to "fill-in". In other words, such kernel events anticipate a story to be unfolded—a character has begun to act, to take shape in the reader's mind, and its actions demand consequences and resolution. (That Qoheleth does in fact relate a narrative resolution [see Chapter 9.5] brings this story-element into sharp relief.)

In figure 1 I suggested that 1.13 was the functional counterpart of each of the listed observational events (3.16; 4.1-2; 10.5-7). Each observation (of which there are many) has a necessary referent in 1.13. This connection, of course, transpires in reading. It is the interaction (in the mind of the reader) between the notion of quest (instigated at 1.13 and augmented by a host of cognate verses) and each of the *subsequent* observations that creates the sense of mystery and enquiry to which the quotes at the beginning of the previous section bear witness. Indeed, it is unlikely that those quotes could have emerged from anything other than the sense of mystery that this character-oriented plot creates. It is in and through this connection and interaction that the plot "unfurls before us as a precipitation of shape and meaning".⁵⁰

There is another type of prolepsis in *Ecclesiastes* that engenders a fictitious effect. Upon reading Qoheleth's opening lamentation—indeed, denouncement—"Everything is absurd!" (1.2), it is easily surmised that Qoheleth himself is "informed". Already, he has lived and he has judged. From this juncture one may envisage an aged Qoheleth in hospital pining for youthful days, his body ravaged by time. Or would he be held captive in a prison for the unorthodox? Or perhaps one "sees" in Qoheleth one of the "Old Boys" in his club, smoking a cigar, content that he has been there, done that and has nothing left to prove? The reader, envisaging Qoheleth in any such beginning "knows" the final setting, and the natural inclination is to fill-in what is not known—what

⁵⁰ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 35.

Qoheleth does not reveal. The twist comes when the reader later discovers (at 12.8) that Qoheleth's opening remarks (stated through the mouth of the frame narrator *before* Qoheleth begins to demonstrate them) are his final and ultimate conclusions. What the reader learns in the ensuing narrative (as one learns Jem's circumstance from Scout's ensuing narrative in *To Kill a Mockingbird*) is *how* Qoheleth arrived at that state of apparent cynicism.

Of course, in a first read of the book, this particular prolepsis is not realized at 1.2. That is, it does not become a prolepsis until it appears again, with great effect, at 12.8, since only then is the reader made aware that Qoheleth's initial state is/was, in fact, his final. Ignorance—that of the actual and implied readers—is a mover of plot. It, in the larger constructed order of functional events, forms the shape of the plot and the tension that the reader feels in the unfolding of Qoheleth's narrative.

All kinds of questions emerge from the nexus of the mystery of Qoheleth. Is there any completeness in his character? Are we led to believe (by his ominous conclusions) that all that is important has been disclosed? Is there anything left to say beyond the decree, "Everything is absurd"? Is the quest of this enigmatic character ever over for the reader? Or is the reader left with his or her questions, burning with the unflexing observations on life that Qoheleth has related? To return to Chatman's criterion, this is the "great importance" of events in *Ecclesiastes*. It is what Peter Brooks describes as "the principle of interconnectedness and intention which we cannot do without in moving through the discreet elements—incidents, episodes, actions—of a narrative".⁵¹ So it is that the proleptic aspect propels the story ahead to a known, tragic conclusion. It will be seen as this study continues that the concern of plot permeates most of the narrative questions under discussion.

⁵¹ *Reading for the Plot*, p. 5.

3. *Qoheleth's Autobiographical Adhesion*

The first personal pronoun *I* is unduly prominent in this book: [Qoheleth] suffers from "I trouble", and this ego seems to have few friends.

—John Paterson⁵²

Qoheleth's narration in *Ecclesiastes* is fused together by an iterative first-person narrator. The presence is so strongly embedded that it led E.H. Plumptre in 1880 to go as far as to read historical (as opposed to fictional) events into nearly every sentential statement of Qoheleth:

Not without reason did the wiser thinkers of the school of Hillel...in spite of seeming contradictions, and Epicurean or heretical tendencies, recognize that in this record of the struggle, the fall, the recovery of a child of Israel, a child of God, there was the narrative of a Divine education told with a genius and power in which they were well content ...to acknowledge a Divine inspiration.⁵³

So Plumptre read into the "I" a historical figure. Whatever historicity the reader may or may not assume, one comes from Qoheleth's narrative with an impression (which some have thought overbearing) of individuality. Such is one effect of first-person narration.

It should be clarified that by "first person" I am referring to a distinction of narrative posture and not of grammar alone. The "I" may be used in something other than a first-person narrative. Take Gérard Genette's example: "when Virgil writes 'I sing of arms and the man...' or [...] when Crusoe writes 'I was born in the year 1632, in the city of York...' The term 'first-person narrative' refers, quite obviously, only to the second of these situations."⁵⁴ The term also applies to *Ecclesiastes*. Harold Fisch makes such a case by comparing the often more impersonal "I" of the Psalter: "The 'I' is there the function of a

⁵² "Intimate Journal", p. 251.

⁵³ E.H. Plumptre, "The Author of *Ecclesiastes*", *Exp* 2 (1880), pp. 429-30.

⁵⁴ *Narrative Discourse*, p. 244; see also, Bal, *Narratology*, pp. 121-26. Although Genette goes on to discard the usage of "first person", I will use it in the traditional sense, to distinguish narrative posture and to maintain clarity.

relationship in which the reader can share; it is not the sign of an autonomous ego. By contrast, Ecclesiastes gives us a radically individualized statement."⁵⁵ This is an important distinction which Qoheleth enjoys; his use of the "I" is uniquely narrative-bound.

There is no other book in the Hebrew Bible that has such relentless individualism and it is surely this quality that has inspired such titles of articles and books as "Old Man Koheleth" (Stone, 1942), or "The Intimate Journal of an Old-Time Humanist" (Paterson, 1950) or *The Inner World of Qohelet* (Zimmermann, 1973). As Martin Hengel comments,

one can...speak of a marked 'individuality' of authorship. It is an individuality which emerges with him for the first time among the wisdom teachers of the Old Testament, and later also appears in a kindred form in Jesus Sirach and is typical for the time of Hellenism.⁵⁶

Other wisdom-oriented books of the Hebrew Bible rarely employ this intimate narrative device.⁵⁷ This is not to say that Qoheleth's style is without precedent. First-person narratives abound in the ANE literature, as well as some Greek philosophical discourses.⁵⁸ Qoheleth's style on the whole, however, is more

⁵⁵ "Qohelet: A Hebrew Ironist", p. 158.

⁵⁶ *Judaism and Hellenism*, I (trans. J. Bowden; London: SCM, rev. edn, 1974 [1973]), pp. 116-17 (italics Hengel's). Hengel argues that the source of Qoheleth's individuality can be traced mainly to Hellenistic sources, placing Qoheleth's locale of writing firmly in a Hellenistic culture. It is obviously precarious, however, to argue for any literary-historical relationship of dependence of one upon another, whether with Hellenic, Judaic or ANE texts.

⁵⁷ For example, Proverbs seems to strike up this personal narrative posture only twice: 7.6-27 where the story of a senseless youth is told and 24.30-34 where the narrator offers an aetiology for the saying, "A little sleep, a little slumber..." But cf. also, Prov. 4.1-3, the Dame Wisdom speeches (1.22-33; 8.4-36) and the dialogue of "the man" (אִישׁ) to Ithiel and Ucal (30.1-9).

⁵⁸ This is widely noted. For example, Ryken compares Qoheleth's narration to "fictional Akkadian autobiography" (in particular the Cuthaeon Legend) which utilizes first-person narration ("Ecclesiastes", in L. Ryken and T. Longman III [eds.], *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993], pp. 273-74). Further, see my discussion of ANE texts at Chapter 2.2.

individualized than that of other ancient first-person narratives.⁵⁹ Indeed, the relentless individualism of his narrative has prompted such labels as "confessions", "memoirs" or "autobiography". Like confessions or memoirs, autobiography is concerned with the events of the life of the primary narrator. The label "autobiography", then, while seemingly anachronistic, is nonetheless appropriate.

The autobiographical form lends stable integrity to a narrative, for autobiography is concerned with the self of the narrator, and the narrator "I" is the great adhesive quality of such a narrative. Such a strategy of discourse (on the subject of one's own experience) serves to free the narrator to touch on innumerable subjects, all of which are bound by the constant narrative presence of the autobiographer. While enabling Qoheleth to speak freely on a host of subjects (although even his subject matter is motif-ridden; see below) the integrity of his narrative has another, more ironic function: to fix his own image in a world which for him is transient, frustratingly repetitive and absurd. For, "[the autobiographer] believes it a useful and valuable thing to fix his own image so that he can be certain it will not disappear like all things in this world".⁶⁰

⁵⁹ For example, in *The Instruction for King Merikare* (*ANET*, pp. 414-18), although the second person of address implies first-person narration, the primary narrator, King Merikare's father, never manages to merge as a distinct character from this form. The closest to this is the rather disconnected proclamation, "But as I live! I am while I am!... I made the Northland smite them [the bowmen], I captured their inhabitants..." (lines 94-95, p. 416); but from this experience no reflection emerges. Herein lies the difference: it is his seemingly unique reference to experience which makes Qoheleth's narration unique among ANE texts. The base which the autobiographical form creates for Qoheleth is, in this respect, fully exploited. Again, while a literary dependence can only be speculated among ancient texts, it is instructive to point out that Qoheleth's choice of narration does not appear to be random (or without serious import), but rather a choice which, as Isaksson remarks, "perfectly fits his pretension to be a king of mighty deeds, great wisdom, and profound experiences" (*Studies in the Language of Qoheleth*, p. 49). Given the effects it engenders, through that chosen form Qoheleth's narrated experience is made difficult to forget.

⁶⁰ G. Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography", in J. Olney (ed.), *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 30. W.P. Brown has, separately from myself, formulated part of this

Qoheleth reflects and juxtaposes the life he narrates to us against the transience and absurdity that he has observed and knows to be real. A generation comes and another goes, the earth will remain and Qoheleth has ensured his place under the sun. Ironically, he has been remembered and will doubtless continue to be.

This autobiographical integrity establishes a fixed point of reference for the reader; the ground for Qoheleth's consciousness. Without a constant "I", Qoheleth's narration would lack the same cohesive power which enables us to speak of Qoheleth as a unified, although multifaceted, persona.⁶¹ "How extraordinary it is", Robert Elliott remarks, "that 'I' somehow encompasses in a coherent way the thousand and one selves that constitute a 'Self,' and that the person whom one loves and the person one loathes also say 'I'."⁶² Thanks to the "I", Qoheleth's thousand and one selves speak with a wonderfully coherent voice.

Some important rhetorical effects generated by Qoheleth's first-person narration are worth pointing out. For example, imagine a key text (7.29) with the more "distant" narrative posture of a covert narrator:

First person:

See, this alone I have found: that God made humanity upright, but they have sought many devices.

Covert:

God made humanity upright, but they have sought many devices.

conclusion in arguing that Qoheleth immortalizes himself through the autobiographical form ("Character Reconstructed: Ecclesiastes", in *idem*, *Character in Crisis* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming]).

⁶¹ So Fox as well, who appropriately calls this autobiographical presence Qoheleth's "organizing consciousness" (*Qohelet*, p. 159). He expands further: "The pervasiveness of the teacher's consciousness in the book of Qohelet is the main source of its cohesiveness" (p. 160). Brown makes the same point, seeing literary cohesion emerging from the "confessional or self-referential style" ("Character Reconstructed: Ecclesiastes", forthcoming). Compare Crenshaw's comment: "Repeated use of the personal pronoun ['I']... thrusts the ego of the speaker into prominence, leaving no doubt about his investment in what is being reported" (*Ecclesiastes* [London: SCM Press, 1988], p. 28).

⁶² *The Literary Persona* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 30.

While the latter has the quality of a **משל** in isolation (at the most being connected thematically with other **משלים**), the former is bound unequivocally to Qoheleth's character as a narrator. The "I" here is what marks this passage and makes it memorable as Qoheleth's own observation.

Similarly, many statements as they stand would be virtually impossible without the first-person stance. Take, for example, 3.10-11:

I have observed the business that God has given human beings to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Furthermore, God has put eternity in their hearts so that humanity cannot discover the activity that God has done from beginning to end.

Unless one placed, "Qoheleth observed that..." at 3.10a, how would the sentiment of verse 10 otherwise be narrated (Qoheleth's own distinctive words)? as/
The whole aspect of observation would have to be extracted, leaving the platitude of 3.11 to stand on its own. This would, by depersonalizing the narration, leave us with a completely different timbre, and undermine the otherwise clearly narrative procedure of discovery at hand. We would hear not the disillusioned observer speaking in fiery and critically unsure tones, but more likely the disembodied and sure voice of the wisdom tradition, shaped inevitably from the context of a body of maxims instead of through the "I" of a fascinating thinker.

The form that first-person narration takes in English translations of Ecclesiastes does not reflect very well the more entrenched Hebrew form. The subject in English usually stands alone as an "I",⁶³ whereas in Hebrew it is conveyed in a host of first-person singular verb forms and suffixes *as well as* the independent pronoun. In the case of Ecclesiastes, the "I" of English translation usually represents the Hebrew first-person verb form. In Hebrew sometimes the verb is accompanied by the pronoun, but the function of the pronoun is often ambiguous. It may emphasize the sentence it occurs in or, more strictly, the

⁶³ Of course, very often the "I" is implied, as in imperative statements.

speaking subject. The self-referential function of Qoheleth's language, then, is often subtle. I will here briefly review the presence of the Hebrew autobiographical form and discuss some of its potential interpretive consequences for reading.

The syntactical placement of the twenty-nine occurrences of **אני** can be broken down as follows:

- A) immediately after a first-person singular preterite⁶⁴ (21×)⁶⁵
- B) immediately before a verbal adjective (2×: 2.18; 4.8)
- C) immediately after a singular participle (2×: 7.26; 8.12)
- D) immediately after an infinitive (1×: 1.16)
- E) predicating a nomen (1×: 1.12)⁶⁶
- F) immediately before a noun construct (1×: 8.2)
- G) immediately before a first-person singular imperfect (1×: 2.15)

Most of these occurrences cannot be properly represented in English and all the major translations duly ignore them. Every occurrence in A should be considered pleonastic to convey the subject. That is, the presence of the first-person verbs in these examples render **אני** grammatically unnecessary. Categories D and G seem pleonastic as well.⁶⁷ Category F is, at the least, uncertain.⁶⁸ Categories B, C and E may be considered to be most like the English "I" in translation:

- B 2.18: **כל-עמלי שאני עמל** (all of my toil at which *I* toiled...)
- 4.8: **ולמי אני עמל** (yet for whom am *I* toiling...?)
- C 7.26: **ומוצא אני מר ממות** (*I* found more bitter than death...)

⁶⁴ By preterite I mean both the perfect, imperfect (non-conversive) and vav-conversive forms which have a past simple sense. The translation of some of these is a contentious issue (see Isaksson, *Studies in the Language of Qoheleth*, pp. 23-38). However, it is only the presence of the autobiographical form I am here concerned with and not the aspect of its narratorial level.

⁶⁵ 1.16; 2.1, 11, 12, 13, 14 [with **גם**], 15 [2×], 18, 20, 24; 3.17, 18; 4.1, 2, 4, 7; 5.18; 7.25; 8.15; 9.16.

⁶⁶ See above, n. 35.

⁶⁷ At 1.16 (D) **אני**, although syntactically different to category A, is rendered pleonastic by the preceding **הנה הנדלתי**. At 2.15 (G) **אני** emphasizes the reflexive nature of the **מקרה** which will also befall Qoheleth (**יקרני**). This occurrence is, again, pleonastic to English translation.

⁶⁸ The **אני** of **אני פי מלך** (8.2) seems to have no purpose, and, not being represented in any of the ancient translations (although emendation theories abound) is likely a scribal error.

8.12: **כי גם יודע אני אשר** (yet *I* also know that...)⁶⁹
 E 1.12: **אני קהלתי הייתי** (*I* am Qoheleth. I was...)

In these categories **אני** is wholly necessary to convey the subject.

It is not clear in the other categories, although they are pleonastic, where the emphasis of **אני** lies. Usually in classical Hebrew the personal pronoun is placed before the verb for the sake of emphasizing the subject. But such verses as 1.16, where **אני** has two unusual placements, show a use of the pronoun largely peculiar to Qoheleth's style. Does **אני** in such instances emphasize something more than the speaking subject? Does it simply emphasize the presence of the speaker? Isaksson's detailed review of all occurrences of **אני** in Ecclesiastes shows convincingly that although the pronouns may be pleonastic in conveying the subject, they are "added in instances of greater importance, where the narrative halts for a moment to make a conclusion or to introduce a new thought".⁷⁰ In support of this, **אני** must have had a unique rhetorical effect on Hebrew readers when read aloud, stylistically marking instances of importance. There is another effect, however, which English translations necessarily fail to emulate.

The culminative effect of the sheer abundance of first-person reference, especially in chs. 1–2, is visually remarkable. The explicit self-referential quality of Qoheleth's language is visually depicted in a series of suffixed *yods* which, for its density, is unprecedented in the Hebrew Bible. Take, for example, the ratio of suffixed *yod* words that are self-referential in the following sentences:

⁶⁹ Without the pronoun in both of these occurrences little sense can be made of the participles in determining the subject. The LXX's modification in both cases of the participle to a first-person form (7.26 [7.27], εὐρησάω ἑγώ; 8.12, γινώσσω ἑγώ) bears witness to the need for clarity here.

⁷⁰ *Studies in the Language of Qoheleth*, p. 171; and cf. pp. 166–71. Schoors appears to follow Isaksson on this point (*The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words: A Study of the Language of Qoheleth* [OLA, 41; Leuven: Peeters, 1992], §1.2.1). Isaksson also points out that the syntactically similar placement of **אני** in Cant. 5.5, 6 signifies an emotional climax (p. 166).

- A) 1.16: 8 out of 22 words
- B) 2.4: 6 out of 8 words
- D) 2.11a: 5 out of 9 words
- E) 2.9: 5 out of 10 words

The assonance and determining rhythm of the most impressive of these examples (2.4) is not only clear to the ear, but to the eye as well:

הגדלתי מעשי בניתי לי בתים נשעתי לי כרמים

This may support Isaksson's thesis on another level. While the visual element may not emphasize the speaking subject per se, it does highlight the intensity of that subject's experience by drawing attention to the grammar by which it is referred to. This partly reflects the duality that Qoheleth creates in the process of reflection. In reflection the narrating speaking subject becomes separated from the earlier experiencing subject that is being reflected upon. From this disjunction arises the significance (the comprehension) of that experience.⁷¹ The Hebrew first-person form, then, works to intensify the presence and significance of Qoheleth's experience in ways that English cannot hope to convey in translation.

In sum, first-person narration in *Ecclesiastes* is conveyed mostly through first-person singular verb forms, followed in frequency by **אני** (to the exclusion of **אנכי**), although this is often pleonastic to conveying the speaking subject. Together with first-person pronominal suffixes these all explicitly convey first-person narration. To visually demonstrate this remarkable presence of the first person, the following graph reflects each of the above forms I have mentioned (all first-person singular verb forms, pronouns and suffixes).⁷²

⁷¹ I explore this phenomenon of reflection in detail at Chapter 8.4.

⁷² In the graph I have only omitted the **אני** of 8.2 (see n. 68, above). I am assuming that the verses are of roughly equal length—at least enough so for my purposes here. The percentage of occurrences shown on the vertical axis is calculated by dividing the number of verses containing first-person narration by the number of verses in that chapter. Isaksson offers a similar graph (*Studies in the Language of Qoheleth*, pp. 43–44) but it differs from this one in that only verbal first-person instances are represented and not pronouns and suffixes. My thanks to Sonya J. Christianson for helping to produce the graph.

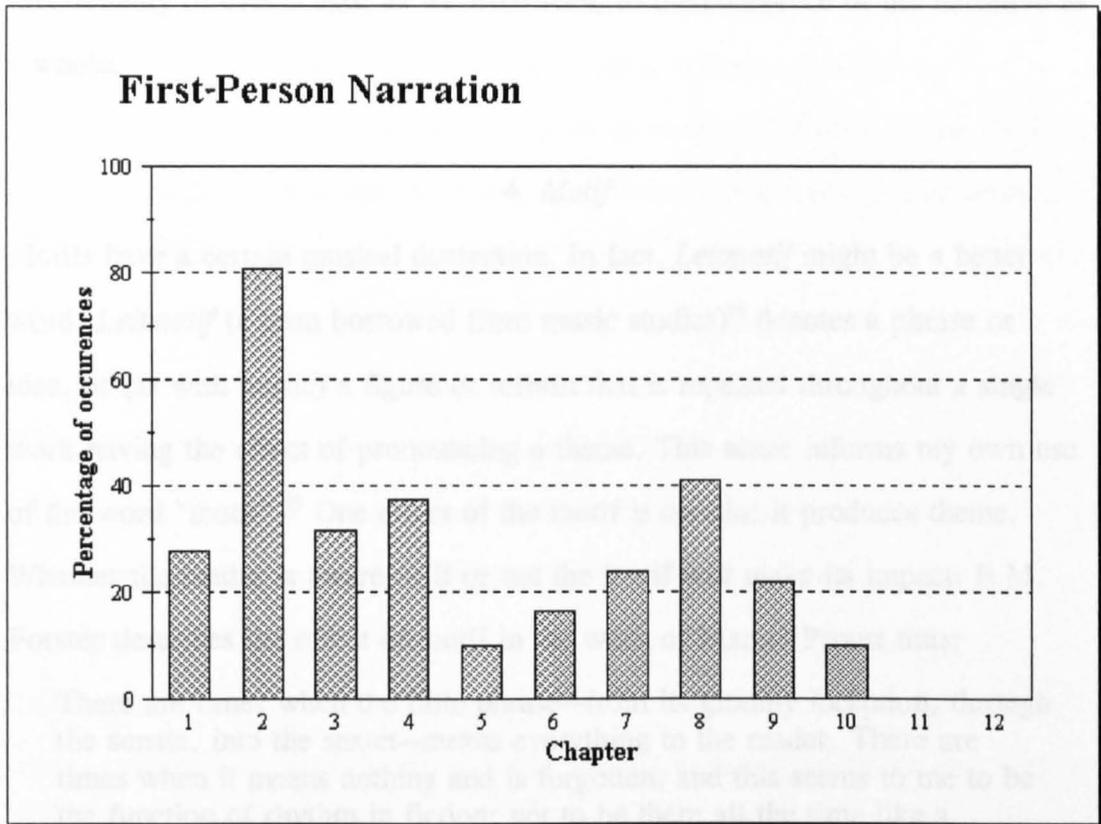


figure 2.

What is most important about the first-person narrative stance, and what this graph helps to demonstrate, is that it remains formally⁷³ unchanged from 1.12 to the frame narrator's appearance at 12.8, and therefore dominates the body of the book. That stance, which makes Ecclesiastes so unique, constitutes the observational quality of Qoheleth's narration, and is the anchor of all of his experience. Consequently, it is likewise the anchor of his proleptic quest and the sense of mystery that it helps to create. It is integral, therefore, to the

⁷³ I say "formally" because there remains to be considered the implied first-person stance in the use of the second person of address; notably present in chs. 11–12. In fact, given this element, nowhere except in the frame narrator's text is Qoheleth's narrative stance broken. For more on this rather separate strategy of second-person narration see Chapter 9.5.

functionality of events and, as we have seen, to the coherence of the narrative as a whole.

4. *Motif*

Motifs have a certain musical distinction. In fact, *Leitmotif* might be a better word. *Leitmotif* (a term borrowed from music studies)⁷⁴ denotes a phrase or idea, or (as with music) a figure or refrain that is repeated throughout a single work having the effect of pronouncing a theme. This sense informs my own use of the word "motif".⁷⁵ One effect of the motif is certain: it produces theme.

Whether the reader is aware of it or not the motif will make its impact. E.M.

Forster describes the effect of motif in the work of Marcel Proust thus:

There are times when the little phrase—from its gloomy inception, through the sonata, into the sextet—means everything to the reader. There are times when it means nothing and is forgotten, and this seems to me to be the function of rhythm in fiction; not to be there all the time like a pattern, but by its lovely waxing and waning to fill us with surprise and freshness and hope.⁷⁶

As Forster suggests, such "rhythm" (although at times forgotten) forms a coherent theme or idea that through reading develops into a single fact of its own.

The real difficulty lies in determining just what constitutes a motif. Must a

⁷⁴ So Chris Baldick (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990], p. 121): "[*Leitmotif*] was first used to describe the repeated musical themes or phrases that Wagner linked with particular characters and ideas in his operatic works". Even in music studies the narrative notion is discernible.

⁷⁵ One thing motif should not be confused with is frequency. Frequency is the repetition of events (and only events) at the story level and their relation to the time of the discourse or diegesis. This is the difference between story time and real time which is discerned in such devices as the telescoping or expansion of events (see Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, chapter 3; Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, pp. 78-79). Motif, however, applies to words or phrases that recall previously mentioned words or phrases by lexical or ideological semblance of some kind. Unlike motifs, events can be phrased in completely different terms and still constitute frequency.

⁷⁶ *Aspects of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962 [1927]), p. 168.

phrase have a certain percentage of lexical semblance to the phrase it is purported to resemble in some way? And once the location of the semblances (or "repetitions") is decided, how many of them must occur before one can call their sum a "motif"? For example, should 3.15a ("What was already is, and what is already was") be considered a reiteration of (or part of a motif with) 1.9a ("What was is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done")? Can one say of 1.9a that the quality of the existence of things is repetitious (or recurring)? I think so, particularly since the equivocation of "what was" (שָׁהָיָה) with "what will be" (הָיָא שִׁיהִיָה) places the scope of the statement in all existence at all times. And can one say of 3.15a that the quality of the existence of things is repetitious (or recurring)? Yes, although it is important to note that there is a development at hand. It is not only existence but activity at all times that is repetitious (or recurring). That recurrence of theme develops into an idea that is ascribable to the speaker (or one might prefer to say, "work"): at all times the nature of events and happenstance is recurring. There is lexical semblance and ideological development (perhaps there is a significance in Qoheleth's expansion to the recurrence of activity?), and the subjectivity of the decision to call this a motif is clear. It is an ascription of meaning to the speaker. Motifs, unlike, for example, the analysis of the presence of the first person, are a purely subjective matter.

Even when we decide to call something a motif, its interpretation is problematic. The reader must, it seems, be aware of the haunting possibility that its significance runs only surface-deep. A comparison to psychoanalysis may help illuminate this problem. The analyst is often faced with the repetition of what Donald Spence calls the "recursive operator"; that is, a recurring image or idea communicated by the patient which *may* be polymorphous, the discovery and identification of which leads to the eradication of the problem that motivates it (e.g., a repeated image of anger towards someone which is motivated by the fear

of rejection). The temptation is great, argues Spence, to see in every recurrence of a given image or idea the presence of a recursive operator. Because psychoanalysis still operates in a largely Freudian context in which all such recurring phenomena must have a reasonable explanation, the possibility that there is no such explanation is unacceptable:

[This problem] was never confronted during the Freudian age because of the belief that the answer could always be found, buried beneath layers of surface distortions... To begin to admit that...the surface of the world is frequently devoid of meaning is to come face to face with a terrible possibility...and the terror behind this challenge accounts for many of the more recent efforts to salvage the [Freudian theory of dreams].⁷⁷

The answer to this problem, for Spence, lies in determining when a recurrence is worth pursuing. It is to be more willing to accept the terror of the unknown. The same may be said of the interpretation of motifs. The interpretation must be grounded in both a careful reading of the whole and a sensitivity to the fact that ignorance of the significance of recurrence, and of events in general, is always a disturbing possibility, an idea which finds sympathy with Qoheleth's own thought (cf. 3.11; 7.14; 8.17).

With such reflections in mind I will survey the presence of three of the more prominent developments that one might call "motifs" in *Ecclesiastes* based solely on their lexical and ideological semblance. I have chosen the simplest examples I could find: (1) All that is absurd; (2) All that is under the sun; (3) All that is a pursuit of wind. Although each motif may be disputed to some extent, these lines proffer an overview in a manner which is, again, accurate enough for the purpose at hand.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ "Narrative Recursion", in S. Rimmon-Kenan (ed.), *Discourse in Psychoanalysis and Literature* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 206.

⁷⁸ The lines represent the entire text and each vertical mark represents the point in the text at which that motif appears. There are 222 verses in *Ecclesiastes*. The length of each line is 111 mm. This makes for a ratio of 1 verse to 0.5 mm; 2 verses to 1 mm. Of course, there are other motifs (of observation, toil, profit etc.) and this same method might be useful to survey them.

Pattern of the Distribution of Motifs

1. All that is absurd (הבל):⁷⁹



2. All that is under the sun (or the heavens):⁸⁰



3. All that is a pursuit of wind:⁸¹



figure 3.

The placing of motif partly determines its interpretive effectiveness. Looking at the whole, at times there seems to be a methodological certainty (the first 50% of lines 1 and 2 respectively). At other times its location seems random (line 3), and merely brings again something darkly to the mind that found its inception in a forgotten nook, having the effect of mere tedium (if there is such a thing). Or perhaps the particular placement of a motif serves to frame, or "heighten" a certain passage.⁸² Whatever effect each motif engenders, and however we are to interpret its significance, motifs are, collectively, a stylistic feature of Ecclesiastes.

⁷⁹ 1.2, 14; 2.1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3.19; 4.4, 7, 8, 16; 5.10; 6.2, 9; 7.6; 8.10, 14; 9.1; 11.8; 12.8.

⁸⁰ 1.3, 9, 13, 14; 2.3, 11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22; 3.1, 16; 4.1, 3, 7, 15; 5.13, 18; 6.1, 12; 8.9, 15, 17; 9.3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 10.5. As I pointed out above (n. 37), there is a synonymy between "under the heavens" and "under the sun" which suggests a lexical semblance.

⁸¹ 1.14, 17; 2.11, 17, 26; 4.4, 6, 16; 6.9.

⁸² So Wright ("The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited", pp. 43-45), who sees a numerical significance and key to structure in the placement of the הבל judgments (he ambiguously uses the term *Leitmotiv*, p. 41). Note Mary Ann Caws's example taken from Virginia Woolf, in *Reading Frames in Modern Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 24-25.

5. *The Structure of Narrative Discourse*

Since both of the narrators introduced in 1.1-2 go on to recount their own events, the consequent story-lines are, in at least one sense, necessarily separate. That is, when the frame narrator speaks at 1.1-2, the event of speaking is functional to the larger sequence of events; not so much to events in Qoheleth's story, but to those in his own: "The words of Qoheleth, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. 'Absurdity of absurdities', said Qoheleth, 'Absurdity of absurdities; everything is absurd.'" There are two implied events present here. The first (1.1) is that of the frame narrator presenting the words of Qoheleth. The second (1.2—located in Qoheleth's story as well) is the action of Qoheleth speaking. The events of speech are functionally related to the frame narrator's epilogue in which the reader learns who the addressee is (12.12a; his son/student) and is informed (albeit inaccurately; see Chapters 5.2, 9.3) as to the success of Qoheleth's quest (12.9-10). Like the functionality operative in Qoheleth's plot announcement, this propels the frame narrator's story forward and creates the possibility for change and choice, as well as the raising of narrative questions.

In the narrative set-up of *Ecclesiastes*, then, who is actually doing the talking? There is nothing after 1.2 that instructs the reader to forget that the frame narrator is doing so. We are subtly reminded of this structure at 7.27, where he gently intrudes: "See, this is what I have found, *said Qoheleth*,⁸³ adding one to one to find the sum." The reader is here reminded that it is still the frame narrator who is telling the story. Even the introductory passage of 1.3-11 (although its narrative form is, on the surface, impersonal) can only be the words

⁸³ We should be in no doubt that this is the frame narrator's text. As Fox argues, the phrase is not an editorial insertion apart from the frame narrative since the grammar is too smoothly constructed for a later insertion to be plausible, nor is it a reference of Qoheleth's to himself in the third person: "Even if we allow the third-person in 1:2 as a self-introduction [which Fox does not], such a switch of voice would be quite useless at 7:27 and 12:8" ("Frame-narrative", p. 84; and see pp. 85-87).

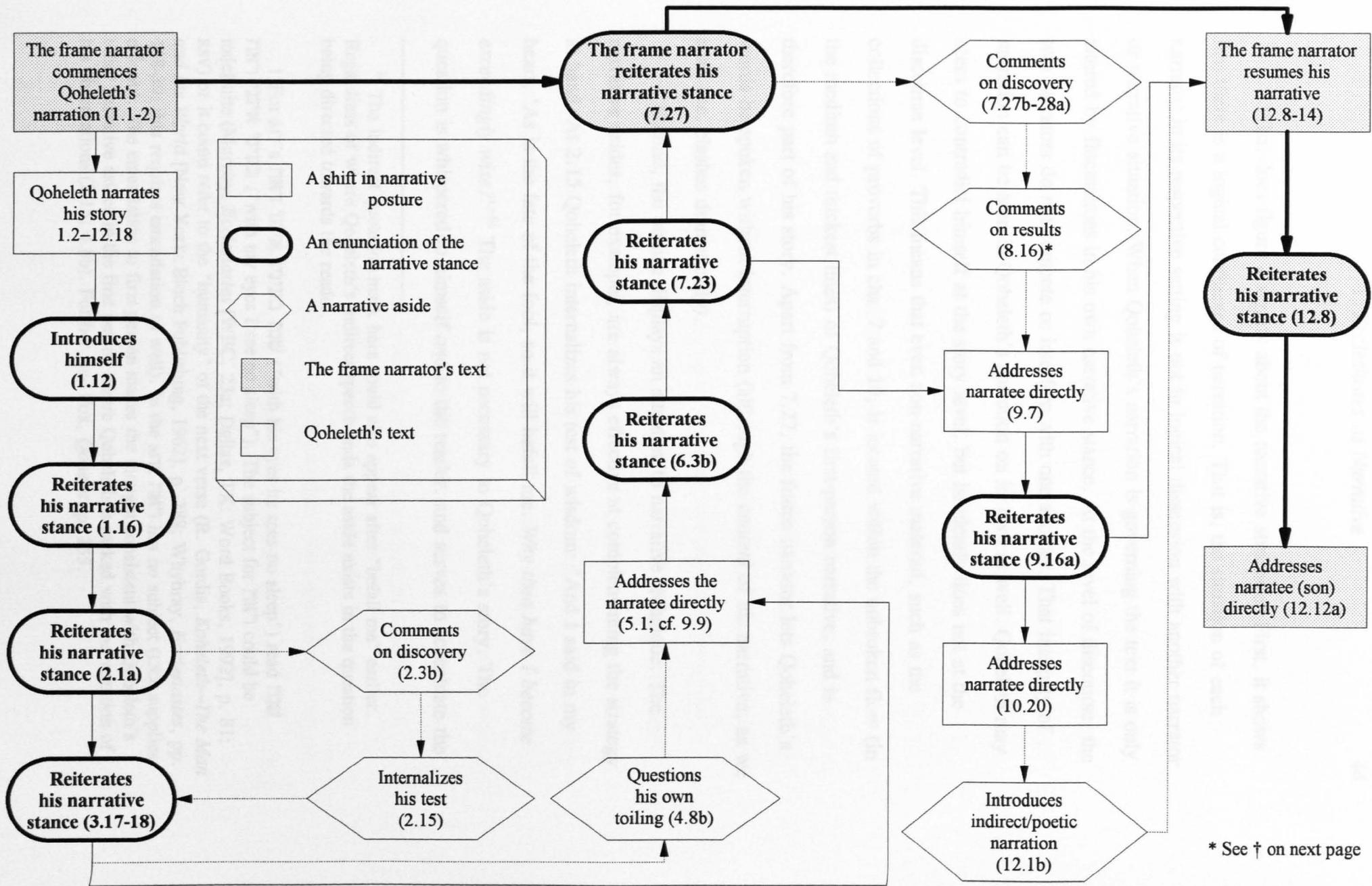
of Qoheleth which were just introduced. And with the commencement of the first-person narrative of Qoheleth at 1.12 (although implicitly begun at 1.3 with a rhetorical question), the reader will inevitably forget (with the possible exception of 7.27) that these are reported words, and will assume that they are being directly narrated by Qoheleth throughout the rest of the book; until, that is, the epilogue where the frame narrator appears again (12.8-14).⁸⁴

It might be relatively simple to perceive who is speaking, but is there logical coherence in the narrative discourse? That is, is there any confliction of narrative stance or voice at any point? Also, how and where is the strength of the narrative line enforced to highlight the primacy of one speaker over the other, or to make the presence of the given narrator felt? The following outline of the syntactical forms which indicate person and voice, the flow of narration and the stance of the narrators—an overview of what is happening on the level of narrative discourse—will help to guide an attempt to answer such questions. It is based on the narrative form, not content, of the material; the discourse, not story.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ On this effect of diegetic levels, see Chapter 2.3, 4.

⁸⁵ The thickness of the lines represents the relative emphasis of the narrative flow—the medium and thickest widths are unbroken narration. There are other narrative asides besides those represented (e.g., the mini-parables in chs. 4 and 9) but the asides here are those of specific narrative acts on the level of discourse.

figure 4.



What does figure 4 signify about the narrative structure? First, it shows that there is a logical confluence of narration. That is, the situation of each narrator in its respective setting is not in logical dissension with another narrator or narrative situation. When Qoheleth's narration is governing the text it is only altered by fluctuations in his own narrative stance. At the level of discourse, the two narrators do not compete or interfere with one another. That integrity of narration can be seen in Qoheleth's narration on its own as well. Qoheleth may seem to contradict himself at the story level, but he clearly does not at the discourse level. This means that even non-narrative material, such as the collections of proverbs in chs. 7 and 10, is located within the unbroken flow (in the medium and thickest lines) of Qoheleth's first-person narrative, and is therefore part of his story. Apart from 7.27, the frame narrator lets Qoheleth's words be spoken without interruption (although the *content* of his narrative, as we shall see, clashes dramatically).

Second, the outline displays an attention to narrative technique. The narrative asides, for example, are always effective at complementing the strategy at hand. At 2.15 Qoheleth internalizes his test of wisdom: "And I said in my heart, 'As is the fate of the fool, so it will befall me. *Why then have I become exceedingly wise?*'"⁸⁶ The aside is not necessary to Qoheleth's story. The question is whispered to himself *and* to the reader, and serves to accentuate the

⁸⁶ The indirect quotation mark here could also appear after "befall me" earlier. Regardless of where Qoheleth's indirect speech ends the aside exists in the question being directed towards the reader.

† For MT's *שנה* *בעיני ראה* ("with his eyes he sees no sleep") read *שנה* *בעיני אינני ראה* ("with my eyes I see no sleep"). The subject for *ראה* could be indefinite (Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* [WBC, 23a; Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1992], p. 81; RSV) or it could refer to the "humanity" of the next verse (R. Gordis, *Koheleth—The Man and his World* [New York: Bloch Publishing, 1962], p. 288; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 138-39; this requires emendation as well). In the MT, *ראה* has no subject (LXX supplies *αὐτοῦ*). The emendation to first person makes the thought consistent with Qoheleth's other narrative asides in the first person where Qoheleth is racked with the vexation of his observations (2.15; 4.8b). Further, see Fox, *Qohelet*, p. 255.

absurdity of his becoming wise while failing truly to understand why (cf. 1.18; 2.14, 16; 6.8; see Chapter 9.4).

Third, the outline shows that Qoheleth is active as a narrating character. The frame narrator's narrative apparatus (i.e. Qoheleth) is by no means static, but a dynamic character who is actively communicating with effective narrative strategies. The result of this narrating activity is that Qoheleth is able to emerge as a distinct character. The persona of Qoheleth is never lost in the often rhetorically powerful material it narrates.

The question posed at the beginning of this section, "Is Ecclesiastes a narrative text?", may now be resumed. Certainly by Prince's definition ("the representation of real or fictive events or situations in a time sequence") the answer is yes. But this section has gone beyond this definition by sketching other indicators common to narratives. While motif, for example, is perhaps the most dubious of the narrative indicators I have suggested, the presence of motifs is something one might expect from a form of highly stylized literature. While it does not follow that all stylized literature is narrative, narrative literature is, by necessity, highly stylized. That is, it makes ample use of the types of narrative elements that I have so far reviewed (events, plot etc.). Indeed, it may be that the mere presence of a frame narrative in Ecclesiastes is sufficient to qualify it as a narrative text, yet there is much more for the reader in store. There are more narrative strategies to be explored ahead. The only point I wish to emphasize at this juncture, however, is that the aspects of the text that I have chosen to survey so far suggest that Ecclesiastes can be viewed with confidence as a narrative text for the purpose of analysis.

Chapter 2

PUTTING THE FRAME IN PLACE

Look here, upon this picture, and on this.

—Shakespeare (*Hamlet*, act 3 sc. 4, 1.53)

1. *The Frame "Proper"*

"To frame", says Mary Ann Caws, "is to privilege what is contained within the borders of the picture."¹ It is to provide an interpretive boundary. It is to limit the view of the reader or observer in order to demarcate the field of interpretation. It does not set limits on interpretation itself, but rather on the canon in which the interpreter functions and has his or her frame of reference. In fact, the frame can raise new questions by virtue of its relationship to the material it frames.

Of course, we borrow the rhetoric of the "frame" from physical frames that surround paintings. The interpretive potential of that physical type of frame is itself extensive. It is likely that frames began as a practical necessity to enable better handling of paintings. Some even provided lids to protect the picture.² Even early on, however, there was an eye towards the aesthetic. The French painter Poussin (1594–1665) made a plea to the owners of his works that they might, when they had received their painting, "ornament it with a little section of cornice, because it needs that in order for the eye's gaze, passing over all its parts, to be held and not dispersed outside".³ The next phase was to take steps,

¹ *Reading Frames in Modern Fiction*, p. 21.

² N. Penny, "Back to the Wall", *London Review of Books* 17/18 (21 September 1995), p. 12. Penny's article is partly a review of *In Perfect Harmony: Picture and Frame 1850–1920* (ed. E. Mengden; Reaktion, 1995).

³ As cited from Louis Marin's *Détruire la peinture* in Caws, *Reading Frames in Modern Fiction*, p. 13.

via the frame, to integrate the picture with its respective setting. By the seventeenth century, however, frames became so overpowering that they brought into question the integrity of their relationship to the picture. Increasingly, frames became an art form in themselves and "it could not be plausibly argued that...[some] styles of frame evolved in response to the needs of particular styles of painting".⁴ Some modern artists have knowingly used frames as commentaries either on the painting itself or on some immediate social context. Pissaro was apparently one of the first to complement his painting by using the appropriate coloured frame and Picasso enjoyed using old Spanish frames for an ironic effect.⁵

Some questions of relationships can be raised by considering the pictorial frame. Who is usually responsible for framing the painting? Some artists have had the luxury of choice. Some have even found it a form of rebellion to be "against routine exhibition mouldings, against the opulence of dealers' frames, against mass-production, even against gilding".⁶ A choice of frame could be tantamount to resisting the pressure of dealers to conform. Indeed, artists unable to afford materials for painting, yet alone frames, may have had no choice but to accept frames that were not to their liking. One could imagine situations where those who provided frames were attempting to give the paintings themselves as smooth and orthodox an inception into the gallery/public as possible. There is opportunity in this four-way relationship (painting/painter, frame/framer) for condescension and manipulation. Frames sometimes have such an overpowering, even garish effect (as those of the Dutch masters) that they are awarded the "last

⁴ Penny, "Back to the Wall", p. 12. Making analogy to the overpowering frames imposed on the Dutch masters, Penny humorously suggests that if "the prim Dutch matron entered an opulent Parisian hôtel she was divested of her dark suit and dressed for the ball" (p. 11).

⁵ Both examples cited in Penny, "Back to the Wall", p. 13.

⁶ Penny, "Back to the Wall", p. 12.

say" in what impression the observer decides to carry away.

Film provides another physical example of framing. In the technical construction of a film, the syntax of the filming frame (the position of the subject[s] in the frame) is of considerable importance. As James Monaco notes, "The relationship between the movement within the frame and movement of the camera is one of the more sophisticated codes, and specifically cinematic."⁷ The physical act of framing a scene (composing what is *in* the film frame) merits our attention since its rhetorical effect is potentially extensive. Questions arise, such as "Does the subject[s] stay in it?" or "Is it 'free' to leave it? Why?" Who is responsible for the syntax of the frame? The actors? The ("real") director?

As with models of interpretation, there are many types of framing that occur in the arts. Let me take an example from modern fiction: John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. In it, George frames his mentally ill companion, Lennie, by constantly speaking on his account and instilling a fear that causes Lennie to allow him to control his relation to the world (not always fairly, and usually for monetary motivation, which directs readerly sympathy to Lennie).

From the beginning the two characters are cast in opposition: George having assuring, "sharp, strong features", Lennie "his opposite...dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws".⁸ George is quite obviously set up as Lennie's "representative" in every form of social communication. When the reader, sympathetically aligned to Lennie's perspective, meets the outside world for the first time (in the form of the two men acquiring a job), the framing is clear:

The boss licked his pencil. "What's your name?"

⁷ He further states that "The masters of the Hollywood style of the thirties and forties tried never to allow the subject to leave the frame (it was considered daring even if the subject did not occupy the center of the 1.33 frame)" (*How to Read a Film* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981], pp. 151-52; further, see pp. 152-54).

⁸ J. Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men* (London: Heinemann, 1966 [1937]), p. 3.

"George Milton."

"And what's yours?"

George said: "His name's Lennie Small."

The names were entered in the book...

The boss pointed a playful finger at Lennie. "He ain't much of a talker, is he?"

"No, he ain't, but he's sure a hell of a good worker. Strong as a bull."⁹

The reader learns that the success of their gaining (and in particular, keeping) the job rests on George's skill (and Lennie's relative cooperation) in framing. This becomes a source of tension throughout the whole book—the tension between what the reader (via the narrator's access to thoughts etc.) knows of Lennie and George, and how the "outside world" will perceive George's presentation of that shared knowledge. By thus "normalizing" Lennie, his character is "shown" to the outside world (outside, that is, of the two companions). This is potentially limiting, but the scope of those limitations depends, in this case, on the integrity of the one framing: George. It is by this same framing that Lennie's prospective relationships are left open, and George's integrity made known. By fashioning boundaries, then, this framing creates many possibilities. And this is the importance of any type of framing: interpretive possibilities.

2. *Frame Narratives*

The "list" of narrative framing techniques is potentially inexhaustible.¹⁰ A frame *narrative*, however, is simply a more formally apparent type of framing than some of the examples I have been describing. It is a text in which an external narrator narrates an inner story at its beginning and end, thereby framing

⁹ *Of Mice and Men*, pp. 32-33.

¹⁰ For example, "...delays and pauses to surround, with temporal and spatial borders, the central focused part, architectural surrounds to further mark them, repetitions and drastic contrasts to call attention either to the borders or to the dramatic quality of the scene pictured in them, an included picture to develop by non-verbal means the significance of the moral or psychological issues implied in the motifs thrown in relief... [etc. etc.]" (Caws, *Reading Frames in Modern Fiction*, p. 262).

(highlighting, privileging, delimiting etc.) the story that it narrates.

As with the physical relationship of pictorial frames and paintings, the relationship of the outer and inner stories varies immensely and provides opportunity for interpretive control in the frame narrative. The outer frame story can often dominate the entire text, in which case the less important inner story serves as a mere excuse for the outer, providing "the material on which that [outer] plot feeds".¹¹ Or, as with *Ecclesiastes*, the inner story dominates, allowing the outer story to simply highlight (usually to great effect) the inner. Shortness of length or a lack of complex events in the outer framing story does not necessarily diminish the frame's impact, and "[n]o matter how minimal or extensive the frame story may be...it forms a narrative in its own right".¹² It is for this reason that in *Ecclesiastes* the frame narrator's brief introduction at 1.1-2 combines effectively with the epilogue to form, despite its brevity, a frame narrative which carries with it all the interpretive possibilities I have so far discussed.

It is widely recognized that granting the inner story a validation it could in no other way obtain is the most "common" effect of framing.¹³ That is, because a character is presented in the "mouth" of another, usually more reliable

¹¹ L. Dittmar, "Fashioning and Re-fashioning: Framing Narratives in the Novel and Film", *Mosaic* 16/1-2, p. 196. The detective novel is a good example of this type. In it, the outer story in which the detective solves a crime frames the events that have led to the circumstances concurrent with the present narrating stance. Those events "feed" the unfolding situation in which the detective works, thereby having the sole function of creating the drama necessary to demonstrate the detective's "brilliance".

¹² Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, p. 255.

¹³ See Caws, *Reading Frames in Modern Fiction*, pp. 9-26; Fox, "Frame-narrative", pp. 94-96, 100-106; Dittmar, "Fashioning and Re-fashioning"; J.F. Summerfield, "Framing Narratives", in T. Newkirk (ed.), *Only Connect: Uniting Reading and Writing* (Upper Montclair: Boynton/Cook, 1986), pp. 227-40; B. Romberg, *Studies in the Narrative Technique of the First-Person Novel* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1962), esp. pp. 63-81.

character (i.e. an editor,¹⁴ fictional author, person of higher social status etc.), readers are more likely to suspend their disbelief and accept the "fictional quality" of the work's premises.¹⁵ Although the central "framed" character may be difficult to accept on its own terms, with the respect tended by the frame narrator, the reader may be enabled to hold that character in higher regard via the frame.

Michael Fox has adeptly pointed out this effect in Ecclesiastes. He argues that the framing "allows the author to maintain both a certain community of thought and feeling with the persona [of Qoheleth] as well as a certain distance".¹⁶ Hence the frame narrator is there as counsel to the reader to take Qoheleth seriously. In other words, readers are more willing to believe this kind of presentation, as opposed to "These are stories by..."¹⁷ The real author thereby hands over (via the introduction and epilogue) the actual presentation to the frame narrator. The distance created may be compared to hearing Qoheleth's tale told around the proverbial campfire, invariably shifting one's frame of reference to story-mode, thereby entering the narrative world of the teller. Through the frame narrator, then, an even greater illusion of reality (one distinct from a historical reality) is created,¹⁸ with one foot in the camp of the real author and the other in Qoheleth's, each standing between "reality and fiction".¹⁹

¹⁴ For example, the occasional appearances of Rousseau as "editor" in his *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*... lend a "guarantee of the editor's trust-worthiness and credibility" and "an illusion of reality to the material presented by the editor" (Romberg, *Studies in the Narrative Technique*, p. 77).

¹⁵ This is not to claim that fictional works have any less a claim than non-fictional works on the "real world". It is not my concern to touch on this matter here. Suffice to say that I think the opposite is usually the case.

¹⁶ Fox, "Frame-narrative", p. 95; cf. also pp. 96, 101. In the end he opts more for the distancing effect than that of a "community of thought".

¹⁷ Fox, "Frame-narrative", p. 96.

¹⁸ That is, the force of the illusion strengthens the reality of Qoheleth as a character to the reader, and not necessarily the reality of a historical Qoheleth *who lived*.

¹⁹ So Romberg, discussing frame narratives in general (*Studies in the Narrative Technique*, p. 68). A more modern example of a frame narrative (again given by Romberg, pp. 69-70, *passim*, and used by Fox, "Frame-narrative", pp. 100, 104) which

In creating an illusion of authenticity the frame set-up also creates a narrative setting in which to imagine the transmission of Qoheleth's words. Fox describes this setting as follows:

...the epic situation of the third-person voice in the epilogue and elsewhere is that of a man who is looking back and telling his son the story of the ancient wise-man Qohelet, passing on to him words he knew Qohelet to have said...²⁰

Here we are prompted to envisage a dialogic interaction of characters on an epic level. The transmission of the story (Qoheleth's words) can be diagrammatically represented as follows:²¹

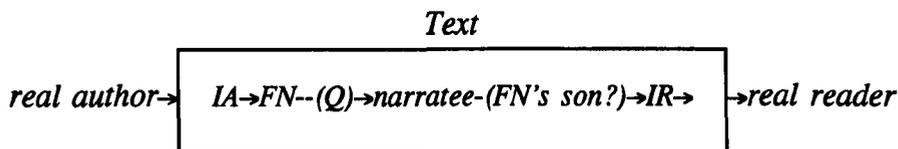


figure 5.

Although readers will often confuse the frame narrator with the real author and even with the character of Qoheleth himself (a problem I will discuss later), the basic frame provides a reference that enables one to perceive a sense of narrative

strengthens the illusion of reality via the use of a fictional editor is that of *Gulliver's Travels*. In it, the editor is a "third man" between the real author and the implied (on the implied author see Chapter 7.4; on the implied reader see 9.5). The real author uses the editor to distance himself from the work, giving responsibility to him. That responsibility is grave, for it concerns the illusion of authenticity that the work either fails or succeeds to create. For the editor has only *collected* the Travels of Gulliver, and while he hopes that the reader will enjoy them, the author uses him to critique even the credibility of those tales (the credibility of the author himself) and makes it clear that the editor is responsible for the final shape of the book.

²⁰ "Frame-narrative", p. 91.

²¹ In this figure, FN = the frame narrator, Q = Qoheleth, IA = the implied author, and IR = the implied reader (the basic diagram appears in Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, p. 151). By "real author" I am referring to the producer(s) of the text. As L. Eslinger argues, the term "author" for biblical critics, should include redactors, compilers, sources etc.; for to the text's final form all of these contribute ("Narratorial Situations in the Bible", in V.L. Tollers and J. Maier [eds.], *Mappings of the Biblical Terrain: The Bible as Text* [London: Bucknell University Press, 1990], p. 89). For Fox, this "author" is the frame narrator (or "epilogist") himself.

direction, to place the characters in their appropriate narratorial positions relative to each other.

Although the frame allows readers to effectively "enter" the story, there is often a more subversive element at play. As Linda Dittmar notes, "frames actually subvert the reassuring function of bracketing. They encourage audiences to suspend disbelief but also force them to re-align the parts into new wholes."²² This is dependent, of course, on the subject matter of both the inner and outer stories. When there is incongruity (as the epilogue is often incongruous with the body of Qoheleth's narration; see Chapter 5.3) the frame narrator does more than foster a believable fiction. The framer sets up the suspension of disbelief *and* leaves space for the reader to question the inner story on its own terms. For the one framing is free to question that story fundamentally. Not to question whether it is a fiction or not, but to scrutinize the views it endorses. So, while readerly disbelief is enabled, so too are all the possibilities of a commentary which can do anything from ridicule to celebrate the inner story's hero.

Since each framing instance carries with it "the significations it has acquired through usage and context",²³ it will be worthwhile to survey some biblical and ANE frame narratives which bear a formal resemblance to Ecclesiastes.²⁴ This survey is carried out not so much with the intention of in-

²² "Fashioning and Re-fashioning", p. 191.

²³ Dittmar, "Fashioning and Re-fashioning", p. 190. This description of framing is in reference to the often metaphorical function of close-ups and montage in film.

²⁴ Fox has already drawn a comparison between Ecclesiastes and the biblical frames of Deuteronomy and Tobit, as well as eight ANE frames; hence I refer the reader to his credible observations and will not add much to them ("Frame-narrative", pp. 92-94; reprinted in a shorter form although with additions to the number of texts compared in *Qohelet*, pp. 312-15). Irene Nowell has offered an insightful study of the narrative situation in Tobit but adds little to the understanding of the frame there ("The Narrator in the Book of Tobit", in D.J. Lull [ed.], *SBL 1988 Seminar Papers* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988], pp. 27-38; esp. p. 29). Finally, Matt Wiebe has made an extensive analysis (more in-depth than Fox's, although to its detriment not compared in any way to Ecclesiastes) of fifteen ANE (usually wisdom) frame narratives in comparison to the book of Proverbs ("The Wisdom in Proverbs: An Integrated Reading of the Book" [Ph.D. Dissertation; Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 1982], pp. 9-41). In addition to

depth comparison (although this occurs incidentally) as with that of encountering the variety of questions raised by frames, questions that are probably the most familiar in terms of content (and with the biblical frames, in terms of ideology), cultural context and (although not so with all) structure.

a. *Biblical Frame Narratives*

The framing of stories is certainly not foreign to the Old Testament. Several examples are worth noting.

1. *Deuteronomy*. The story of the Israelites' journeys are re-told to them by Moses. However, beyond Moses there is another, anonymous, external frame narrator.²⁵ At times this narrator invokes the "additional" authority of Yahweh (29.1; 32.48). The introduction (1.1-5) clearly frames what is to happen: "These are the words which Moses spoke *to all Israel* beyond [בעבר] the Jordan...in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to explain [באר] this law, saying..." (1.1, 5). The frame narrator is here prompting the reader to (continue to?) imagine the dramatic scene of all the people gathered to hear Moses speak "beyond the Jordan".

Within the flow of narration the frame narrator intervenes to provide pertinent information. Note, for example, 4.41-43 (after Moses has been speaking): "Then [וא] Moses set apart on the east side of the Jordan three cities to which a homicide could flee, someone who unintentionally kills another person... Bezer in the wilderness...[etc.]". This allows the frame narrator to

Wiebe's list, Fox includes the frames of *Neferti*, *Ipuwer* and *Duachety*. My analysis adds to both lists the frames of Job and Sirach.

²⁵ Fox notes that "in *Deuteronomy*...there is a voice telling *about* the chief character, looking back on him from an indefinite distance, while remaining itself well in the background" ("Frame-narrative", p. 93; italics Fox's).

direct the attention of the reader periodically to data relevant to Moses' story²⁶ (if not relevant to today's readers, plausibly relevant to ancient Israelite readers/hearers).

The frame narrator controls the perspective throughout while lending the book its own stamp of authority. Indeed, the final form of this book has an epilogue in which Moses' life is appraised ("Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses", 34.10a). It is the frame narrator who thereby gains the final word, and who is depicted as having ultimate control over the canonical form.²⁷

2. *Job*. The lengthy introduction (1.1–2.13) gives a narrative context for all the speeches that follow. Also, beyond the introduction, the frame narrator frequently offers clear markers of speech (e.g. 25.1; 26.1; 27.1; 29.1).²⁸ This frame set-up is much more stylized than that of Deuteronomy. All the relevant markings are clear, and sometimes highly interpretive in their content.

There is a great deal of potential interpretive control allotted to frame narrators and it is well exploited here. The infamous closing statement, "And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends..." (42.10a), may shape the theological emphasis of the entire book. Is the reader meant to accept that the many speeches that confound the notion of a clear relation between deed and consequence are now nullified? Is the world, after all the existential struggle of Job, so simple after all? As will be seen below (Chapter

²⁶ Cf. 27.1, 9, 11; 31.22–25; 32.44–45, 48; 33.1.

²⁷ Similarly, B.S. Childs: "The new interpretation [in the form of the unique, edited narrative framework] seeks to actualize the traditions of the past for the new generation in such a way as to evoke a response of the will in a fresh commitment to the covenant. The present form of the book of Deuteronomy reflects a dominant editorial concern to reshape the material for its use by future generations of Israel" (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Literature* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989], p. 212).

²⁸ For a precise narrative outline of the whole book, see D. Clines, *Job 1–20* (WBC, 17; Dallas, TX: Word, 1989), pp. xxxvi–xxxvii.

5), the frame narrator in Ecclesiastes likewise exploits such interpretive control.²⁹

3. *Proverbs*. Matt Wiebe has pointed out the resemblance of Proverbs to ANE frames. Wiebe acknowledges, however, that this is not so much a formal semblance as one of content. The presence of the frame is discerned mainly in the superscription (1.1), the narrative setting of a father instructing his son, the apologetic and instructional nature of the introductory material, and in the fact that "the end of the introduction [9.17-18] and the start of the instruction [10.1-2] are marked by a change of focus".³⁰ In many ANE frames (and in Ecclesiastes as well) the narrative situation is the same; that is, a father narrating to his son *about* wisdom or a hero of wisdom. Such a narrative situation is set up at Prov. 1.1-8a, and is unbroken until 10.1 where another proverb collection begins (*משלי שלמה* is repeated). At this point the narratee(s) seems to have been extended beyond the "son" (*בני* is not used again until 19.20, 27). The implied audience is emphatically resumed from 23.15 to the end of ch. 29 (with the second person of address from 22.17). Chs. 30 and 31, while not obviously structurally related to what precedes, may function as competing epilogues to the entire book.³¹

It is particularly the paternal narrative relationship (father-son) that frames the material in a narrative context, highlighting the way in which wisdom

²⁹ The closing lines of Hosea may also be noted: "Who is wise, let them understand these things. And the discerning, let them know." Such a directive to the reader (to understand the book in the context of wisdom, as opposed to prophecy?) has great potential in terms of the book's "final say" (cf. Childs, *Introduction*, pp. 382-83).

³⁰ "The Wisdom in Proverbs", p. 56. Wiebe's comparison of Proverbs rests on the widely held view that ANE instructional literature is characterized by a three-fold form: (1) introduction, (2) instruction and (3) epilogue. Further, see below.

³¹ According to Wiebe, Agur (ch. 30) and Lemuel (ch. 31) represent two possible reactions to the presentation of Wisdom as Woman in Proverbs. While Agur chooses to outwardly reject it (30.3-4), Lemuel merely ignores it (his mother fears that his rejection will have repercussions [31.2ff.]; "The Wisdom in Proverbs", p. 218, *passim*).

is acquired: through paternal transmission.

4. *Tobit*. Compare the opening words of Tobit to those of the Septuagint of Ecclesiastes:

Tobit 1.1:

Βιβλος λογων Τωβιτ, του Τωβιηλ, του ᾿Ανανιηλ...ἐκ της φυλης Νεφθαλι.

Ecclesiastes 1.1:

᾿Ρηματα ᾿Εκκλησιαστου, υἱου Δαυιδ, Βασιλεως ᾿Ισραηλ ἔν Ἱερουσαλημ.

The identification of the book's content, lineage and location of the main characters each occurs in these traditional superscriptions from the frame narrators.³²

In terms of framing there are other affinities with Ecclesiastes. For example, Tobit's frame narrator presents Tobit (even "accompanies" him on his journey) while remaining at a distance from him. Also, in both Eccl. 1.12 and Tob. 1.3-4 the perspective of old age is introduced which grants to the respective narrators a future stance for the telling *now* of their narratives.³³ Fox further notes that the sparsity of the frame narration at the introductions of both works accentuates their formal semblance.³⁴

The epilogue of Tobit (14.11-15) merely provides biographical information and not so much an assessment of the main character as witnessed in

³² The locale of Tobit's story is in and around Ninevah, which is where the tribe of Naphtali have been exiled (1.3ff.).

³³ Further, see Fox, "Frame-narrative", pp. 93-94, and Chapter 1.2, above. That there is nothing intervening between the introduction by Tobit's frame narrator and Tob. 1.3-4 may lend support to O. Loretz's theory of a primary Ich-Erzählung in Ecclesiastes, to which has been added 1.2-11 and other passages (see "Ich-Erzählung", esp. p. 46). Without 1.2-11, Ecclesiastes' introduction formally resembles that of Tobit's. However, cf. the comparison of Ecclesiastes to Amenemhet below.

³⁴ "Frame-narrative", p. 94.

other frames.

5. *Sirach*. The extensive prologue serves as an introduction that grants, as with other frames, a narrative setting for all that will follow. The frame narrator literally presents the book: "I found a copy and...thought it absolutely necessary that I should devote diligence and labour...to the task of completing the book and publishing it."³⁵ He also recommends that it be read. In so doing he assumes responsibility for the success of the book's reception and readership.

There is, however, no distinct epilogue to speak of. Instead is found the interesting form of biographical summary by the primary narrator himself (51.13-22), followed by an injunction to pursue wisdom in the same fashion as he had: "She [wisdom] is to be found close by. See with your own eyes that I have worked but little, and yet have found much rest for myself" (51.26b-27; see also 51.23-30). The narrative shift (he now addresses himself to the "untaught" [ἄπαιδευτοι] of 51.23, as opposed to "my child" [τεκνον] from 2.1, *passim*) represents a shift of concern for the way in which wisdom is to be attained; a concern the narrator has grounded in his own experience (51.13-22).

b. *Ancient Near Eastern Frame Narratives*

In terms of their respective structures, many ANE instructional texts invite comparison to Ecclesiastes. As noted above, I refer the reader to Fox's study, and will here limit my comparison to three ANE works which bear some of the most important likenesses to Ecclesiastes.

1. *Hardjedef*. The epilogue and most of the instruction no longer exist, but it is credible to posit an epilogue due to the structural similarity of what remains to

³⁵ Goodspeed's translation, *The Apocrypha*, pp. 223-24.

other ANE frames. The opening lines bear a striking resemblance to those of Ecclesiastes:

The beginning of the instruction which the prince and commander, the king's son Hardjedef made for his son whom he raised up, named Aibre. [He] says: Reprove yourself...³⁶

It is clearly stated that the instruction was made by the prince for his son. This differs from Ecclesiastes mainly in that no comparable origin is offered. The clarity and presence of transference goes beyond that found in Ecclesiastes. That is, since the story's source is less displaced (due to a more precise description of its origin) it becomes easier to fix reasons for the inner story's telling. The consequences of such an interpretive clue could be far-reaching.

2. *Kagemni*. Only a little of the instruction and the whole epilogue remain, but, as with Hardjedef, it is reasonable to posit the rest of the structure. The epilogue runs as follows:

The vizier had his children summoned, after he had understood the ways of men, their character having become clear to him. Then he said to them: "All that is written in this book, heed it as I said it. Do not go beyond what has been set down." Then they placed themselves on their bellies, they recited it as it was written. It seemed good to them beyond anything in the whole land. They stood and sat accordingly.

Then the majesty of King Huni died; the majesty of King Snerfu was raised up as a beneficent king in this whole land. Then Kagemni was made mayor of the city and vizier.

Colophon: It is finished. (*AEL*, I, p. 60)

As with Ecclesiastes 12.9-10, the frame narrator begins the epilogue with a summary of the main character's life's work (*he had understood the ways of men*) which, in Kagemni's case, authenticates what he relates to his children. The epilogue's function goes beyond that of Ecclesiastes, however, in its summary of a narrative context; one which may well have been more thoroughly sketched out

³⁶ *LAE*, p. 340. This and a few more lines of instruction are all that is extant from several ostraca of the Ramesside period (*ibid.*).

at the introduction of the work. Finally, the epilogue of Kagemni, as with Ecclesiastes 12.11-12, implicitly emphasizes the importance of transmitted knowledge (*heed it as I said it*), an emphasis that is key to the tension in Qoheleth's relationship to the frame narrator (see Chapter 5.3).

3. *Amenemhet*. The introductory lines merit comparison to Ecclesiastes:

The beginning of the instruction which the majesty of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt: Sehetep-ib-Re; the Son of Re: Amenemhet, the triumphant, made, when he spoke in a message of truth to his son, the All-Lord. He said:

Thou that hast appeared as a god, hearken to what I have to say to thee...
(*ANET*, p. 418)

As with other ANE frames, the introductory "he said" sets up the narrative situation of the book. Indeed, as Wiebe points out, the introductory poetic stanzas which follow (1.2-11) set up a narrative situation in which Amenemhet will deliver his first-person narrative (1.12ff.).³⁷ The poetic introduction of Ecclesiastes (1.4-11) might be structurally comparable, with its preparation of the subject matter which will occupy Qoheleth's narration (i.e. the absurdity of everything—*not least* the cycles of the physical world described in 1.4-11).

Apart from the observations I have made in the course of the comparisons, the following structural features of ANE instructions also invite comparison with Ecclesiastes.

The frame narrator commonly introduces some king, courier or pharaoh in the opening sentences. As with biblical frames, the introductory lines usually identify the book itself, and the lineage and location of its main characters. All instructions have some form of introduction, some of them lengthy, providing a scenario in which to narrate the whole story (e.g. *Neferti*,³⁸ *Amenemope*,³⁹

³⁷ See Wiebe, "The Wisdom in Proverbs", pp. 16, 70.

³⁸ *ANET*, pp. 444-46.

Ahiqar,⁴⁰ *Satire of the Trades*;⁴¹ cf. Job). After the introduction occurs the main body of instruction. This often consists of persistent first-person narration (*Ankhsheshonqy*,⁴² *Merikare*,⁴³ *Amenemhet*) which serves to ground the observations of the wise man or courier in experience. After the instruction, an epilogue usually completes the work. This often furthers the story of the outer frame (*Kagemni* [depending on extant material], *Ptahotep*, *Merikare*, *ANY*,⁴⁴ *Amenemope*, *Papyrus Lansing*;⁴⁵ cf. Job).

At this point it is interesting to note the conclusions of Katharine Gittes's thorough study of the history of frame narratives. She sees in the earliest (Arabic, Greek, medieval [*The Decameron* in particular]) some common organizing principles; in particular, the centrality of wisdom:

Foremost among these organizing devices is the framing story itself ...[and] various thematic motifs, most notably the wisdom theme, which often centers on secular knowledge and the importance of wit and intelligence as a means of survival in the world. No matter what topic they discuss, most frame narratives [i.e. outer and inner story together] give a full, rounded view of that topic.⁴⁶

The wisdom motif is obvious in most of the frames that I have discussed above. Often, the inner stories that outer frames encompassed were concerned with the quest or narrative journey of a particular hero or heroine of wisdom. Frame narrators, according to Gittes, came to embody a kind of corporate character in themselves. That is, the frame narrator became a stock type of character which authors gradually exploited to a full extent. It is difficult to say whether or not the real author of *Ecclesiastes* was aware of the rich framing tradition of which

³⁹ *ANET*, pp. 421-27.

⁴⁰ *ANET*, pp. 427-30.

⁴¹ *ANET*, pp. 432-34.

⁴² *AEL*, III, pp. 159-84.

⁴³ *ANET*, pp. 414-18.

⁴⁴ *ANET*, pp. 420-21.

⁴⁵ *AEL*, II, pp. 167-75.

⁴⁶ "The Frame Narrative: History and Theory" (Ph.D. Dissertation; San Diego: University of California, 1983), p. 188; cf. p. vii.

he formed a part. Knowingly or not, however, there is a commonality of theme, purpose and rhetorical effect witnessed in even the most dissimilar of ancient frames.

3. *The Production of Narrative Levels*

For the sequential reader of Ecclesiastes the frame narration is primary. That is, up until Qoheleth commences his own words, he only exists within the parameters which the frame narrator's description allows. But from his announcement at 1.1-2 emerges a narrative product: a story within a story. A person is telling a story in which a person is telling a story. Those stories have the same "hero" (i.e. a central narrating character): Qoheleth. The frame narrator's Qoheleth is reflecting and looking back. His Qoheleth is reflecting on a younger Qoheleth; one who is experiencing and learning. Qoheleth is at once two characters: one experiencing, one reflecting.⁴⁷

This *I now* and *I then* embedded in the narrative level was a strategy chosen by Virginia Woolf for her own memoirs. She described the reason for her choice as follows:

I think... I have discovered a possible form for my [memoirs]. That is, to make them include the present—at least enough of the present to serve as platform to stand upon. It would be interesting to make the two people *I now*, *I then*, come out in contrast. And further, this past is much affected by the present moment.⁴⁸

In her article on framing narratives, Judith Summerfield, after citing this passage, goes on to flesh out the idea by discussing Richard Wright's *Black Boy*:

⁴⁷ Fox discerns two levels of narration: level 1, the frame narrator, who tells us about level 2a, Qoheleth the reporter; who in turn is the narrating "I" looking back from the vantage point of old age upon level 2b, Qoheleth the seeker; who is the experiencing "I", the younger Qoheleth "who made the fruitless investigation introduced in 1:12 f." ("Frame-narrative", p. 91).

⁴⁸ Summerfield citing Woolf's *Moments of Being: Unpublished Writing*, 1976 ("Framing Narratives", p. 231; italics Summerfield's).

[Wright] constructed a text; he framed an event—from a vantage point years later, when he was a spectator of his past life. And the entire autobiography moves between the I then and the I now; the "participant" *in* things as they are happening; the spectator—*out*—looking back and reflecting upon, evaluating: the *in* and the *out* became the frame for the entire text.⁴⁹

This framing by recollection occurs simultaneously in the told text and the teller's text. In the same way the contrast is created with/by Qoheleth. That is, the duality of his *now* and *then* allows him to include his present while being acutely aware and critical of his past. It also allows him to "redeem" the folly of his youth from a more mature narrative stance (see Chapter 9.5). This effect of narrative level is partly due to the structure of the frame narrative.

These levels may be precisely described in narratological terms. It begins with the act of writing; the "literary event" we attribute to the author.⁵⁰ All events within the act of writing belong to the first (diegetic) level of narration. The first level of narration in Ecclesiastes is the frame narrator's. The frame narrator is external *to* Qoheleth as the author is external *to* the frame narrator. Just as Qoheleth makes no reference to the frame narrator, the frame narrator makes no reference to the author; that is, the person or group who is identified as writing. The frame narrator's access to information, then, is unquestioned: there is no source outside of his own story to be questioned (although we can identify parts as borrowed from elsewhere, such as the Solomonic element etc.). The very effect of such levels is that readers easily forget their presence.

4. *Narrative Level as a Cause of Amnesia*

Because of his position (in regard to narrative level) Qoheleth is made more accessible to the reader than is the frame narrator. That is, "[while the frame narrator is] existentially immune to conditions that will govern characters within

⁴⁹ "Framing Narratives", p. 232 (italics Summerfield's).

⁵⁰ See Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, pp. 247-48.

the story-world and readers in the real",⁵¹ Qoheleth is not so immune. He is what Lyle Eslinger calls "epistemologically limited". His *internal* position ensures that his story-world is limited to the narration of another character (Qoheleth has been framed!). As such, Qoheleth's world is easily entered. Not only is the frame narrator inviting the reader there, but he is providing the premises of a story-world, with all its epistemological limits. Qoheleth is thereby placed firmly *in* the story-world he narrates—within its "spatial and temporal bounds".⁵² Everything said at that level becomes relevant to that narrator's "ontological ties to the story world and his motivation to narrate is also conditioned by the bond".⁵³ The relationship is not two-way, and this is why frame narrators are in such powerful interpretive positions. The frame narrator is essentially immune to the "inhabitants" (actors) or events of Qoheleth's narrative level. Whether or not Qoheleth will succeed in his quest can be of no real consequence to the frame narrator.

The frame narrator's act of relating Qoheleth's words is easily forgotten as one reads (even the intrusion at 7.27 can pass unnoticed). Therefore, what is in reality an inner level of story (what Genette would term an intradiegetic level) "becomes" a pseudo-primary level of story (pseudo-diegetic). Qoheleth as narrator "takes over" the frame narrator's function as the primary (diegetic) narrator. This is one way in which Qoheleth is loosed from the epistemological bounds imposed by the frame narrator.

This effect occurs in the much-quoted example of *Arabian Nights*. Scheherazade is threatened with death by her husband the king and occupies him with stories every night to preserve her life. Each of the stories has its own narrator/characters which in turn tell stories, until eight narrative levels are

⁵¹ Eslinger, discussing biblical narrative situations in general ("Narratorial Situations in the Bible", p. 80).

⁵² Eslinger, "Narratorial Situations in the Bible", p. 79.

⁵³ Eslinger, "Narratorial Situations in the Bible", p. 79.

created. That the intradiegetic level causes the king to forget this shift of level is crucial to Scheherazade's well-being, and therefore, to the unfolding of her diegetic narrative.⁵⁴ While the diegetic level of Ecclesiastes is not bound to its intradiegetic level to such an extent, the "forgetfulness" of the reader is analogous. It is because we are drawn into Qoheleth's narrative that we forget the previous level of narration. Note Genette's comments about the pseudo-diegetic narrator of Proust's *Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*:

...the evocation forgets its memory-elicited pretext and to the last line unfolds on its own account as direct narrative, so that many readers do not notice the spatio-temporal detour that gave rise to it and think it a simple isodiegetic [of the same narrative level] "return backward" without a change in narrative level.⁵⁵

Until Qoheleth's narrative has reached its end, readers may either forget the frame narrator altogether or see him *and* Qoheleth as equally diegetic. In this way, Qoheleth, by loosing his epistemological bounds, becomes as "free" (and hence enigmatic) a character as the frame narrator. Just as Scheherazade is set free by the king's forgetfulness, so Qoheleth is liberated by the reader's.

⁵⁴ See Bal, *Narratology*, pp. 143-44.

⁵⁵ *Narrative Discourse*, p. 240.

Chapter 3

THE OUTER BORDERS: I

1. *The Superscription (1.1)*

The words of Qoheleth, son of David, king in Jerusalem.

This verse is often referred to as the “title” of Ecclesiastes. It conforms to a common Old Testament narrative device¹ which might more properly be called a superscription. Superscriptions have a function analogous to that of titles. They are often descriptive and/or an abstraction of the content of the text which they are heading. Often, a title contains pertinent biographical information, offering the reader a context of identity and place. In modern fiction, for example, the function of the title is potentially considerable. As Wayne Booth remarks, titles “are often the only explicit commentary the reader is given: *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *The Sun Also Rises*” and so on.² A superscription may do this and more. To “superscribe” is to write *over* or *above*, and by extension, outside of. All of the frame narrator’s text is, in this sense, a superscription. A title is a name. A superscription is a description which, at least in this case, lends a certain authority. While the frame narrator obviously supplies more explicit commentary at 12.9-14, he makes it clear here that what you are about to read has the “stamp” of authenticity and of kingship.

a. *Whose Superscription is it Anyway?*

The set of constructs at 1.1 does, of course, belong to a narrative voice. But

¹ Eg. Jer. 1.1; Amos 1.1; Zeph. 1.1.

² *Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 198 n. 25.

“whose”? Qoheleth’s? One of many redactors? The frame narrator’s? The first suggestion (Qoheleth) is ruled out by 1.2. That is, since the reference to Qoheleth in the third person at 1.2 is not self-referential³ it is likely that the same holds for 1.1. The second suggestion (redactors) is not likely since there is nothing to suggest any editing beyond that of the frame narrator’s own activity at this stage.⁴ That is, there is no reason to posit *another* voice. Given the correlation of 1.1 to 12.10 (see below), and the lack of any narrative contradiction in voice, temporal stance or level between 1.1 and 1.2, I suggest that 1.1-2 is narrated in one voice: the frame narrator’s. To be precise, then, the superscription is not Qoheleth’s text. Qoheleth is, as in the rest of the book, an actor. In all but the frame narrator’s text he is also a narrator. But here he is only an actor in another narrator’s text. This makes “his” words here a narrative *act*. As Mieke Bal puts it: “In the narrator’s text the words of the actor are not represented as *text*, but as an *act*.”⁵

So, what kind of “actor” is Qoheleth? The frame narrator’s presentation of him in 1.1 is of a ready-made character, with limitations immediately set for the reader. Qoheleth is a son of David, a king and is in Jerusalem.⁶ As such, all

³ Clearly, 1.2 is the frame narrator’s voice with Qoheleth’s only in indirect speech. The other grammatical third-person references (7.27; 12.8) favour this. When Qoheleth wants to be self-referential he is more evidently so (cf. 1.16; 2.1, 2, 15; 3.17, 18; 6.3; 7.23; 8.14; 9.16—half of these “speech” events are intensely personal: e.g. “I said in my heart”, 2.1, 15; 3.17, 18 [1.16, *with* my heart]; on such idioms which may denote self-reflection, see *DCH*, p. 324). Also, see Fox, “Frame-narrative”, pp. 84-87, and Chapter 8 below.

⁴ As Fox points out (contra Galling), there is no reason to limit the original superscription to “Words of Qoheleth” (which would suggest that the rest of 1.2 was added by an editor to better harmonize with what was already present that identifies Qoheleth—1.12, 16 etc.). Fox argues that the royal fiction was too rooted in the text for this to be likely (*Qohelet*, pp. 166-67). We should also ask ourselves why we might be willing to grant such “cleverness” to a redactor for his ability to harmonize and not to a “single hand” (on the question of the composition of the whole as regards the frame, see Chapter 6).

⁵ Bal, *Narratology*, p. 142 (italics Bal’s).

⁶ This last qualification has been sorely overlooked as a geographical narrative backdrop for what follows. It creates a fictional *locale* in which to understand this

his actions and observations are set in a particular context. They may or may not betray the conventional behaviour expected of the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Like framing itself, this creates a boundary by which we read. It is an interpretive boundary. If what we read violates our boundaries a certain meaning is created in that process. Not only does the frame narrator, in a quasi-physical sense, limit what the reader *sees* of Qoheleth, he sets the initial boundaries of his character. These are boundaries which the reader may or may not choose to expand (or narrow even further) as a result of his or her sequential reading and/or previous conceptions of king, son of David and so forth.

As a character, no more need be said in the form of explicit commentary *about* Qoheleth. It is when the content of this story has passed, and the final depiction of Qoheleth in the epilogue (12.9-10) is given, that the elements of his character manifested collide and collage to form a unique, round picture. For now, the frame narrator's Qoheleth is far more flat. That is, it lacks the "ability" to deviate from a given set of characteristics or particular expectations.

b. *Eventual Implication*

As I have already noted, the superscription utilizes a common formula. Compare Prov. 1.1:

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel.⁷

As in Proverbs, the descriptions of Qoheleth in the frame narrator's superscription are all static and not actantial. That is, while in this conventional mode of Hebrew syntax there is no explicit verbal form, there is a sense in which

narrative. The backdrop is reiterated throughout Ecclesiastes: "Jerusalem" (1.12, 16; 2.7, 9). Possible allusions to Jerusalem as a narrative backdrop are 5.1 (house of God = the temple?); 5.8 (*the* province = Judea?); 5.9 (a land with a king = Israel/Jerusalem?); 8.10 (holy place = temple?; *the* city = Jerusalem?); 10.16-17 (a land with a king = Israel/ Jerusalem?). Furthermore, there is no *other* explicit geographical reference but Jerusalem.

⁷ Cf. Cant. 1.1 for another Solomonic ascription.

actions are implied. The phrase בן־דוד obviously alludes to Qoheleth's birth. An implication of the activity of ruling is implied by the phrase מלך בירושלם. A verb of speech is implied in the construct דברי־קהלת, and refers to the event of communicating in his narrative. This activity finds its functional counterpart in 12.10a:

בקש קהלת למצא דברי־חפץ וכתוב ישר דברי־אמת

Qoheleth sought to find words of delight, and with integrity he wrote words of truth.

At 1.1 the narrative act is implied, signified, but here (12.10a) the active quality of Qoheleth's communication is stressed and the means of it (being only implicit at 1.1) are made explicit. One could amplify 1.1: "These are the words which Qoheleth, son of David, king in Jerusalem, communicated." A wood engraving by Stefan Martin illustrates this declaratory aspect well.⁸ It shows Qoheleth (as King Solomon) holding a Hebrew "scroll" with the words of 1.1-2a written on it:



figure 5.

⁸ From J. Blumenthal (designer), *Ecclesiastes, or The Preacher*.

In his sketch Martin has recognized the allusion to activity in linguistically static constructions. In his reading he has taken words as signifiers of activity and enlarged their meaning. To take an example, the signified of דברי־קהלת is concise and of a particular nature. The phrase is comparable to what Barthes calls a “cover word”:

...the closing logic which structures a sequence [of activity] is inextricably linked to its name [i.e. the “cover word” which signifies that sequence]; any function which initiates [for example] a seduction *prescribes*, from the moment it appears, *in the name to which it gives rise, the entire process of seduction* such as we have learned it from all the narratives which have fashioned in us the language of narrative.⁹

In a similar way, דברי־קהלת assumes a sequence of events. As an act which initiates the communication to follow, it signifies the “entire process of [communicating]...such as we have learned it from all the narratives which have fashioned in us the language of narrative”.¹⁰

2. *Plot and Desire at 1.1-2*

Published authors cannot escape the reality that they, in some sense, “have the reader in mind”. That is, by the act of publishing the author in effect says “I desire to communicate.” No matter how “pure” (i.e. devoid of explicit indications of the desire to communicate) or *avant garde* the work is, every published literary work is evidenced by a common denominator: the desire of its

⁹ “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives”, in *Image, Music, Text* (ed. and trans. S. Heath; London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 102 (italics mine).

¹⁰ It is particularly tempting at this juncture to suggest that דברי־קהלת may signify more than speech; i.e., *acts* in general. Elsewhere, דברי in a noun construct often signifies what a character *did* (so of Solomon, 1 Kgs 11.41; Jerobo’am, 1 Kgs 14.19; Rehobo’am, 1 Kgs 14.29; cf. 1 Kgs 15.7, 23, 31; 16.5, 14, 20, 27; 22.39). Yet the constructs found at Prov. 30.1 and 31.1 suggest that, however tempting this may be for my own argument, it is unlikely that the construct signifies acts in Eccl. 1.1. The idea particularly collapses in lieu of both Qoheleth’s use of דבר (5.2-3, 7; 9.17; 10.12 etc.; however, cf. the ambiguity of 1.8, 10; 8.1) and the frame narrator’s later description of Qoheleth as one who sought to find דברי־חפץ (12.10).

author to be read.¹¹ In Ecclesiastes, that desire to communicate is more explicit than not. The frame narrator's narrative act is a focal point by nature of its location and his implicit desire is to communicate Qoheleth's words and not his own per se. This is integral to another feature of this narrative movement, the plot.

The narrative act of 1.1 plainly suggests that the *content* of the words of Qoheleth are to follow. This prepares the sequential reader for the later events of Qoheleth's narrated experience. As such, that narrated experience is *made possible* (at least in the frame narrator's story-world) by the kernel narrative act of 1.1. The frame narrator's quotation of Qoheleth at 1.2 is part of this kernel as well. As Edwin Good, in his careful reading of Eccl. 1.2-11, observes,

The sententious "says Qoheleth," followed by the repetition of *hābēl hābālīm* not only underscores the phrase's importance but also makes us wonder what is going to be said about it and to what it will be attributed. The repetition of the phrase...intensifies the expectation that it will be applied to something...¹²

The first action of Qoheleth's referred to is the narrative speech-act of 1.2. By means of this and the superscription it becomes clear that Qoheleth's character (i.e. the evolution and manifestation of it in his "own" words) is to be the principal concern of what follows. This is a thrust behind much modern fiction. That is, to break away from the traditional notions of the beginning-middle-end procedure of the novel, not relying on the "primitive" desire to know "what

¹¹ That this is a common denominator of literary works is convincingly argued by Wayne Booth, "True Art Ignores the Audience", in *Rhetoric of Fiction*, pp. 89-116.

¹² "The Unfilled Sea: Style and Meaning in Ecclesiastes 1:2-11", in J. Gammie *et al.* (eds.), *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978), p. 63. Good further defines the notion of expectancy he works with (and that I imply), which is worth quoting: "...something in the work first sets up in the reader a tendency to respond, arouses the expectation of a consequent, then inhibits the tendency, and finally brings the (or an) expected consequent" (p. 62). While Good applies this principle only to the reading of 1.2-11, it can easily be extended to an expectancy aroused concerning the entire narrative strategy of Ecclesiastes.

happens next".¹³ Instead, a plot may have as the centre of its narrative logic the revelation of character. Hence the expectancy aroused concerns a character's development through what it says and/or does and not necessarily how it interacts and develops in relation to others.

This is not to say that there cannot emerge from such a plot more traditional ("primitive"?) qualities of narratives such as suspense and resolution. The expectancy created here is not immediately fulfilled, and is certainly not fulfilled, as Good points out, in 1.3-11.¹⁴ Indeed, it creates a gap which can only be filled by the subsequent development of Qoheleth's character in both the frame narrator's and Qoheleth's mainly independent narratives. The way in which that character-oriented plot develops will be discussed in detail in Chapters 8 and 9. The point for now is that such a plot commences in the full narrative movement of the frame narrator at 1.1-2.

¹³ E.M. Forster has humorously depicted this "primitive" desire: "A ['modern'] plot cannot be told to a gaping audience of cavemen or to a tyrannical sultan or to their modern descendant the movie-public. They can only be kept awake by 'and then—and then—' they can only supply curiosity. But a plot demands intelligence and memory also" (*Aspects of the Novel*, p. 94).

¹⁴ "The Unfilled Sea", pp. 71-72.

Excursus 1

QOHELETH AND THE MEANING OF הבל

What shall I do with this absurdity—
O heart, O troubled heart—this caricature,
Decrepit age that has been tied to me
As to a dog's tail?

—W.B. Yeats ("The Tower", pt 1)

Before discussing the main passages in which the frame narrator appears, it would be wise to address the likely meaning(s) of הבל, the most crucial key word for both Qoheleth *and* the frame narrator (in 1.2, for example, הבל, in singular or plural form, constitutes five of the eight words). This brief excursus will aid both the narrative investigation at hand (in that it brings the content of what is narrated into sharper definition) and the investigation as a whole. The aim is not so much to establish some relationship between intent and meaning, but rather to establish the biblical semantic range within which הבל likely operates, particularly as a signifier of judgment.

1. הבל *outside Ecclesiastes*

In the Old Testament, excluding Ecclesiastes, at least eight distinct connotations of הבל may be found. They are, in descending order of frequency:

- A) breath/vapour (8×)¹
- B) idols (8×)²
- C) worthless/false (7×)³

¹ Pss. 39.6[5], 7[6], 12[11]; 62.10[9]; 94.11; 144.4; Prov. 21.6 Isa. 57.13. This meaning, according to D. Seybold, is attested by "later Aramaic dialects that were influenced partly by the OT", and might suggest an onomatopoeic word formation in the Hebrew ("hebhel", *TDOT*, III, p. 313).

² Deut. 32.21; 1 Kgs 16.13, 26; Ps. 31.8; Jer. 8.19; 10.8; 14.22; Jon. 2.9[8].

³ Jer. 16.19; 23.16; derivative (הבליעל): 1 Sam. 25.25; 2 Sam. 16.7; 1 Kgs 21.13; noun and verb constructs (ויהבלו): 2 Kgs 17.15; Jer. 2.5.

- D) no purpose/useless (6×)⁴
- E) futile (4×)⁵
- F) nothing/empty (3×)⁶
- G) fleeting (1×: Job 7.16)
- H) deceptive in appearance (1×: Prov. 31.30)

Although there are some borderline cases in the distinctions I have made,⁷ each occurrence shares the fact that it constitutes a judgment or is integral to one. In each case something is usually judged *to be הבל*.⁸ Take, for example, Jer. 16.19: "The nations will come and say, 'Our Fathers inherited lies, nothing! [הבל], and there is no profit in them [i.e. lies, שקר].'" Here it is lies that are associated with הבל (which I take to mean, in this context, "false" or "worthless"). And in all of the biblical occurrences something obviously false or futile, empty etc., is likened to or actually *named* (e.g. Ps. 94.11) הבל. The judgments are both explicit (e.g. Jer. 16.19) and implicit (e.g. Jer. 10.15; Zech. 10.2).

In each of its occurrences, הבל is negative in connotation; that is, negative in a literal sense—denouncing something as negative in contrast to that which is potentially positive (e.g. true versus false [Jer. 16.19; 23.16]; useful versus useless [Isa. 30.7]; consoling words versus empty words [Job 21.34; cf. Zech. 10.2]; substantial versus insubstantial [Ps. 94.11; Prov. 21.6]). The opposites are, of course, usually implied. Take, for example, Prov. 30.31a:

שקר החן והבל היפי

Charm is deceitful and beauty deceptive.

⁴ Job 27.12; Isa. 49.4; Jer. 10.3; 10.15; Lam. 4.17; Zech. 10.2.

⁵ Job 9.29; Pss. 62.10[11]; 78.33; Isa. 30.7.

⁶ Job 21.34; 35.16; Prov. 13.11.

⁷ For example, Ps. 78.33 could connote "futility" or "vapour", and it is unclear to me whether Lam. 4.17 suggests "having no purpose" or "futility".

⁸ So also, Seybold: "the term expresses an evaluation of people or things ...[and usually] accomplishes a (negative) qualification" ("hebhel", p. 314). It is worth noting in relation to this fact that a הבל ("idol") may itself be judged הבל (Jer. 2.5; furthermore, see below) and any association with idols judged disobedient (Deut. 32.21).

Here charm (החן) is on a par with beauty (היפי). Both were (in the author's opinion) sought after by the women of his day. This is borne out by the next contrasting stich: "But a woman who fears Yahweh is to be praised" (30.31b). While some women might seek הבל (in the form of beauty) they are, it is implied, to be abhorred, for it is the woman who fears Yahweh who is to be praised. Both הבל and שקר are negative "opposites" of the fear of Yahweh.

There is often a textual link between what is הבל and what is idolatrous (such as customs etc.).⁹ The connection is apparent when the הבלים ("idols") themselves are considered futile or worthless. At 2 Kgs 17.15 this is especially evident:

וילכו אחרי ההבל ויהבלו

...and they went after idols and became false [or "...after worthlessness and became worthless"]. (cf. Jer. 2.5)

Any association here with the הבל is הבלים.

Perhaps what is most striking (in relation to Ecclesiastes) is the sheer and consistent quality of negation in each occurrence of the word regardless of dissimilar contexts and referentiality. If we grant that words acquire multifarious colourings through usage, and all the import of their former contexts (albeit only those known to the reader), then the biblical use of הבל formed a paradoxically rich while bleak background, a blackboard of negativity on which Qoheleth could sketch his own nuances of his key word.¹⁰

2. הבל in Ecclesiastes

As I have pointed out, all the uses of הבל outside Ecclesiastes constitute a

⁹ See Jer. 10.1-15 in which הבל occurs 3×.

¹⁰ Compare T. Polk's comments: "Words do not work [as empty ciphers] at all... Everywhere the connotation of *hebel* is thoroughly negative" ("The Wisdom of Irony: A Study of *Hebel* and its Relation to Joy and Fear of God in Ecclesiastes", *SBTh* 6/1 [1976], p. 8).

judgment or are integral to one. The same holds true in Ecclesiastes. There is, however, a major difference. None of the הבל judgments outside of Ecclesiastes claim that since something is, for example, useless, it is therefore הבל. While beauty may *be* הבל (Prov. 31.30a), the fact that something is beautiful is not (necessarily) הבל. Only things, not situations, are הבל. The signifieds of הבל outside of Ecclesiastes do *not* include states of affairs within their scope of judgment¹¹—nor do they include, globally, "everything". It seems, then, that Qoheleth used the term quite unconventionally, for twenty-one of the thirty-eight occurrences in his book are judgments on situations.¹² Those twenty-one occurrences can be classified into two types: 1) it is הבל that there is a divorce between deed and consequence in a certain situation (14×),¹³ and 2) it is הבל that a situation is the way it is (7×).¹⁴

Here is an example of the first type, a divorce between deed and consequence (2.15): "And I said in my heart, 'As is the fate of the fool, so it will befall me. Why then have I become exceedingly wise?' So I said in my heart that this too was הבל." There is a disparity here. Qoheleth has become wise and he (as the reader is invited to) assumes that his fate should be different from the fool. There is no apparent logical relationship between (i.e. there is a "divorce" between) deed (becoming wise) and consequence (having the same fate as the

¹¹ As Fox argues, הבל in Ecclesiastes is used to report "facts" about the world at large, and outside of Ecclesiastes it is the lamentation psalms which come closest to this, but even these are very personal in nature and their scope does not extend to the world (*Qohelet*, p. 93). Similarly, see G. Ogden, "'Vanity' it Certainly is Not", *BT* 38/3 (1987), pp. 302-304, 306-307.

¹² I include neither the judgments with הבל as referent (see below) nor the strictly adjectival qualification of nouns or noun groups (5.7; 6.11, 12; 9.9; 11.10). While 7.15 could arguably belong to the latter category, I extend its scope to that of an implied judgment (i.e. of the situation which immediately follows it—see below). It is worth noting that the semantic usage of הבל adjectivally in Ecclesiastes is similar to the more "common" usage of הבל elsewhere (cf. Job 7.16; Pss. 39.6[7]; 94.11; Isa. 30.7). As in the Psalter, these adjectival usages are not concerned with situations.

¹³ 2.15, 19, 21, 26; 4.7-8a (2×), 16; 5.10; 6.2; 7.15-16 (implied); 8.12a, 14 (2×); 9.1-3.

¹⁴ 2.23; 4.4, 8b; 3.19; 6.9; 7.6; 8.11.

fool: death [2.16b]). The divorce is הבל.

Here is an example of the second type, that a situation is the way it is (4.4): "And I observed that all toil and all skilful activity is the result of¹⁵ one man's envy of another [קנאה איש]. This too is הבל and a pursuit of wind." The situation is stated plainly: toil and activity are the result of envy. This is הבל. In texts demonstrating this second type, Qoheleth literally calls things as he sees them, and this helps to form the core of the book's undisputed observational quality. He rarely if ever offers a response to such comments; his point instead is simply to elucidate the realities observed. And here lies the difference between the two types: while the first is *demonstrated* by a "divorce", the second is simply stated. In the second type, the divorce is assumed and not shown.

What English word might therefore best encapsulate הבל in Ecclesiastes? One clue comes from a uniquely existential quality of Qoheleth's use of the word. With it, Qoheleth describes his most intensely personal experiences and yet relates them to a much wider scope of judgment. With this existential quality in mind, Michael Fox chooses to render the term by "absurd". Drawing on the work of Albert Camus, Fox defines "absurdity" thus:

The essence of the absurd is a disparity between two phenomena that are supposed to be joined by a link of harmony or causality but are actually disjunct or even conflicting...[quoting Camus:] L'absurde est essentiellement un divorce. Il n'est ni dans l'un ni dans l'autre des éléments comparés. Il naît de leur confrontation.¹⁶

The severance of deed from consequence, Fox argues, is explicit in Qoheleth's text itself:

¹⁵ I take the particle כִּי here to have this resultant force (so Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 38; cf. Prov. 14.30: "The bones rot [רִקב] as the result of [כִּי] envy [קנאה]").

¹⁶ *Qohelet*, p. 31 (Camus quote from *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*). C.B. Peter has offered a far less-convincing comparison than Fox's of Camus to Qoheleth, although he does manage to create some ground for analogy between what he calls "Camusian Absurdity" and "Ecclesiastesan Vanity" ("In Defence of Existence: A Comparison Between Ecclesiastes and Albert Camus", *BTF* 12 [1980], pp. 26-43; esp. p. 40). Further on existentialism in Ecclesiastes, see Excursus 2.

What is crooked [מעות] cannot be made straight
and what is lacking cannot be counted. (1.15)

Consider the activity of God:
For who is able to make straight
what he has made crooked [עותרו]? (7.13)

In this twisting (עות, "to twist, pervert") "is the severance of deed from consequence, which severance strips human deeds of their significance".¹⁷

This definition works well with the fourteen occurrences of the first type. However, the seven occurrences of the second type might best be translated "futile". In the example of 4.4 it is surely futile (or "of no purpose", "in vain") that all toil is the result of envy. The reader can only *assume* that Qoheleth thought it absurd as well. This is because the relation of deed and consequence can only *be* assumed, for there are no real deeds mentioned (no history, no events). Rather, the reader is expected to accept Qoheleth's opinion that all toil and all skilful activity have questionable motives. Furthermore, the reader is expected to assume that the deed (or "work"?) of envy (for Qoheleth an unquestioned reality) should not have toil as a consequence. Indeed, it is the consequence itself which is judged to be הבל.

There are related considerations that affect the choice of translation. For example, הבל is closely connected to several other words or phrases that colour its meaning at particular points.¹⁸ The proximity has led most scholars to assume a degree of semantic overlap between הבל and such phrases as "a

¹⁷ Fox, *Qohelet*, p. 47.

¹⁸ It is important to note, however, that when הבל is coupled with a phrase such as "a great evil" (e.g. 2.21, ורעה רבה) the *culminative* effect is metaphorical and *not* a strict equation of the two phrases. That is, one phrase is not used to qualify the other, but they are used together as a kind of collective metaphor to describe something else. For example, in 2.21 the two phrases together qualify the lamentable situation of leaving one's portion to someone who did not toil for it (2.21a). The phrases there clearly do not qualify each other. This frees the semantic field of הבל to be defined by its referents (situations, concepts etc.) and not by other concrete phrases (furthermore, see Seybold, "hebhel", p. 315).

grievous ill"¹⁹ and "an evil ("wretched"?) occupation".²⁰ The most important of these phrases are רעות רוח²¹ and רעיון רוח.²² Both רעות and רעיון occur only in Ecclesiastes and are probably derived from the same root, רעה. What that root means, however, is the problem. I will not rehearse all the options here,²³ suffice to say that I am in agreement with the wide consensus (as witnessed by some modern translations: RSV, NIV, NRSV, NASB) and some linguistic testimony,²⁴ to translate "pursuit". More simply, I take רוח, when used with הבל, to mean "wind".²⁵ The proposed translation of רעות and רעיון, if correct, supports this translation of רוח (the idea of *pursuing* one's "breath", for example, is difficult to imagine).²⁶ In relation to הבל, a "pursuit of wind", implying as it does a vexatious chore,²⁷ can have no positive import and complements the sheer negativity of the word.

The notion of "absurdity" to which I have thus far made reference is strictly intellectual. A divorce within the logical process is just that and nothing more. Yet couplings of הבל with phrases such as "a grievous ill" and so on,

¹⁹ חלי רע—2.17; 5.13, 15; 6.2.

²⁰ ענין רע—2.21; 4.8; 6.1-2; cf. 1.13; 4.3-4; 9.3; 10.5.

²¹ Appearing with הבל at 1.14; 2.11, 17, 26; 4.4; 6.9. It occurs once on its own as a רוח "judgment" at 4.6.

²² Appearing with הבל at 4.16, and on its own in a רוח "judgment" at 1.17.

²³ For this see the commentaries, particularly that of G.A. Barton for the translation tradition (*Ecclesiastes* [ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1959 [1908]], pp. 85-86).

²⁴ Admittedly this form could either derive from a verb common in Aramaic meaning "to desire" or from רעה ("to shepherd" etc., the participle of which denotes "shepherd" at 12.11). The latter word is used specifically of tending animals (Gen. 4.2; 37.2 etc.) and more generally of grazing and pasture (Gen. 41.2; Job 24.2; Isa. 5.17 etc.). In any case it is plausible that an ironic sense lies dormant in the morphological assonance of both רעיון and רעות with the biblical רעה (other possible forms include רעו, רעות, רעום). Compare LXX's rendering of רעה in Ecclesiastes, *προσσευξασ*, which suggests an action involving a deliberate choice and, by extension, striving or pursuit.

²⁵ A related word such as "vapour", however, might work as well and would not take away from the inherent negativity of the phrase which I will suggest.

²⁶ For other meanings of רוח in Ecclesiastes, see Chapter 8.4.

²⁷ Qoheleth significantly tags the phrase to an observation on the futility of labour: "Better a handful with rest than two handfuls with toil and a pursuit of wind" (4.6; cf. 1.6).

carry a moral aspect (an aspect shared with uses outside Ecclesiastes). Obviously, *רע* has moral overtones, and situations that are denounced as *הבל* Qoheleth often clearly regards to be evil or unjust in themselves.²⁸ Can the notion of absurdity be therefore extended to include the moral aspect? Yes, but this entails a choice. While it is probable that most readers consider what is absurd to be not good (*רע*), the word's intellectual sense allows the reader to choose to ignore its moral aspect.

The choice to render *הבל* by "absurd" (as with nearly every other rendering of *הבל*) has been contested. For example, Daniel Fredericks (who opts for translating *הבל* as "breath"), after surveying Fox's arguments, writes that

we should not settle too soon for such despairing attempts to explain the complexities of a Qoheleth; rather perhaps there is a biblical meaning to *hebel*, contemporary with its composition, that would explain Qoheleth with greater coherency.²⁹

Fredericks's objections are puzzling. Why can we not presume that the philosophical notion of absurdity was "contemporary" with Qoheleth's experience? What reason is there to nullify the use of "absurd" outside of its explication in, for example, Camus? There is none. Camus had sought to explicate an experience which he saw common to everyone. He (like Qoheleth) did not limit his own observations to a historical setting or movement.³⁰

What of other suggested meanings and translations for *הבל*? One of the most interesting, coming from Edwin Good (followed notably by T. Polk), is that

²⁸ So esp. 1.13-14; 2.23; 8.14; cf. 7.6-7.

²⁹ D. Fredericks, *Coping with Transience: Ecclesiastes on Brevity in Life* (TBS, 18; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), p. 18.

³⁰ Furthermore, compare Fox's citation of the Camus scholar Cruickshank: "Whatever the special character of Camus's conclusions, the absurd itself remains a contemporary manifestation of a skepticism as old at least as the Book of Ecclesiastes" (cited in *Qohelet*, p. 32). It is worth noting (as C.B. Peter does) that Camus actually bracketed himself from the existential movement, choosing to disassociate himself with Sartre rather early on and focus on the particularly moral aspects of philosophy ("In Defence of Existence", p. 36).

הבל has a fully ironic sense. Irony, it is argued, is aware of incongruity and smiles wryly at it. Like absurdity, it recognizes the disparity between human deed and consequence but goes further than absurdity *within* the reading experience: "Having observed an incongruity, irony pricks the bubble of illusion into which one has blown his life's breath."³¹ While absurdity ceases at the point of observation, irony interprets that observation, choosing to believe that its overall purpose is to heal and not to destroy: "the basis of irony... aims at amendment of the incongruous rather than its annihilation... Wherever Qoheleth uses *hebel* ...the subject is treated ironically."³² While the ironic is surely entrenched in Qoheleth's use of הבל, a substantial interpretive measure must be taken to perceive it. This is why "irony" or "ironic" would be (as Good and Polk seem to agree) inappropriate as a translation. Indeed, translating הבל as "irony" would ironically rob the given referent (situation) of its inherent irony! For the joy of reading irony lies in the unearthing of its subtlety.

Clearly, a word is needed that best represents the majority of the instances. "Meaningless" (NIV), for example, does not accomplish this. There is meaning even if a character's experience is meaningless (it would be impossible, I think, to show that Qoheleth ever regarded his experience as meaningless). The *fact* that experience is meaningless is meaningful. As Wayne Booth puts it, "to be caught in a meaningless predicament is a bad thing, in which case there *is* meaning".³³ There have been other more amusing, if inappropriate, suggestions such as Frank Crüsemann's of "shit"³⁴ and F.C. Burkitt's of "bubble".³⁵ Other

³¹ Polk, "The Wisdom of Irony", p. 7.

³² E. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1981 [1965]), pp. 27, 182.

³³ Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 298 (italics Booth's). In support, G. Ogden argues that the הבל judgments do not imply that life is vacuous or meaningless, but rather that the situations Qoheleth observed are in themselves anomalous, and that *that* is what is הבל ("'Vanity' it Certainly is Not", pp. 302-304).

³⁴ "The Unchangeable World: The 'Crisis of Wisdom' in Kohaleth", in W. Schottroff and W. Stegemann (eds.), *God of the Lowly: Socio-Historical Interpretations of the Bible*

suggestions such as "vanity" (KJV, RSV, *et al.*) or "futility" (TLB, *et al.*) suffer from the same problem as "meaningless": they cannot express the הבל-ness of a situation over and above that of a specified object (and in Ecclesiastes, remember, the situation judgment is more common than the calling-it-as-it-is judgment). Perhaps ironically, to preserve some semblance of *meaning* (albeit one that may leave a bitter taste), "absurd" is the best expression of Qoheleth's use of הבל. All said, "absurd" remains the best choice throughout, if for no other reason than that the reader is enabled to perceive the thematic unity of the judgments.³⁶

3. הכל and הבל

Outside of Ecclesiastes, הכל always has an immediate referent in its own story-world. Here is a good example: "Nothing was missing, whether small or great... David brought back *everything*" (1 Sam. 30.19). In all other biblical texts הכל refers to concrete nouns that act as simple referents. A *lack* of referent would therefore tell us something informative in that in such instances הכל must take on a unique, abstract definition/use. And, as we might expect, Ecclesiastes is again atypical in this respect. Of the eighteen occurrences of הכל eight inform this review in that they stand in (sometimes ambiguous) relation to הבל,³⁷ and only one of these appears to have a clear referent.³⁸

(New York: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 57.

³⁵ *Ecclesiastes: Rendered into English Verse by F. Crawford Burkitt*, p. 9, *passim*.

³⁶ Fox is in agreement (*Qohelet*, p. 44).

³⁷ 1.2, 14; 2.11, 17; 3.19; 7.15; 9.1; 12.8. Eccl. 7.15 is the only verse in which the words occur yet are separated from each other, which creates an interesting ambiguity in itself ("in my absurd life I have observed everything..."; further, see below). John Jarick has suggested to me in personal correspondence that the choice of placing הכל and הבל together may be purposefully to portray a visual word-play. They occur together only in Ecclesiastes and the only visual difference between them is a serif-mark.

³⁸ 9.1, if we allow for emendation, is the only of these with an antecedent. By reading הבל at 9.2a for MT's הכל and placing it immediately after the לכל לפניהם of 9.1b, Qoheleth appears to say concerning the righteous and the wise that "...everything before them [i.e. their deeds and love and hate] is הבל".

The lack of antecedent is obvious with 1.2 and 12.8 (cf. 11.8, כל־שבא הבל, "all that comes is absurd"). There could, however, possibly be a referent for הבל at 3.19 if we take it there to mean "everyone" (all animals and humans; so 3.20, 3×). It seems more likely, however, that Qoheleth reflected that (כי) הבל (3.19b) *as a result* of comparing the circumstance of animals to that of humans (3.18-21) and that הבל at 3.19 is therefore more generalized and abstract. The referents of the other three (1.14; 2.11, 17) are less evident. It is worth noting that all three verses have remarkably similar contents. At 1.14 Qoheleth observes (ראה) "all the deeds that have been done (כל־המעשים) שנעשו under the sun" and concludes (הנה) that הבל and a pursuit of wind. At 2.11 he considers (פנה) "all the deeds my hands had done (בכל־מעשי) ושעשׂו ירי and the toil in which I toiled to do it", and concludes (הנה) that הבל and a pursuit of wind and that there is no profit (יתרון) under the heavens. Of these three, however, 2.17 is the most informative example:

And I hated life, for the work which was done under the sun was grievous to me. Indeed, everything is absurd and a pursuit of wind (כי הבל הבל) (ורעות רוח).

Here Qoheleth does not "consider" or "observe" work and *then* conclude that everything is absurd. Instead, the language of the judgment itself is more personal. It was grievous to him (רע עלי). At 1.14 and 2.11, "everything" might exclusively refer to the work (or "activity") done under the sun. However, at 2.17 it might also include *everything*; that is, every material thing, including the agents that do the activity. This fits well with uses of הבל outside of Ecclesiastes which always connote material things, including agents (e.g. Ps. 119.91).³⁹ Furthermore, some of the הבל judgments refer directly to *things* and not to general situations,⁴⁰ serving fully to demonstrate the dictum at 1.2: everything is

³⁹ Contra Fox (*Qohelet*, p. 37) who argues that the judgments refer only to activity.

⁴⁰ So 5.7[6]; 6.11, 12; 7.15; 9.9 [2×]; 11.10; cf. 1.4-7.

absurd. Because of the all-encompassing referents for *הכל*, *הבל* must, it seems, be applied to all things without exception, including knowledge, wisdom and even the frame narrator's quite different epistemological priorities (see Chapter 5.3).

Of the other uses of *הכל* in Ecclesiastes two are too vague to be of value in this survey (10.19; 11.5), four refer to "everyone" and as such do not inform the abstract sense (3.20 [3×]; 6.6) and one clearly has a specific referent (12.13). The remaining three are instructive and may be summarized as follows: in the days to come *הכל* will be forgotten (2.16); God has made *הכל* beautiful (or "appropriate", *יפה*) in its time (3.11); Qoheleth has observed *הכל* (*all that happens to the righteous and the wicked?*, 7.15b) in his absurd days. Each of these references broadens the scope of *הכל* immensely. *הכל* is here not simply limited to human activity or things under the sun, but to the very activity of God. Although Qoheleth specifies that it is everything under the sun (*תחת השמש*)—all that God created—which falls under the scrutiny of his eye, by implication God himself is included. The incomprehensibility of the world is, to Qoheleth's thinking, linked to the inability to understand God's works. These factors are one and the same. God's activity is at once *יפה* and *הבל* (3.11). The *human* aspect of activity (and by implication the human understanding of God's activity) will be forgotten (2.16). Here is an absurdity manifest in the text itself without Qoheleth drawing our attention to it as such. God has made everything pleasing—fitting in a pleasant order—⁴¹and yet it is unknowable, undiscoverable and absurd (3.11). For Qoheleth, this absurdity prevents him from being truly wise (7.23-24). Indeed, Qoheleth reports elsewhere that to attempt to understand all that is done—all that is absurd—is futile:

I observed all the activity of God. For humanity is not able to discover all the activity that has been done under the sun. Therefore, [although] humanity toils to seek it, still they will not discover it. Although the sage

⁴¹ Cf. the use of *יפה* at 5.18.

claims to know it he will not discover it.⁴²

In this text the principal referent of הכל is the activity of discovery, failed and futile. הכל is, quite simply, everything under the sun which Qoheleth observed and of which he sought to discover the inner working. When the inner and outer logic of that immense quantity of matter and events eluded him, he declared it הכל.

There are two particular effects that emerge from the linking of הכל with הכל. One is the emergence of a thread which links each of the הכל judgments. That conjunction, Fox argues, "implies that there is some meaning common to the various occurrences of the term [הכל, which]...infects the entire system [of Qoheleth's epistemology], making 'everything' absurd".⁴³ That link creates the second of these effects: the ability of הכל to encapsulate the great variety of situations to which the הכל judgments refer.⁴⁴ The phrase הכל הכל enlarges the field of the definition of הכל and thereby creates ample range for Qoheleth to usher in his הכל judgments. It is the generalization by abstraction of the entire text (הכל הכל being the ultimate abstraction). As such it works as what Bal terms a "mirror text"; a phrase that comes to signify the whole scheme of a story and which "lifts the whole narrative onto another level...[and] serves as directions for use".⁴⁵ Qoheleth's paramount judgment, then, is a standard by which all of his consequent experience shall be judged. There can be no challenge laid against it. For Qoheleth, there is no one who can say, "This is *not* הכל" concerning any activity or any *thing* he has experienced and judged so.

⁴² 8.17; cf. 11.5. Further on Qoheleth's indictment of God in the inscrutability of the world, see Chapter 9.3.

⁴³ Fox, *Qohelet*, pp. 35, 47; cf. p. 108.

⁴⁴ Furthermore, cf. T. Polk: "there is scarcely a topic in the book to which *hebel* is not applied" ("The Wisdom of Irony", p. 7).

⁴⁵ Bal, *Narratology*, p. 147.

Chapter 4

THE INNER BORDERS

1. הבל הבלים *in the Frame* (1.2; 12.8)

"Absurdity of absurdities", said Qoheleth, "Absurdity of absurdities";
"Everything is absurd." (1.2)

"Absurdity of absurdities", said Qoheleth,
"Everything is absurd." (12.8)

These verses are unique in several respects. The initial superlative construct in each verse, הבל הבלים, is peculiar to Ecclesiastes. The two verses together form what is widely agreed to be the most powerful narrative *inclusio* in the Old Testament. The final phrase in each verse (הכל הבל) is also peculiar to Ecclesiastes and occurs six other times in the book (1.14; 2.11, 17; 3.19; 9.1;¹ 12.8) forming one of the most concise and wide-sweeping judgments within the biblical literature.

The superlative, which itself functions as a kind of frame at 1.12 and 12.8, expresses the uttermost of what is absurd: "Absurdity of absurdities". Like "Holy of holies" (Exod. 26.33) and "Song of songs" (Cant. 1.1), that phrase simply expresses the uttermost of the quality expressed. But unlike its biblical counterparts, the phrase is also used as a generalized expression that is reminiscent of a lament. In Ecclesiastes this superlative has no other proper subject but the experience of the speaker himself. But there is a referent. The lone proclamation, "Absurdity of absurdities", begs the question, "What is this absurdity?" This absurdity, the sequential reader learns, is הכל, "everything".

¹ Read הכל לפניהם הבל; see p. 82 n. 38.

As discussed above, the definition of **הכל** is made complete as the sequential reader progresses through the text. It is fully developed by the time the epilogue is reached, for it is at that point that the superlative appears again. Its occurrence at 12.8 lends the construct a finality. It is the alpha and omega of Qoheleth's judgments. The superlative phrase is limited to the frame narrator's text and the narrative representation suggests that the frame narrator has employed it in order uniquely to summarize the majority of Qoheleth's observations.

While **הכל הכל** also functions summarily, it appears in Qoheleth's text² as well as the frame narrator's and therefore does not carry with it the same uniqueness or level of judgment as **הכל הכלים** at 1.2 and 12.8.³ This uniqueness is hard to overestimate. It suggests that not only is the frame narrator's understanding of Qoheleth himself seemingly complete, but also his understanding of Qoheleth's most crucial operating idea, **הכל**—the "mental image which affects his thinking".⁴ The frame narrator is wholly aware, and makes explicit use, of this organizing principle of Qoheleth's story.

In sum, the elements of 1.1-2 that create a readerly impact have now been discussed: the commencement of a narrative frame, shift in narrative level and voice, commencement of desire and plot, and the significance of **הכל** to the frame narrator. All of these aspects can be seen to form the nucleus of the framing strategy. While this strategy is not limited to passages in which the frame narrator "appears" (for its strategy is to be an ever-present indicator), it is fitting

² 1.14; 2.11, 17; 3.19. Also, see p. 84 n. 37.

³ Seybold also recognizes the way in which **הכל הכלים** necessarily surpasses the level of the other *hebel* judgments: "The framework verses, 1:12 and 12:8, display indeed an expansion into the universal and a heightening of emotional interest that cannot be demonstrated in the maxims. In this way the catchword and battlecry of Qoheleth is elevated to a summary ideological conclusion, the expression of a nihilistic judgement on the world and its values" ("hebhel", p. 320).

⁴ Seybold, "hebhel", p. 320

to see in those passages both a *formal* structural strategy and springboards for discussion.

2. *A Momentary Intrusion (7.27)*

In terms of structure, the frame of Ecclesiastes is not so much a picture frame as a window frame with a thin partition in its centre. The frame narrator's intrusion at that centre serves to remind the reader that the frame narrator is still telling (on a level outside of the flow of narration) Qoheleth's story. The intrusion is found in the midst of one of Qoheleth's most intense observations (7.23-24):

All this I have tested with wisdom. I said, "I will become wise", but it was far from me. What has been is far off and deep, surely deep. Who can discover it?⁵

While the "all this" (כל־זה) of v. 23 most likely refers to all that he has observed until that point,⁶ it may likewise look ahead to the following observation, as a sort of thematic preparation. As with a Greek tragedy, the reader knows (by Qoheleth's rhetorical question [v. 24b], suggesting his own ironic awareness of the situation) that Qoheleth will fail in becoming wise. He establishes his own demise and the anticipation builds (7.25-26):

I turned, I and my heart, to understand, to search out and to seek wisdom and the sum of things; to understand harmful folly and the foolishness of madness. And I found more bitter than death the woman who is traps and her heart nets, her hands chains.⁷ He who pleases God will be delivered

⁵ Cf. Job 11.7-8, where Zophar asks Job if he can find out (תמוצא) the deep soundings of God (החקר אלהי) which are deeper than Sheol (עמקה משאול). Like Job's deep soundings, Qoheleth cannot discover that which has been. This is the subject of his discourse here: what he *cannot* discover. Qoheleth addresses the issue similarly at 1.17; 2.12; 8.16-17. Further on this passage, see Chapters 7.1, 9.3.

⁶ Or at least to the section that precedes it (7.19-22). Further, see p. 206 n. 84.

⁷ "אשר־היא מצורים וחרמים לבה אסורים ידיה", "she is traps, her heart nets, her hands chains..." The first and second descriptive nouns are used of hunting and fishing (cf. Eccl. 9.12, 14), and the first and last possibly have military connotations (Lam. 3.52; Judg. 15.14; cf. Eccl. 4.14). However, the contention of K. Baltzer that this passage is primarily about war and the role of women therein is not convincing. For example, Baltzer argues that while the second and third terms have counterparts (her "heart" and "hands") the first does not and one must be offered (he suggests "breasts").

from her, but he who sins will be taken by her.

He claims that he turned (סבותי אני) to know (לרעת), to explore (ולתור) and seek (ובקש) wisdom and the sum of things: to *understand* the antitheses of conventional wisdom's rewards, folly and madness (7.25b). This grouping of "quest" verbs suggests that the forthcoming conclusion is paramount, for Qoheleth has enlisted all of his powers of observation to discover it.⁸ But this is not yet the most important of conclusions.

See, this I have found, said Qoheleth⁹ ([adding] one to one to find the sum, which my soul has continually sought but I have not found): one man among a thousand I have found, but a woman among all of these I have not found. See, this alone I have found: God made humanity upright, but they have sought many devices.¹⁰ (7.27-29)

Rather, in 7.27 the greater emphasis arrives: "*See, this* I have found..." (adding זה ראה to the lone verb of discovery at 7.26a), and the emphasis continues ("*said Qoheleth*") as Qoheleth informs the reader of his process of discovery, something which *until now* he was unable to discover. Finally (adding לבר to the already heightened formula of 7.27a), Qoheleth offers an observation that is integrally related to the first in this section (understanding is unattainable). The fact that he found a man among a thousand (even though we cannot know exactly

But this is unnecessary as it is likely that a counterpart is already present in the pronoun היא (see "Women and War in Qohelet 7:23–8:1a", *HTR* 80/1 [1987], pp. 127-32; esp. 128-29). Despite such attempts to avert our attention from the inherent misogyny, this text *is* potentially offensive. Compare another unconvincing attempt (in a wholly different vein) to "redeem" the text: Duane Garrett, "Ecclesiastes 7:25-29 and the Feminist Hermeneutic", *CTR* 2/2 (1988), pp. 309-21.

⁸ The בקש/מצא coupling, as M. Fox and B. Porten ("Unsought Discoveries: Qohelet 7:23–8:1a", *HS* 19 [1978], pp. 26-38) have pointed out, is unique and effective here, highlighting Qoheleth's own experiential ground (heightened further by the varying uses of חכם at 7.23; *ibid.*, pp. 27-29). Each occurrence of one generates occurrences of the other, and the word play is often rich or ironic (as in Qoheleth's *discovery* [מצא] that there is too much *seeking* [בקש], 7.29; *ibid.*, pp. 37-38).

⁹ That this is the frame narrator's text and neither Qoheleth's self reference nor a later editorial insertion, see p. 41 n. 83.

¹⁰ חשבנות, "sums"; LXX λογισμοῦς. Cf. Wis. 1.3: "...crooked reasonings [λογισμοί] separate one from God" (and see Wis. 3.10).

what is meant by this¹¹), but among the same amount of people he found no woman, is presented as a kind of evidence that humanity was first upright, but they now have sought many devices ("reasonings" which lead them astray). And this is how a thoroughly negative tone is conveyed: failure to discover, regardless of the object, is Qoheleth's vexation in life.

The framing here is multi-layered. Not only are these observations narrated particularly in the guise of Solomon (which he rarely does as explicitly elsewhere¹²), but it is at the heart of this key passage that the frame narrator has chosen to remind the reader that he is still remembering and recounting Qoheleth's story. By heightening this particular observation syntactically and by employing the guise of Solomon more distinctly than usual, this passage is invariably memorable. The frame narrator's insertion aids in its "setting aside", marking its importance for Qoheleth's narrative.¹³

¹¹ Whybray indicates the important fact (widely overlooked) that Qoheleth does not inform the reader either just what it was he was seeking in this instance or precisely what is meant by the hyperbolic "one man among a thousand" (*Ecclesiastes*, p. 127). Further, see my discussion at Chapter 9.3.

¹² For the Solomonic aspect and a treatment of *Qoheleth's* strategy in this passage, see Chapter 7.1.

¹³ Lohfink agrees that the frame narrator's intrusion here serves to highlight his observation in contradistinction to others (as cited disapprovingly in Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 126).

Chapter 5

THE OUTER BORDERS: II

So, naturalists observe, a flea
Hath smaller fleas that on him prey;
And these have smaller fleas to bite 'em,
And so proceed *ad infinitum*.
Thus every poet, in his kind,
Is bit by him that comes behind.
—Jonathan Swift ("On Poetry", l. 337)

The epilogue¹ may be divided into four sections based both on form and content: 1) the narrative *inclusio* (12.8, the counterpart to 1.2), 2) the final description of Qoheleth (12.9-10), 3) the warnings to the frame narrator's son (12.10-11) and 4) the final word of advice to the reader (12.13-14). Of course, in the epilogue the frame narrator comes to life as a character in his own right. In the first section he recalls Qoheleth's ultimate observation, laying claim again to a complete understanding of Qoheleth's story. In the second he offers an *individual* view of Qoheleth's activity (cf. 12.10— "words of delight" and "with integrity he wrote words of truth"). In the third he makes clear his epic setting (of speaking to his son) and upholds what he regards to be the ideal epistemological process (see below). In the fourth he brings everything ("all that has been heard", 12.13) to a seemingly orthodox conclusion.

Unlike the superscription, there are not many exact structural parallels to

¹ Whether or not this section is the work of one or more epilogists or redactors is not pertinent here. However, some argue that the epilogue does not begin until 12.9 (e.g. Murphy, Whybray). This overlooks the fact that 12.8 is an intrusion of frame narration. One must admit at least the presence of both Qoheleth and the frame narrator there, if not the frame narrator alone. The fact that it is only within 1.2 and 12.8 that the phrase **הבל הבלים** occurs sets these texts sharply apart from Qoheleth; further, see Chapter 3.1a.

the epilogue in other ANE frames.² G. Wilson has pointed out a structural similarity between this epilogue and the prologue to Proverbs. However, the connections he makes are strained.³ While comparisons to overall structures and framing strategies are useful, it is best to treat this epilogue within the limited context of the story it frames.⁴

The epilogue has brought to the fore some interesting interpretive issues. Many commentators have seen in this passage a clue to the process of canonization *within* the Bible.⁵ Also, the relationship of this passage's composition to that of the body of the book has merited much discussion and has been connected to the issue of canonization as well. While I will touch on these issues where relevant, my own discussion will focus largely on the questions

² See Chapter 2.2. Some ANE frames, for example, further the inner narrative more than Eccl. 12.8-14 does (e.g. *Kagemni*).

³ Wanting to stress a thematic connection of the collections of Proverbs to Ecclesiastes, Wilson argues that the "common elements" in Prov. 1.1-8 and Eccl. 12.9-14 serve to "bind all between more closely together" ("The Words of the Wise": The Intent and Significance of Qohelet 12:9-14", *JBL* 103/2 [1984], p. 183). The evidence offered is that both the prologue to Prov. 1.1-7 and Eccl. 12.9-14 emphasize the importance of justice (צדק, Prov. 1.3; Eccl. 12.14; cf. Eccl. 3.17; 8.5-6) and (making a connection between Deuteronomic notions of justice and wisdom) that the "fear God and keep his commands" of Eccl. 12.14 served to link the late near-canonical forms of both books together (pp. 189-92). Hence, the "canonical editors" of both works added all the superscriptions and Eccl. 12.9-14, "making explicit the connections implied in Proverbs 1-9" (p. 190). The analysis fails on three accounts. 1) The material which is indeed comparable is, as Wilson admits, fairly stock wisdom material (justice, fearing God etc.; p. 181); 2) Wilson does not sufficiently deal with the content of Qoheleth's narration, thereby overlooking the immediate function of the frame narrator; and 3) if the connection was made as arbitrarily as Wilson suggests then it need not be taken as seriously as he suggests (e.g., "This movement [of editing] so binds these two works together that now each must be read in the larger context of the other and in the light of the hermeneutical principle [fearing Yahweh/God] laid down in prologue and epilogue"; p. 190).

⁴ This said, I accept the opinion of Wilson and others that in 12.11-14 the emphasis of the frame narrator moves beyond (while still including) the subject of Qoheleth.

⁵ See Chapter 7.3 and, in particular, Childs, *Introduction*, pp. 584-89; J. Goldin, "The End of Ecclesiastes: Literal Exegesis and Its Transformation", in A. Altmann (ed.), *Biblical Motifs: Origins and Transformations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 135-58 (Goldin deals mostly with the epilogue in relation to the Jewish canon which includes the Talmud); G. Sheppard, "The Epilogue to Qoheleth as Theological Commentary", *CBQ* 39 (1977), pp. 182-89; Wilson, "Intent and Significance".

raised by the unique and tense relationship between the one framing and the one framed.

1. *The Inclusio* (12.8)

"Absurdity of absurdities", said Qoheleth,
"Everything is absurd."

I have already pointed out the correlation of this verse to the superscription, and that it is identical except for the lack of repetition of the phrase "absurdity of absurdities". What has yet to be discussed is the *strategy* of inclusion at hand. Inclusion is a well-known device in nearly all forms of literature. It is a kind of framing, a formal mark of structure with a forceful rhetorical function. The *inclusio* serves to mark off a specified section of text. In this case it surrounds precisely Qoheleth's narration and nothing else. Thinking in different terms, one might compare the *inclusio* to two identical doors at either end of the same room—serving as the only entrance and exit respectively—or perhaps the ornate covers of a book which serve to create a unique sign, a quality of separateness. Just as book covers give the most obvious appearance that the book is physically stable (even though its real stability comes from the binding of the loose leaves inside), so the *inclusio* is the most obvious structural marker and thematic sign in Ecclesiastes.⁶

It is worth noting that the content of this inclusion is itself inclusive. That

⁶ So also, P. Viviano, "The Book of Ecclesiastes", p. 80. A.G. Wright has suggested that the location of this structural marker is numerically significant: "it is quite clear that the editor does take a carefully counted book of 216 verses...and he does in fact build that book to a total of 222 verses by the addition of six verses of epilogue and thus bring the book into perfect balance (111/111). It seems beyond reasonable doubt that he was aware of the numbers 111 and 216 and that the production of a perfectly balanced book is not something that he blundered into" ("The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited", p. 44; see also pp. 43, 45 on the significance of the **הכל** phrases in the *inclusios*). Of course, Wright admits that the Masoretic versification may flaw his argument, but considers it "consistent enough" for his purposes.

is, its content (the superlative in particular) is a summary, taking into account all that it frames, reckoning everything. This type of abstract reckoning creates the first notable incongruity between the frame narrator and the one framed. By being overtly aphoristic, the frame narrator flies in the face of Qoheleth's more open style of reasoning. As such, Michael Payne remarks, the frame narrator is "at odds" with Qoheleth, who is

antiaphoristic, complexly dialectical, and thoroughly dramatic... It is not so much that Koheleth rejects [for example, the orthodox ideas expressed in 12.13-14]...as it is that he holds a larger, more comprehensive view, his meditations requiring the orthodox views to which they are a dialectical response.⁷

It is at the inclusion that this anti-dialectic finds its beginning.

What about the relation of 12.8 to the rest of the epilogue? Fox has offered an interesting paraphrase of 12.8: "Utterly absurd! (*as the Qohelet used to say*). Everything is absurd!"⁸ By understanding the perfect, אָמַר, as a frequentative simple past, Fox highlights the frame narrator's interpretive presence which is about to unfold fully. Although it is the imperfect (or vav-conversive) and not the perfect which usually suggests such a sense,⁹ the story aspect is justifiably amplified as a paraphrase. The frame narrator is about to commence something of a biographical nature.

2. *The Final Portrait (12.9-10)*

Furthermore, Qoheleth was a sage. He continually taught the people knowledge, and he listened,¹⁰ and studied [and] composed¹¹ many

⁷ "The Voices of Ecclesiastes", p. 264.

⁸ *Qohelet*, p. 347 (italics mine).

⁹ See Davidson, *An Introductory Hebrew Grammar* (New York: Scribner's and Sons, 24th edn, 1932), §46.II.2. Compare the frequentative aspect found, for example, in Job 1.4: "[Job's sons] used to go (וַהֲלִכּוּ) to feast...and they would invite (וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ) their sisters..."

¹⁰ Reading שָׁמַע at 12.9 as the piel perf. of שָׁמַע ("to hear"—supported by ancient versions; cf. Prov. 1.5-6; 12.15; 18.15—listening is an activity of the wise) and not as a derivative of the ill-attested מֵאֲזֵנַיִם ("weights", "scales"; so RSV and a few

proverbs.¹² Qoheleth sought to find words of delight and with integrity he wrote words of truth.

While the other, latter texts of the epilogue (such phrases as עֲשׂוּת סַפְרִים at 12.12 etc.) have received much attention, this section has received surprisingly little. In terms of Qoheleth as the frame narrator saw him, it is the most informative text in Ecclesiastes and presents the reader with a well-defined final portrait. While the effects of the frame narrator describing Qoheleth as if he lived (lifting him, in a sense, out of a fictive context) have already been touched on above, the content of that description remains to be explored.

This commencement proper of the epilogue reiterates the authority of the frame narrator as Qoheleth's foremost interpreter. First, his "historical" existence is (albeit modally) insisted upon: Qoheleth *was* (שָׁהִיָּה). Secondly, his activity is described: Qoheleth *did* such and such. The existent and actantial modes together suggest a complete description. The frame narrator begins that description with something that should not take us by surprise: Qoheleth was a חָכָם.

Much ink has been spilled over the meaning of חָכָם. Some have endowed it with a political sense; that is, one successfully dealing with powerful people, knowing how to get what he or she wants.¹³ Or R.E. Murphy, for example, sees a חָכָם as one who is concerned with the things of the wise (the question of "what is good", "profitable" etc.) and argues against the notion that there was a professional class of "the wise".¹⁴ Amongst the plethora of Old Testament

commentators). See Fox, *Qohelet*, p. 323.

¹¹ On these verbs (חָקַר and חָקַן) see below, n. 18.

¹² For examples of the semantic range of מִשְׁלַּל see M. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* (TOTC; Downer's Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), p. 153. Because a מִשְׁלַּל could include such "genres" as parables and allegories, it is perhaps an apt nomen for the diverse quality of devices Qoheleth employed in his narration.

¹³ For example, Whybray (citing Fitchner approvingly), "Prophecy and Wisdom", in R. Coggins *et al.* (eds.), *Israel's Prophetic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 187, *passim*.

¹⁴ "The Sage in Ecclesiastes and Qoheleth the Sage", in *SIAN*, pp. 265-67.

passages concerning wisdom, Job 15.2-6 and Prov. 1.5-6 are particularly instructive regarding the *activity* of the חכּם. The former passage suggests, by negation, that it is the responsibility of the wise to speak words of substance which end in profit (v. 3), are rooted in the fear of God (v. 4a), promote meditation (v. 4b) and testify to the integrity of the speaker (v. 6). (This last aspect is echoed in the frame narrator's description of the manner in which Qoheleth wrote: יָשָׁר; cf. Prov. 22.20-21.) Proverbs 1.5-6 suggests that the purpose of wisdom is both to gain skill (v. 5) and to make one cunning with words (v. 6). One common Old Testament idea (developed particularly in Proverbs) is that the ability of the wise derives from learning, or from the presumably self-induced action of fearing Yahweh (esp. Prov. 1.7; 15.33). However, in passages such as Exod. 36.1-2, 4, 8; Deut. 1.13, 15, the wise are so because Yahweh has enabled them. And according to Sir. 38.24ff., wisdom is something acquired only if one has the luxury of time to pursue it.

Qoheleth's own views on wisdom are varied. Wisdom itself is surely good (2.13, 26; 7.11-12, 19; 8.1-2; 9.13-18) and is clearly helpful for his own task at hand (1.13; 2.3, 9; 7.23). Yet wisdom is under the scrutiny of Qoheleth's eye as something to be wary of (1.17; 2.12; 7.25; 8.16-17) and is even in itself a vexation (1.18; also, compare 2.16b; 6.8a; 7.7; 8.17; 9.11 [bread does not come to the wise]). In light of this, Murphy is certainly correct to point out that Qoheleth the sage *is* one who concerns himself with the question of what is good for humanity (2.3, 24-25; *passim*; cf. 4.9-12)¹⁵ and, of course, of what is

¹⁵ Whereas Qoheleth makes it a point to test what is good (טוֹב) for humanity, the narrator of Proverbs is very much in the habit of *telling* the reader what *is* good (Prov. 13.2, 4, 21; 19.8 [wisdom leads to what is good]; 28.10; *passim*). Interestingly, one finds a middle position in Job. At the outset Job piously asks if he can rightly receive what is good while rejecting what is bad (רָע, 2.10). However, later he complains that he will see no more good (7.7), and that when he sought what was good, evil (רָע) came (30.26). Also, compare Elihu's statement concerning the "case" of Job—that they should consider together among themselves "what is good" (34.4; NRSV).

advantageous (having יִתְרוֹן; 1.3; 2.13; 3.9; *passim*). The description, then, that Qoheleth is a חָכָם (given Murphy's bend to the interpretation), surely comes as no surprise to the reader.

Against such a semantic background the frame narrator (who was at least, it is implied, familiar with the "words of the wise") claims that Qoheleth was a חָכָם. Qoheleth's myriad character fits well the varied hues of what it meant to be a sage. It would be difficult to claim, then, that the frame narrator has added anything new to the reader's understanding of Qoheleth at this point, except perhaps that by regulating him to this particular nomen Qoheleth is, once again, to whatever limited extent possible, "normalized" by the one who frames him. In fact, by stating that Qoheleth was a חָכָם the tension between the kind of wisdom Qoheleth employed and the "being wise" that he searched for (see Chapter 9.3) is glossed over.

What, then, does the frame narrator add to the portrait of Qoheleth? In what follows does he begin to inform the reader beyond what can be adduced from the body of Qoheleth's narration? Is there a tension? Are the activities described really manifest, or even implied, in Qoheleth's story? And what can we learn from differences between Qoheleth's self-understanding and the understanding the frame narrator has of him?

From Qoheleth's narration the reader may assume that he was certainly qualified to teach about the subject of knowledge, a concept which, for him, worked as a matrix of interpretation by which to observe the world. However, that he actually engaged in teaching is not so clear. Or indeed, that he had an association with "the people"¹⁶ is a difficult concept to reconcile to his

¹⁶ חָכָם from Exodus to Joshua often *refers* to Israel (Exod. 1.20; 3.12; 4.16 etc.). This is usually due to the Israelites being the contextual antecedents of the word, but the word comes to *mean* Israel in later use (1 Chron. 13.4; cf. Ezra 3.1; Pss. 106.48; 144.15). There is a more general meaning found elsewhere which might denote "humanity" (Isa. 42.5 [לְעָם]; cf. Prov. 29.2; cf. LXX's ἀνθρώπων for חָכָם at Eccl.

narration. He speaks early on of "the people of old", and how they will or will not be remembered (1.11). In a parabolic proverb he speaks of a king of whom there was no end to "the people" who followed him (4.16). This gap in Qoheleth's story creates, as it were, a gap for the frame narrator to fill. But the Solomonic connection becomes particularly relevant here in that Solomon's prayer at 1 Kgs 3.8-9 could function as a necessary pretext:

And your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen; a great people (עַם־רַב)... Then give to your servant a discerning heart (לֵב שֹׁמֵעַ) to judge your people and be able to discern between what is good and evil...

There are plenty of examples in the Old Testament of leaders explicitly teaching "the people" and often in a sustained role, and the request of Solomon, that he might judge Yahweh's people "in the midst" of them, suggests that he desired a *continual* role of instruction in Israel (cf. 1 Kgs 4.33-34 [5.13-14]). Qoheleth's own connection to Solomon (see Chapter 7) might fill-in the gap and show that the reader has again gained relatively little additional knowledge. In fact, the very notion of teaching in the Old Testament is so diverse and ambiguous¹⁷ that the frame narrator's description is incapable of filling in the gap of Qoheleth's narrative.

The following three delineations of Qoheleth's character in v. 9b (וְאִנִּי)

12.9). Because of the Solomonic context (see below), הָעַם at Eccl. 12.9 probably refers to Israel—i.e., whatever that had come to mean in Qoheleth's location in history.

¹⁷ Moses taught Israel (or at least thought he should—Deut. 4.14; 6.1), but we are never told what that entailed. The *subject* of the piel of לָמַד is sometimes indirectly conveyed by commands to parents to teach their children (Deut. 4.10; 11.19; cf. Jer. 9.14[13], 20[19]), or God himself is the subject (Ps. 25.4-5; Jer. 32.33). We do not know who the "teachers" of the narrator of Ps. 119 are (v. 99). Daniel was presumably taught by court officials of some kind (Dan. 1.4). Among many other words which suggest teaching (יָדַע, hiph.; שָׁכַל; אָלַף, hiph.), compare some diverse examples—יָדָה: an idol can "teach" lies (hiph.; Hab. 2.18); Job will "teach" Bildad about the hand of God (Job 27.11)—בִּיָּן: "teachers" (hiph. part.) served in David's entourage (1 Chron. 25.8) and the Levites "taught" all Israel, being holy to the LORD (2 Chron. 35.3).

הרבה (וחקר תקן¹⁸ משלים הרבה) taken together might, as M. Fishbane has argued, relate directly to the composition of Ecclesiastes. Drawing on examples of cognate verb forms in Assyrian and Babylonian colophons, Fishbane concludes that the epilogist wrote a similar kind of colophon, borrowing widely from the "professional" language of his cultural milieu, creating a "stylized variation of conventional scribal tasks well known in ancient Israel".¹⁹ His work seems to have found wide acceptance.²⁰ However, there are some difficulties. Besides some weaknesses in his linguistic assumptions,²¹ there is no evidence, beyond the description of Qoheleth, that the epilogue refers to any tasks or processes beyond those that are present. Fishbane offers three examples of colophon phrases grouped together which suggest scribal activity and concludes that the epilogue of Ecclesiastes was written consciously in a similar pattern. The main problem here, however, is that the frame narrator's immediate concern is not so much to shed light on the scribal activity of a sage as to offer a very personal assessment of Qoheleth which adumbrates his character profile (hence such qualitative, value-laden adjectives as חפץ, ישר and אמת; see below).

That Qoheleth composed or arranged "many proverbs"²² echoes the

¹⁸ On the first of these three verbs (אין) see above, n. 11. The second (חקר, "to search out", "examine thoroughly", "investigate" [hence by extension, "to study"]; sometimes of land [Judg. 18.2]; sometimes in contradistinction to the "unsearchability" of God [Job 28.27; Prov. 25.2; cf. Job 5.27]) certainly resounds of Qoheleth's descriptions of himself in passages where he proclaims that he intends to search out and discover the nature of wisdom and the world (chs. 2 and 7 esp.). The third verb (תקן, "to set in order", "make straight"; Eccl. 1.15; 7.13; cf. Dan. 4.36[33]) is not well attested in the Old Testament. The sense of composition, which is likely meant at Eccl. 12.9, finds a parallel in Sir. (Heb.) 47.9, of singers "composing" music. Murphy has made the attractive suggestion that these latter two verbs might echo Qoheleth's critical faculty as illustrated in Eccl. 7 and 8, in which case they suggest praise (*Ecclesiastes*, p. 125).

¹⁹ *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), p. 31. Fishbane reads the three verbs as "ordered", "examined" and "fixed" respectively.

²⁰ See Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 127.

²¹ See Fox, *Qoheleth*, p. 323.

²² As is widely noted in the commentaries, "many proverbs" does not necessarily suggest the book of Proverbs, but more likely refers to the specific sayings of Qoheleth

superscriptions found in Proverbs, and as a description the effect is surely to mollify some of the "solipsistic or elitist" elements of Qoheleth's text.²³ That is, if any reader be tempted to think that Qoheleth was not involved in the more traditional activities of such sages or scribes as the "men of Hezekiah" (Prov. 25.1), they need not doubt. With this and the previous three verbs associated with the activity of the wise, the frame narrator is perhaps at odds with Qoheleth's Solomonic guise. While kings might have discovered and even "composed" proverbs, it is doubtful that they actually "wrote" them down; such was the task of the scribe. Furthermore, Qoheleth's actions in his own narrative seem to fit more the picture of a king who is not so much concerned with teaching, study and proverbs, as with the political acumen by which he amassed his great wealth²⁴ and the issues that arose from his consequent failures. Qoheleth's self-depiction is again at odds with the frame narrator's.

Such incongruence is admittedly less clear, however, in v. 10. The shift here to a more personal description resonates more clearly with the body of Qoheleth's narration. In one way, this description anaclectically expands the plot; for Qoheleth sought, but the question may be raised, Did he *find*? As Fox points out, the frame narrator does not "commit himself as to the success of this attempt [at seeking out words of delight]".²⁵ But even more to the point here is the tension in contrasting descriptions concerning what Qoheleth actually did. As to whether there is incongruence, the issue rests largely, I think, on the phrase "delightful words" (רְבִירֵחַפִּיץ). It is likely that the phrase refers to what G.A. Barton termed an "elegance of form"²⁶—Qoheleth sought to write in a pleasing

(particularly in chs. 7 and 10).

²³ So G. Sheppard, "The Epilogue to Qoheleth", p. 184.

²⁴ This is particularly evident in ch. 2, esp. v. 8; cf. 1 Kgs 4.20-28.

²⁵ Fox, "Frame-narrative", p. 101.

²⁶ *Ecclesiastes*, p. 199.

and elegant manner.²⁷ First, there is a potentially harmonic point to make. Perhaps Qoheleth found words that brought pleasure to a life that was otherwise vexatious and unbearable. Such well-chosen words might have escaped the **הבל** judgment of 5.2-7: "For with many dreams and absurdities [there are] many words—but fear God" (5.7). But as a *summary* the description is seriously flawed. In Qoheleth's own terms he sought not "delightful", elegant words, but the very existence and quality of all that is under the sun. He sought what was deep and far off (7.23-29; 8.17). What Qoheleth sought was substantially more than what his interpreter would have us believe and, according to Qoheleth's own estimation, he failed in discovering it (see Chapter 9.3).

It is significant that the frame narrator's description of Qoheleth remains at a distance from him. Besides the broad descriptive term **חכם**, he does not really tell us anything *about* Qoheleth. Was Qoheleth difficult to get along with? Did he love and serve his God all his days? He sought to write uprightly, but was he, like Job, truly **ישר**? Although there are reasons for (careful) readers to disbelieve (at the story-level) the frame narrator's description, that description is made with confidence. The activities described are not exactly radical or surprising, but he is nonetheless an explicit biographer, offering a final view of Qoheleth which the reader must have as the last "taste" in his or her mouth. The questions are left for readers to engage.

²⁷ In Ecclesiastes the word has two senses: 1) The usual Old Testament meaning, "delight", "pleasure" (5.3; 8.3—the king does "whatever he pleases [= freedom]"; 12.1—"having pleasure in" [without vexation or pain; cf. the phrase before it: "Before the days of misery (**ימי הרעה**) come..."], which are days in which you cannot take delight); 2) the more obscure Old Testament meaning, "matter", "thing" (3.1, 17; 5.8; 8.6). The usual sense (1) at 12.1, borne out by the poem that follows it with its contrasting themes of delight and misery (12.1-7), likely influences what is found here at 12.9.

3. Warnings and Admonitions to a Preferred Epistemology (12.11-12)

The words of sages are as oxgoads, and as implanted nails²⁸ are [the] collected sayings²⁹ given by one shepherd.³⁰ Yet beyond these, my child, take heed:³¹ [of the] making³² of many³³ books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.

The translation and general sense of this section present one of the most difficult tasks to Qoheleth-studies. In v. 11 the metaphors at work are arranged in a difficult syntax. There are several rare idioms including the *hapax leg.*, בעלי, אספות (v. 11c), the precise meaning of which would be enormously instructive

²⁸ משמרות; "nails"—something which keeps something else fixed (cf. Isa. 41.7; Jer. 10.4).

²⁹ בעלי אספות, "the owners (or "masters") of collections (of sayings?)". בעל at Eccl. 5.13 and 10.20 undoubtedly means "owner". There is a figurative use of בעל found at Eccl. 10.11: a בעל לשון (lit. "owner of a tongue") could mean "one skilled in speech" or one who controls a snake's tongue and who therefore "charms" a snake (cf. Ps. 58.4-5[5-6]; Jer. 8.17; Sir. 12.13; also, see Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 154). Joseph, for example, is a בעל החלמות—a "dreamer"; a maker or craftsman of dreams; a "specialist" (Gen. 37.19). Although בעל usually refers to people, it is unlikely that "people" would be given by a shepherd, even in a figurative sense. The sense should be extended to that which represents people; i.e., their writing, hence complementing the preceding parallel, "the words of sages"—hence "the collected sayings [of the sages]".

³⁰ "Shepherd" is often a metaphor for God (Gen. 49.24; Pss. 23.1; 80.1; Isa. 40.11; Jer. 31.10; Ezek. 34.12 etc.). It could refer to Solomon as a patron of wisdom or to Qoheleth himself. All that is clear is that since the shepherd here is the subject of נתן, "it" is the source of the collected sayings just referred to and therefore plays a part in the dual parallelism at play. Since this shepherd is clearly the source of the sayings one might rule out a human referent, although such figures as David and Moses come to mind as sources of psalmody and law respectively. Solomon (or Qoheleth/Solomon?), then, should not be ruled out here (contra Gordis and Fox). Whether or not אחר is an enumerator (RSV *et al.*) or an indefinite article (Fox) affects the sense little.

³¹ הוזהר; cf. 4.13, where it is used of an old and foolish king who, no longer "taking heed", is thought worse off than a poor but wise youth (cf. Ezek. 33.4-6). It is associated with teaching (hiph.) at Exod. 18.20.

³² עשה ספרים has received much attention. There is wide agreement that עשה here denotes composition of some sort; that is, the physical making of books. P.A.H. De Boer makes the suggestion that עשה refers to "working at" books. This can be rendered by metonymy as "book learning" (R.B.Y. Scott), or "use of books" (NEB; see De Boer, "A Note on Ecclesiastes 12:12a", in R. Fischer (ed.), *A Tribute to Arthur Vööbus* (Chicago: Lutheran School of Theology, 1977), pp. 85-88. Since De Boer's suggestion does not exclude, for example, copying or transcribing books (p. 86), something at the level of composition may still be allowed for.

³³ That הרבה should be understood as "many" as opposed to the adverbial "endless" (hence "endless making of books"; so H.L. Ginsberg) see Goldin, "The End of Ecclesiastes", pp. 145-46. Also, cf. Eccl. 12.9בβ.

as regards the process of any kind of "professional" wisdom in ancient Israel. In v. 12 the antecedents/referents to "these", "the making of many books" and "much study" are unclear. This is likely a text full of the jargon of a closed community.³⁴

To help untangle the metaphors in v. 11, a close reading of a kind is necessary. The first parallel seems clear:

words of sages = oxgoads

The words of the wise direct and prod one as a goad prods an ox. The recipient of those words plays a passive role while the role of the sages themselves is a hybrid between activity and passivity.³⁵ But this metaphor must be reconciled with the verb "to give" at the end of the sentence. Therefore, if the oxgoads and nails are both given by a shepherd then the following parallel is possible:

giving/use of oxgoads and nails by shepherd = use of words by sages

Just as a shepherd uses goads and nails to prod and fix, so sages use their words to inflict; the metaphorical sense breaks down somewhat and the parallel becomes more analogical. The words themselves are just as "dangerous" to human recipients (who now function metaphorically with animals that are prodded) as goads are to animals.³⁶

A more widespread understanding of the verse (presuming a more natural

³⁴ Compare Sheppard's comment: "[the frame narrator] speaks of 'these' [12.12a] as though he can assume a recognition of their identity by his readers" ("The Epilogue to Qoheleth", p. 188).

³⁵ The limits of the metaphor can be pushed further. The ox works and is therefore not passive, but is the very engine of the work of which it is a part. The ox, however, does not decide where it goes; this is the nature of its passivity. Its direction is determined by the prodding of the goad. In the same way, the student studies much (the student provides impetus) and the way (דרך) of wisdom must be kept to at all costs. Yet the direction must be determined by the teacher (passivity) and the (force of the?) teacher's words (12.11c). Furthermore, an ox must be goaded to pull the cart and keep it on the road (דרך), yet Qoheleth says to his reader, "Walk in the ways of your heart (בדרכי לבך)".

³⁶ So Fox, *Qohelet*, pp. 325-26.

readings. The one who frames prescribes the boundaries of interpretation *and* adumbrates this with the metaphors. The frame narrator, as Qoheleth's presenter, fits his own partial description of the process of the wisdom tradition more closely than Qoheleth himself does. This is even more apparent from the following verse.

The thrust of v. 12 is one of admonition and warning, but the precise content of that warning is difficult to discern. If the antecedent for "these" (מהמה) is the "collected sayings" just mentioned, then the admonition to the son (the frame narrator's student) is to not "go beyond"³⁸ the "collections of the masters" (Qoheleth being one of them). However, if the antecedent is the story of Qoheleth (hence, "these [words just related]"), then the epilogist seems to be offering veiled praise of Qoheleth's wisdom. In any case, some literary content is being referred to, beyond which the frame narrator does not wish his audience to extend any intellectual endeavour; perhaps even a fixed canon of literature is in mind.³⁹

³⁸ יתר; cf. Eccl. 12.9: "Furthermore ("besides what you have just read"), Qoheleth was a sage." Compare Est. 6.6—Haman says to the king, "Whom would the king wish to honour *besides me?* (יותר ממני, "beyond, more than")" The phrase suggests an exceeding of the subject it qualifies in a way which has already been done. Hence, the student has been instructed, by implication, as to what is good, but studying or "composing" more than this is not recommended.

³⁹ For Sheppard the antecedent of "these" is "a set of extant collections or books inclusive of, but larger than, Qoheleth" ("The Epilogue to Qoheleth", p. 188). J. Goldin points to the *Anshe Keneset Ha-Gedolah* of the *Abot* which is representative of the mishnaic understanding of Eccl. 12.12 as an admonition to maintain the integrity of the Torah ("The End of Ecclesiastes", p. 156; *passim*). Hence "these" are the "collections" of Torah. Therefore it was said, "The Torah is sufficient", even, "preserve instead the more carefully edited readings provided" (*ibid.*, p. 149). Even the רברי חכמים at the beginning of this section might refer to a "knowable body of knowledge", although there is little evidence to suggest that it refers exclusively to the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes (contra Wilson and, partly, Sheppard; see Wilson, "Intent and Significance", pp. 176-77). Goldin's arguments might be supported by the Deuteronomic admonitions to not "add to" (לא תספור) the commands that the LORD has given, lest things not go well (Deut. 4.2; 12.32). Also, see Roger Beckwith (*The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985], pp. 319-20) who argues that 12.12 refers to work outside of Ecclesiastes.

As the verse progresses, the warning is elaborated. The warning suggests that if one were to go beyond the fixed literature, the composition (or "working at" in general) of a great number of books would result and the hapless victim would be drawn into much study. The picture is one of the student wearying him or herself with labour and the sentiment is perhaps surprisingly congruous with some of Qoheleth's own notions of absurdity:

For the dream comes with much concern (ענין),
and the voice of a fool with many words. (5.3; cf. 1.8)

For with many dreams and absurdities [there are] many words—
but fear God. (5.7)

For Qoheleth, too, the sheer quantity of things are a mechanism of the absurd (cf. 1.18; 5.11; 6.3, 11). (It is interesting to note that the frame narrator did not use *הבל* to describe what was "no end" and "a weariness to the body". Qoheleth undoubtedly would have.)

The congruity in this passage, however, ironically contributes to its incongruity. Qoheleth does not suggest himself that there is a fixed body of knowledge which must be adhered to, without which dire consequences would follow. For Qoheleth, the answer to what is "no end" and a "weariness of the flesh" (what is absurd) lies not in the wisdom tradition—for wisdom itself has failed in liberating him from the incongruence he has observed (see Chapter 9.3)—but rather in the enjoyment with which God empowers people to escape absurdity. The answer rests with God. Even more incongruent is the fact that Qoheleth often suggests that for him such absurdity could only be observed and not overcome by mere resistance.⁴⁰

Do the warnings of 12.11-12 reveal a preference, then, for the frame

⁴⁰ 4.1-3 is the best example of this; further, see Excursus 2.

narrator's own epistemological outlook?⁴¹ To approach this question I would like to pick up on the phrase "limits of knowledge". First it should be clarified what kind of knowledge is meant. The distinction offered some time ago by Michael Polanyi, of two types of knowledge, will serve my purpose here.⁴²

The first type is *tacit* knowledge, which is inarticulate in form. It is received. Like a map that fixes one's location in relation to the recognizable features of a landscape, this kind of knowledge is *a-critical* in nature and is formed from "systematically collected observations".⁴³ The crucial point in relation to this analysis is that it is received essentially unaltered. (Tacit "ability" is most apparent in the acquisition of language skills, as in the general observation that children learn a new language more quickly than adults.)

The second type is *explicit* knowledge. As the word implies, this knowledge can only be created through a process of discovery. The content of explicit knowledge is, in fact, tacit knowledge. That is, in the example of the map, the formulated knowledge which makes it up is expressed through a process of discovery that uses many forms of tacit knowledge (notes, surveys etc.). Such

⁴¹ Epistemology is perhaps the most basic of philosophical inquiries and is therefore beyond anything like a thorough treatment here. I refer the reader to Fox's superb treatment of the subject in chapter 3 of *Qohelet*, "The Way to Wisdom: Qohelet's Epistemology". Fox emphasizes Qoheleth's personal acquisition of knowledge. His conclusions are summed up well in his own words: "The sages prided themselves not on having created knowledge but on having taken it to themselves. Whereas Qohelet's favorite verb of perception is 'seeing', theirs is 'hearing'" (ibid., p. 98). It is worth noting, however, the warning offered by J. Ellul, that most philosophical "labels" foisted on Qoheleth are undeserved: "At most we could concede that the 'subjects treated' by Qohelet are also philosophers' favourite subjects—subjects that metaphysics has dealt with. But nothing more... Let us leave metaphysics to the metaphysicians, then, so that we can listen to Qohelet speak without metaphysicians' discourse interfering. This way we will see that he speaks differently from them" (*Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* [trans. J.M. Hanks; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990], p. 27; see also pp. 26-30).

⁴² As elaborated in *The Study of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1959), pp. 11-40, which is the introduction to his longer works, *Personal Knowledge* and *The Liberty of Logic*.

⁴³ Polanyi, *The Study of Man*, p. 17.

a process is doubtless evident in Qoheleth's text, in that it is his *explicit* reformulation of the tacit knowledge of wisdom which allows for his seemingly distinct brand of critical observation.⁴⁴ For example, in 3.16-17 Qoheleth observes some "stock" elements of wisdom—elements that could be considered the fabric of tacit knowledge:

But still I observed under the sun that in the place of justice there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness there was wickedness. I said in my heart, "God will judge the righteous and the wicked"; for [there is] a time for every matter and for every deed.

It is the intensely personal narrative element ("I said in my heart") that marks Qoheleth's sentiment as a reformulation, a judgment, an *explicit* idea about common human experience. Qoheleth thinks *about* wisdom. To "go beyond", in such a way, the established parameters of tacit knowledge might well be seen as futile or perhaps something more threatening. Polanyi, while stating a hypothetical case, makes the surprisingly applicable comment:

...the establishment of a completely precise and strictly logical representation of knowledge...might be championed as an ideal [and] any personal participation in our scientific account of the universe [is] a residual flaw which should be completely eliminated at once.⁴⁵

While one cannot, of course, strictly equate Polanyi's notion of "scientific account" with the frame narrator's notion of fixed learning and knowledge, the point remains relevant: moving beyond what is fixed is always a threat to the establishment that fixes it. In the case of the biblical wisdom literature, such

⁴⁴ It should be noted that the comparison being made here is *not* to the kinds of processes of discovery found in Job, Proverbs or any other wisdom literature. As has been widely noted (most especially by G. von Rad), similarities abound in the way in which sages acquired knowledge in the ancient world (cf. Crenshaw's comments on Qoheleth's "examination of personal experience" in his review of Fox's *Qoheleth*, in *JBL* 109 [1990], p. 715). The comparison is strictly limited to the fixed notions of knowledge as found in the epilogue.

⁴⁵ *The Study of Man*, p. 18. Polanyi goes on to refute this position as self-contradictory in that the "most distinguished act of thought consists in *producing* such knowledge" (ibid.; italics Polanyi's).

conservatizing elements as the frame narrator's text may well have buttressed the establishment of power—political and social.⁴⁶

It is Qoheleth's narrative setting that creates his epistemological foundation. He knows by experience. It is through the narrating "I" that he sets out his own limits of what he knows of and in the world.⁴⁷ The frame narrator, it appears, has attempted to override that method of knowing with his own tacit preference. But it should be remembered that the frame narrator's epistemological "preference" is only that. It is clear that his own priorities (what *his* student should heed) differ from Qoheleth's, but the reader has always had the option of choosing his or her own limits of interpretation. The force reflected in the midrashic readings of this passage, for example, was *chosen* by those readers. Indeed, the option always remains open to readers—the epilogue simply makes the options clear.

The epistemological tension can be further illustrated by Qoheleth's use of the language of shepherding, which is reversely paralleled in the epilogue. Both of the frame narrator's shepherding images (the goads which prod animals and the shepherd figure who is perhaps the source of something *like* implanted nails) serve to depict that which is fixed, even trustworthy (not departing from "these" will guard the student from weariness of the body; 12.12b). The knowledge within which the student is to stay (presumably a knowledge with which the frame narrator was well-acquainted) is tacit and is sure. For Qoheleth, however, the language of shepherding is suited to a contrary purpose: to depict that which

⁴⁶ So W. Brueggemann, "The Social Significance of Solomon as a Patron of Wisdom", in *SIAN*, pp. 126-27. Although Brueggemann does not mention Qoheleth's frame narrator, he speaks of the "proverbial wisdom" of ancient Israel that assumed of the world a "studiable system [with] constancy and durability, experienced as regularity and predictability" (p. 127). This is a perceived order which "is not questioned or criticised...[and] *outside of which* questions are not raised" (*ibid.*; italics mine).

⁴⁷ Of course, it is disputed as to whether "I", as a literary device, is a viable entity which is capable of representing anything like a unified "self". Further, see Chapter 8.

is *not* fixed. So the refrain, "Everything is absurd and a pursuit of wind."

"Pursuit of wind" suggests, among other things surely, that the object considered is not under control.⁴⁸ This is particularly significant when Qoheleth's ability to know is under consideration: "And I set my heart to know wisdom and knowledge, madness and folly. I knew that this too is a pursuit (רעיון) of wind" (1.17). It should be noted that it is not wisdom and knowledge that are a pursuit of wind, but rather the fact that he set his heart to know them was *like* a pursuit of wind. It is Qoheleth's personal attempt at reaching true understanding which is not fixed or able to be controlled. It is not something received and/or graspable.

Two illuminating examples of the play between the language of shepherding and of pursuit are worth noting. First, Prov. 15.14:

The heart of the understanding seeks knowledge (יבקש־דעת),
but the mouths of fools feed on (ירעה) folly.

Second, Hos. 12.1a [2a]:

Ephraim herds the wind (רעה רוח) and pursues (רדף; cf. Eccl. 3.15) the east wind all day long...

As Crenshaw says of these two instances, "both examples mock the behavior of shepherding, whether rounding up the wind or feeding on folly".⁴⁹ Indeed, both examples show the capacity of Hebrew language and thought to suggest the ironic sense likely present in Qoheleth's narration, a sense which stands at odds with the frame narrator's more fixed usages of the terms.

The irony inherent in warning against the composition of many books in the epilogue of a book can hardly be overstated. It is a clever deconstructive turn

⁴⁸ The close association of הבל (as the name "Abel") with the verb רעה at Gen 4.2 is interesting to note here: ויהי־הבל רעה צון ("Now Abel was a keeper of sheep"). The LORD was pleased with Abel (הבל) and his offering (4.4), and Cain states that he was not the keeper (שמר) of Abel (הבל, 4.9). Cain was unable either to account or be responsible for הבל. Of course if the author of Ecclesiastes was aware of the word association in Genesis it would be of some significance, but this remains speculation.

⁴⁹ *Ecclesiastes*, p. 73.

which one could imagine even Qoheleth would admire. Many times in my studies I have heard the phrase "of the making... etc." quoted jokingly in face of the stress of a large amount of work ahead. Likewise, I have often felt the absurdity of my own writing of a "book" about a "book" which denounces the activity involved in "making" one. The frame narrator was surely aware of the simple irony, and that assumption by the reader (that he *was* aware of it) further contributes to the enjoyment of the irony. The irony serves to alienate the frame narrator yet further from Qoheleth; for one can easily assume that the warning is an ill-concealed dissent from Qoheleth's own way of knowing. The creation of books might involve the creation of new knowledge, of thinking and of the critical reformulation of ideas to which the frame narrator seems opposed.⁵⁰

To return to the phrase, "*limits* of knowledge", in this passage the language of fixing, guiding and shepherding abounds. This is the language of framing. The use of such language itself frames an alternative to Qoheleth's epistemology. After establishing the boundaries of Qoheleth's character in 12.9-10, the frame narrator thereby goes beyond those boundaries to establish (prod and fix) his own epistemological preferences for his audience, thereby setting himself at odds with Qoheleth.

4. *The Final Word (12.13-14)*

[This is] the end of the matter—everything has been heard—fear God and keep his commandments; for this [applies to] everyone.⁵¹ For God will bring every deed into judgment concerning all that is hidden, whether good or evil.

⁵⁰ Even the warning against much study carries this association. לָהֲנֶה, a *hapax leg.*, is possibly related to the Arabic *lahija*, "be devoted", "apply oneself greatly" (see BDB, p. 529b). However, by following many commentators and taking this to be a defective form of הִנָּה, suggesting an intense investigation (cf. Job 1.8, "*meditate* day and night"; Pss. 1.2; 63.6[7] [where it is synonymous with זָכַר]; 77.12[13]; etc.) my argument is supported even more strongly.

⁵¹ On this "pregnant Hebrew phrase" (כִּי־זֶה כָּל־הָאָדָם) see the examples compiled by Gordis (*Koheleth*, p. 345).

That the epilogue leaves the reader with a more conservative sentiment than Qoheleth would likely have offered (indeed, did offer [12.7]) has hugely shaped the overall understanding of the book. As Murphy remarks, "The orientation provided by vv 12-14 exercised great influence in the history of the exegesis of Ecclesiastes."⁵² There is no evidence that the epilogue contributed to the acceptance of Ecclesiastes into the canon, and there seems to be no other viable reason for this conservatism than that the frame narrator is again overriding Qoheleth's more radical message with his own more tacit priorities. This conservative emphasis is tied into the frame narrative set-up. Discussing this section, Fox comments that the

author blunts objections to the book as a whole by implying through use of a frame-narrator that he is just reporting what Qoheleth said, without actually rejecting the latter's ideas. The epilogist thus allows the more conservative reader to align himself with him, so that a reader need not reject the *book*, even if he does reject the views of Qoheleth.⁵³

Many conservative readings of the book may be "explained" this way. To cite one example, because Ecclesiastes "ends" this way, J.S. Wright can say the following of the *book*:

To summarize its contents, the book *constitutes an exhortation* to live a God-fearing life, realizing that one day account must be rendered to him.⁵⁴

To be fair, it is not misleading to suggest that the frame narrator is in fact offering a summary of the "book" at 12.13-14. The phrase *הכל נשמע* at 12.13a, in light of the narrative context (the epilogist has *told* Qoheleth's story to his son), could be paraphrased, "When Qoheleth's story has been heard, what should be remembered is..." The fault of such readings as the one I have just cited is that the summary of the frame narrator is *a-critically* adopted as a *good* summary

⁵² *Ecclesiastes*, p. 126.

⁵³ Fox, "Frame-narrative", pp. 103-104 (italics Fox's).

⁵⁴ "The Book of Ecclesiastes", in J.D. Douglas *et al.* (eds.), *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2nd edn, 1982), p. 296 (italics mine).

of Qoheleth's thought, which it surely is not. Worse yet, the verses are often misconstrued as Qoheleth's own words when readers overlook the fact that another voice is narrating at the epilogue. Critical misunderstandings are then bound to occur. Take the example of L. Ryken:

The writer himself [whom Ryken takes to be Qoheleth] signals the two types of passages that make up Ecclesiastes with a pair of metaphors near the end of *his* collection... The "under the sun" passages are like goads that make us unable to settle down complacently with life lived on a purely earthly plane. The positive, God-centered passages are fixed points of reference.⁵⁵

The frame narrator has allowed many generations the opportunity to misread and compress Qoheleth's inquiries into such misdirected homily, and the fact that the epilogue has engendered such assessments is yet more evidence that the frame narrator's epistemology is a tacit one.

Of course, Qoheleth offered his own conservative sentiments, but these can be accorded undue significance, for they are nearly always spoken in a critical context. The most cited example of his conservatism, for instance, has sharp critical undertones:

Whenever you vow a vow to God do not delay to pay it, for there is no delight [taken] in fools. Pay what you vow! Better that you do not vow than that you vow and do not pay. Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin, and do not say to the messenger that it was an error. Why should God be angry at your voice and ruin the work of your hands? For with many dreams and absurdities [there are] many words—but fear God.
(5.4-7)

This could hardly be summarized as "Fear God and keep his commands." Indeed, this passage emits a strong "aroma of paranoia"⁵⁶ which is out of keeping with

⁵⁵ "Ecclesiastes", in Ryken and Longman (eds.), *A Complete Literary Guide*, p. 272 (italics mine).

⁵⁶ So Zimmermann (*Inner World*, pp. 37-41), who suggests that this passage is evidence that Qoheleth believed fiercely in what Zimmermann calls the "omnipotence of thoughts" which contributed to his neurosis: "Qohelet is so self-punishing [in 5.1-7] that no margin for error is allowed" (p. 40). If this is right, Qoheleth's critical capacity here seems severely hampered.

the very positive effects which fearing God is meant to engender elsewhere, not least of which is the beginning of knowledge! (Prov. 1.7; cf. 1 Sam. 12.24; Prov. 3.7-8) Furthermore, in a celebrated passage, Qoheleth does in fact play havoc with one of the commandments of Torah:

Rejoice, O young man, in your youth.
 And let your heart gladden you in the days of your youth.
 And walk in the ways (והלך בדרכי) of your heart,
 and in the sight of your eyes.
 And know for certain [that] concerning all of these things
 God will bring you into judgment. (11.9)

In Torah, the fringe that the Israelites were instructed to wear on the corner of their garments was there to *prod* them to

remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and not to follow after (תתורו אחרי) your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to go after. (Num. 15.39; cf. Job 37.7-8)

In Qoheleth's variation on this text he has put a twist to the notion of keeping God's commands. He reformulates the commandment and appropriates it to his own purposes. He certainly, in a sense, goes beyond it.

The frame narrator, however, is more cautious to not "go beyond" anything. This is perhaps most evident in 12.13-14, which has been frequently compared to Sir. 43.27:⁵⁷

עוד כאלה לא נוסף וקץ דבר הוא הכל

More than this may not be concluded, the end of the matter, "He is all in all."⁵⁸

While any literary relationship between Ecclesiastes and Sirach is rarely claimed, and while the position of this verse in Sirach is not "epilogic", some comment is worth making. After a long description of the glory of the works of the LORD (42.15-43.26), the narrator in Sirach has reached a point where any more

⁵⁷ See Gordis, *Koheleth*, p. 345.

⁵⁸ Translation by Sheppard, "The Epilogue to Qoheleth", p. 187.

comment strikes him as superfluous. The end of such speech would be unreachable. Likewise, Qoheleth's frame narrator seems to say that there is no more that he wishes to (or can) say to his student. Such speech would "go beyond" what is required. Perhaps Sirach felt, along with the frame narrator, that words are unnecessary since the "whole of humanity" lies elsewhere.

In his closing verse the frame narrator's views on judgment echo Qoheleth once more (cf. 3.17; 11.9b). The echo is ironic in light of all the discord the epilogue offers the reader. The frame narrator wishes to impose his tacit epistemology on "everyone", that they might fear God and keep his commandments *without*, it seems, the kind of critical reformulation and expressive thinking that Qoheleth embodies.

Chapter 6

FRAMING THE FRAMER: FINAL REFLECTIONS ON *THIS* FRAME

The prologues are over. It is a question, now,
Of final belief. So, say that final belief
Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.
—Wallace Stevens ("Asides on the Oboe")

It might be contested that I have been unnecessarily hard on the frame narrator. Yet I stand by what I have said above. Of course, some of the extent to which (and the manner in which) he summarized Qoheleth's story was necessary. The frame narrator was not at pains to write his own book and in this respect he was in keeping with his own views on the proliferation of knowledge. Indeed, the frame narrator kept relatively close to a common practice of ancient epilogues. As M. Wiebe notes of other ANE frames,

The epilogues of [the genre of] Instruction all reflect back on the instruction [i.e. inner story of the frame] and sing its praises... The epilogues of *Kagemni*, *Ptahhotep*, *Merikare*, *ANY*, and *Amenemope* stress the importance of following the letter of the instruction presented and the continuance of the tradition of the "sayings" or "writings." These epilogues refer to the instruction as the "sayings of the past" and the "words of the ancestors" and to the instruction itself as if it were a well-known written text.¹

Like other ANE frames, the frame narrator reflected backward, sang Qoheleth's praises and likely referred inclusively to Qoheleth's work as "words of the sages", while claiming that Qoheleth wrote "sayings" himself. However, he differs from ANE frame narrators in that his approval of Qoheleth's procedure of knowing is far less evident. In no way did he "stress the importance of following the letter of the instruction presented". Why, then, as a narrative character, did

¹ Wiebe, "The Wisdom in Proverbs", p. 42.

the frame narrator bother to tell Qoheleth's story at all?²

In a way, I have obliged myself to answer this question. I offer the following, tentative, answer. The frame narrator did not demand anything like strict adherence to Qoheleth's words. He did, however, stress that his (implied) audience should not go beyond a fixed body of knowledge which *likely included* Qoheleth's story. It may be assumed, therefore, that his commitment to Qoheleth's story was only partial and that his duality of opposition and commitment to Qoheleth is to be explained by it. However, since the frame narrator lent such ample credence to Qoheleth's story by his act of framing, this seems unnatural. From the summary of the epilogue it is clear that the frame narrator *did not* agree with Qoheleth's approach to wisdom, God and tradition, bound, as they were, to his wholly different epistemology. Therefore, given the fiction of the presentation, the frame narrator comes across as a rather reluctant scribe who had to do what he could with what he had (knowing that he had the last say in any case), and this with evident respect to Qoheleth's words, which were, to his great annoyance, part of the wisdom tradition themselves.

To compare, again, frames of modern fiction, it is certainly not unusual for a fictitious frame to purposefully question the material it frames. Note Linda Dittmar's assertion about some fictitious frames:

Faulkner and [film director] Kurasawa use their frame stories to question the very truth of the narrated materials they contain. Accounts [in the inner narrative] conflict with one another, yet each has a claim on us—the claim of the fictive come to life through acts of narration. The inner narratives reveal the extent to which subjectivity [like Qoheleth's "I"] governs all knowledge... [Furthermore,] a disjunction between story and frame puts into question the audience's relation to all accounts.³

² I speak here only in a fictional sense, for, historical considerations aside, the frame narrator *is* a character who, we are asked to believe, knew Qoheleth, was his foremost interpreter and told his story. On the composition of Ecclesiastes, see below.

³ "Fashioning and Re-fashioning", pp. 192-93, 199. Compare Mary Ann Caws's comments: "[inner narratives] can be expository, necessary to the [outer] plot, voluntary, or free in their function, and of the play-in-the-play sort; their relation to the frame is

This is one of the greatest assets of framing: to put into question "the audience's relation to all accounts". A frame compels the reader to assess and evaluate the work at hand. By presenting his assessment, the frame narrator solicits the reader's own, personal assessment.

One reason the epilogue allows for such diversity of reading is that while the formal structure created by the frame around Qoheleth seems unbendable and unshiftable, the interpretive boundaries it sets are not strictly so. As Mary Ann Caws contends,

the frame is valuable as a concept for the imagination, even in its strictest limits, as is the very act of "trotting around" it occasions, plainly self-inclusive and self-framing... [Frames are,] above all, aids to perception...[and] *all frames are constantly open to shift and exchange.*⁴

That is, it is absurd to think that reading involves the *imagining* of polarized opposites which in no way share a flux of meaning between them. A frame involves both the interpretive borders which define itself and the content which it frames in creating its effects. In fact, there is open-endedness within the frame narrator's text itself. For example, the frame of Ecclesiastes raises the plot-oriented question of the audience's reception *within the story presented*: Will the "son" accept what has been spoken about Qoheleth? Note Wiebe's comments:

The presence of...[the] frame surrounding the instruction...[and t]he progression within each Instruction...raises narratological questions such as, How will the son respond to the instruction?, and, Will the instructor witness a receptive audience for their instruction?... Answers to these questions are suspended until the Instruction returns to the narrative frame in the epilogue.⁵

Wiebe finds this concern present in only four of the Instructions, where all but

then of various kinds, but in every case the content is different from the content of the outer or framing text" (*Reading Frames in Modern Fiction*, p. 270 n. 16; italics mine; also, see pp. 269-71).

⁴ *Reading Frames in Modern Fiction*, pp. 4-5 (italics Caws's). That frames do not always lend themselves to neat division in the form of "diagramming", see P. Brooks on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (*Reading for the Plot*, pp. 256-57 and p. 351 n. 8).

⁵ Wiebe, "The Wisdom in Proverbs", p. 43.

one of the epilogues is lengthy: *Kagemni*. *Kagemni* (as noted above) bears a formal resemblance to Ecclesiastes, and the effect of the respective epilogues is comparable. According to Wiebe, in *Kagemni* the frame narrator "answers any question[s] of the reception of this instruction by those instructed".⁶ Can the same be said of Ecclesiastes? Yes, but only to the extent that the frame narrator has made it relevant; and that happens to be minimal. That is, while the purpose of the epilogue of Ecclesiastes is to admonish the recipient of Qoheleth's story, the whole question of reception becomes overshadowed by the opposition that the frame narrator has made to Qoheleth. The question is never answered.

Qoheleth's frame narrator does, however, "close" at least one issue.

Frames which have symmetry provide the reader with a sense of origin and ending. For frames

validate the interpretive act by foregrounding the story-telling context at least in the beginning and end of the text... Thus, once we realize that Alice's adventures are a dream framed by her falling asleep and waking up, the puzzle falls into place; we may continue to wonder about that Cheshire cat, but we trust the frame as a guide to the narrative within it...[For] frames normalize their content by attributing to it an origin and a context.⁷

This is precisely what Qoheleth's frame narrator does. By giving us an origin (from the mouth of the king) and a context (geographical,⁸ of speech and of character [the epilogue]), the frame narrator wins our trust and summons our attention, however much we may still wonder about Qoheleth, that Cheshire cat.⁹

⁶ "The Wisdom in Proverbs", p. 44.

⁷ Dittmar, "Fashioning and Re-fashioning", p. 195.

⁸ I.e. Jerusalem; see p. 67 n. 6. However, see Zimmermann, *Inner World*, pp. 123ff.

⁹ That context of origins also contributes further to the work's authentication. This is done through allusions to historical figures and to some kind of authorial presence. So K. Gittes: "The 'real' world of the framing story (and sometimes the less real world of the tales themselves) is usually authenticated by historical figures and by the authorial presence. Such authenticating makes the often unreal and fantastic events in the enclosed tales appear more credible" ("The Frame Narrative", p. 189). The "historical figures" in the epilogue are Qoheleth/Solomon and the sages, while an authorial presence is

One consistent concern about the epilogue has been how it does or does not inform our understanding of the book's historical composition. And here again the issue of incongruence can be raised, this time in relation to the analogy of picture frames as discussed in Chapter 2.1—in particular, the question of with whom the responsibility of the production of the frame rests.

Did Qoheleth, like some wealthy artist, have the luxury of choosing the frame himself? That is, does the whole work—painting and frame—come from one hand? It would seem strange for an *artist* to choose a wholly unsuitable frame, unless we allow that, as with Pissaro and Picasso, there was a clever and subversive strategy at hand. Of course I cannot stop anyone believing that Qoheleth was so cleverly subversive, but I suggest rather that someone chose the frame for him, so to speak. If this be the case, then was the one who chose the frame intending to give the work itself as smooth and orthodox an inception into the gallery/public as possible? In this regard, it is interesting to note that some painting frames overpower the painting, imposing their own ideology and "message" to such a degree that the "message" of the painting and frame become confused to observers. We have seen this to be the case with the conservative readings of Qoheleth based, as they were, on the frame and not the "picture". There is, however, a difficult interpretive balance to maintain in all of this.

To take the first option, if one grants, as does Fox,¹⁰ that a hyper-self-conscious real author, in a vein of Romantic Irony, wrote the entire text, knowingly playing with the literary conventions of the day, one might be suspected of anachronistically foisting on Qoheleth literary circumstances and conditions which should, at the least, be considered circumspect. To take the

discerned in the act of transference, the very telling of Qoheleth's tale.

¹⁰ Fox clearly intends more than a "final-form" study of Ecclesiastes, rather, "The author has given him [the frame narrator] a conventional—and fictional—epic situation" ("Frame-narrative", p. 104). Throughout his article, Fox maintains this assumption. It is particularly evident in his effective defense of "single-handed" authorship (pp. 85-91).

second option, if one grants that author what Romberg calls an "unconscious infringement of point of view",¹¹ the risk runs in the opposite direction. That is, in assuming that the author took no conscious effort in depicting the frame, the reader is likely to overlook the multifarious effects it creates, thereby implying that ancient writers and readers were not in fact capable of literary sophistication (i.e. the chronological fallacy). This is perhaps why, in recent years, the incongruity of the epilogue to the body of the book has been underplayed or the relationship ignored altogether.¹² The discrepancies are, however, evident and informative, and analysis of the relationship helps to unpack Qoheleth's own strategies. Were I forced to speculate on matters of history, I would be inclined to imagine that the frame narrator was himself a sage of a more moderate temperament than Qoheleth, who was obliged (to his annoyance—and perhaps by an edict the reasons for which were not made clear to him) to present Qoheleth's largely pre-formed story in his own garish, "establishment-issue" frame. I hasten to add that I for one am glad he did so.

Now, finding a suitable point of departure to discuss Qoheleth's narrative strategy is a daunting task. The rubric *narrative* can easily include such aspects as characterization (of narrators, implied authors and audiences etc.), setting, voice, distance, fictive versus historical assumptions and so forth. Here is where the tone of the work must determine the questions we bring and the approach(es) we take. Because Qoheleth's character—as discussed in Chapter 1—is so intimately

¹¹ *Studies in the Narrative Technique*, p. 335 (in reference to Rousseau's problematic use of his name with the fictional editor in *La Nouvelle Héloïse...*).

¹² For example, among modern commentators some virtually ignore the relationship (Crenshaw, Eaton, Fredericks, Wilson [who is concerned more with the epilogue's relation to Proverbs]) or see the tension the frame narrative creates as a "corrective" of Qoheleth's thought (Childs). Some see the tension as essentially positive, laudatory (Murphy, Ogden), or essentially at odds with Qoheleth in purpose (Fox [although see *Qohelet*, pp. 315-16], Gordis [in part], Sheppard).

constructed and conveyed in the first person, his narration lends itself naturally to questions of identity, self-hood and implied authorship, which lead to questions, as shall become evident, of the *subject*. Such is the concern of the following three chapters of the thesis: the strategies of Qoheleth as a narrative, speaking *subject*. I begin with what I believe is the most empirically graspable (in the sense that it lends itself to analysis most forthrightly) of Qoheleth's narrative strategies, and yet perhaps the most playful and elusive.

Chapter 7

THE SOLOMONIC GUISE

He played the King as though under momentary apprehension that someone else was about to play the ace.

—Eugene Field (critiquing a performance of *King Lear*, *Denver Tribune*, c. 1880)

Ecclesiastes was written in a sometimes elusive Solomonic guise.¹ However, the employment of it is not, as shall be seen, as simple a strategy as has been widely assumed. Its presence suggests some pertinent questions. What strategies are ascertainable in the use of the guise? What problems has the half-hearted presence of the guise created for reading the book of Ecclesiastes as a whole? What motivation[s] might be suggested, if any, for the creation of such a guise by the real author (i.e. why is it there?)? And in what ways do the real author, implied author,² Qoheleth and the frame narrator relate to one another in terms of the Solomonic guise? In order to address such questions the guise itself will need some delineation.

1. *The Scope and Strategy of the Solomonic*

Many of Qoheleth's interpreters insist that his Solomonic guise (or royal fiction, as it is often called) is strictly "contained" in the first two chapters, after which the guise is, for all intents and purposes, dropped.³ Not only is there no more seemingly explicit Solomonic allusion, it is held, but any rhetorical function of

¹ Implied by 1.1; 1.12–2.26 and other verses, as will be argued below.

² The definition of these terms will be fleshed out below. Suffice to say that I am relying substantially on the distinctions of Wayne Booth in *Rhetoric of Fiction*.

³ The list includes A. Barucq, B. Childs, J. Crenshaw, F. Ellermeier, K. Galling, H.L. Ginsberg, R. Gordis, R.B. Salters, G.T. Sheppard and W. Zimmerli. I will state most of their positions specifically below.

the guise is apparently spent after ch. 2. All agree that the superscription (1.1) commences both the book and the Solomonic guise proper (1.1 and 1.12–2.26—or 1.1; 1.12–2.17, according to some).

From its beginning the guise reveals its ambiguous quality. The phrase "king in Jerusalem" (מֶלֶךְ בִּירוּשָׁלַם), for example, is peculiar to Ecclesiastes. The preposition, ב, compounds the ambiguity, and "Jerusalem" is difficult since when speaking of an Israelite king in the Old Testament, "Israel" is usually referred to as the place of power. Given the ambiguity, is there any possible connection to Solomon? The issue rests mainly on the phrase, בְּדָוִד, "son of David". James Crenshaw has suggested that this phrase "in Hebrew usage...can refer to grandchildren or simply to a remote member of the Davidic dynasty".⁴ While there is some biblical evidence that בֶּן can, as Crenshaw also suggests, denote a "close relationship of mind and spirit"⁵ or simply affection (eg. 1 Sam. 24.16), nowhere in the Old Testament does בְּדָוִד mean anything other than a biological son of David and only once is it other than Solomon (2 Chron. 11.18). Admittedly, "sons of David" can be used of people other than Solomon,⁶ but the point remains that the singular nomen "son of David" does not seem to carry any figurative meaning. There is nothing to suggest that Eccl. 1.1 is an exception to this usage. The title may therefore make implicit reference to King Solomon, to whom was ascribed Proverbs 1–29.

Even the name Qoheleth (1.1, 2, 12; 7.27; 12.8, 9, 10) can be understood in reference to Solomon. The verb קָהַל (of which *qōhelet* is a participle), "to assemble" or "gather", is only used of people being assembled, and particularly of Solomon's assembling the elders of Israel for the Temple's dedication (1 Kgs

⁴ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 56.

⁵ *Ecclesiastes*, p. 56.

⁶ 2 Chron. 13.8 = kings ruling Israel in general; 23.3 = Davidic line of kings (cf. 32.33); Ezra 8.2 = David's descendants returning from Babylonia.

8.1-2).⁷ In that narrative, the derivative כל־קהל (1 Kgs 8.14, 22, 55, 65) is used to denote "all of the assembly of Israel" which Solomon has gathered and speaks to. It is well known that participles were often used to denote the activity or profession of a person (e.g. Ezra 2.55, 57, הספרת ["scribe"] and פכרתה הזבירים ["one who tends gazelles"] are used as masculine names). Conceivably, "Qoheleth" has a similar function. It is not the "concrete" Solomon we are to picture but rather a facet of his traditional persona/profession as king and wise man— assembler of the people.⁸ Already both the "concrete" and the ambiguous forms of the Solomonic guise seem present. I will return to the unique problems this creates below.

Just to clarify that Qoheleth was an Israelite king (as opposed to another, e.g., Persian) the *place* of Qoheleth's kingship is explicitly stated in what has been called the book's "second title" (1.12):

אני קהלת הייתי מלך על־ישראל בירושלם⁹

Here Qoheleth makes his first introduction and, as if mercilessly to amuse himself at the reader's expense, suggests by the use of הייתי not that he *is* a king, but that he *was* a king. This has been a serious problem for those holding Solomonic authorship dear, since Solomon reigned until his death (1 Kgs 11; 2

⁷ Crenshaw rightly points out that this does not necessarily imply that "Qoheleth" denotes an "Assembler" of the מְשַׁלְּמִים of the epilogue (12.9; *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 33-34).

⁸ There has been no shortage of suggestions to understand the reason of the name "Qoheleth". Most accept that it is a proper name (see O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* [trans. P.R. Ackroyd; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974], p. 492). Jacques Ellul has made the interesting suggestion that "Qoheleth" be understood "in terms of the book's content rather than etymologically". For Ellul, "Qoheleth" may function as an antonym to the rest of the book: a feminine form in a text which is anti-feminine (*Reason for Being*, pp. 17-18). It is difficult to imagine, however, that the kind of obscure literary environment necessary for such an antonym was even available to the author.

⁹ For the term "king over Israel", cf. 2 Sam. 19.22 and 1 Kgs 4.1 (of Solomon). H.L. Ginsberg's thesis that מְלִיךָ should here be pointed מְלִיךָ, denoting a land owner, requires the unlikely corruption of על (among other problems) and has received virtually no acceptance (H.L. Ginsberg, *Studies in Koheleth* [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950], pp. 12-15).

Chron. 10). For example, the medieval scholar Ibn Ezra felt compelled to suggest that "Solomon wrote it [Ecclesiastes] in his old age, and appeals...to the new or rising generations, and tells them such and such things I tried in my lifetime."¹⁰

T.A. Perry suggests that the statement is to be understood figuratively:

...the retired king is introduced less for autobiographical purposes than to bring to the center of debate the question and value of withdrawal from public affairs and, by extension, worldly involvement...[the] withdrawal is not a philosophical one...he has come to the conclusion, through the frustrations of experience, that life is simply not worth the bother.¹¹

Whether figurative or literal, the textual ambiguity here does not seem to diminish the effect of the guise, for the real effect is not so much to fasten Qoheleth's persona immovably to that of the historical Solomon as to create a unique interpretive freedom (indeed, one that might have been exploited in the way Perry suggests).

The next possible allusion to Solomon occurs at 1.16:

I spoke to myself in my heart, saying, "Behold, I have increased greatly in wisdom, more than all who were before me over Jerusalem."

This verse picks up the thread of identification begun at 1.1 (and reiterated at 1.12). By the description, the wise king meant here is surely Solomon,¹² but the "all who were before" him could be either (the house of?) David or a long line of

¹⁰ As cited and translated by C.D. Ginsburg in, *Cheleth (Commonly Called the Book of Ecclesiastes)* (London: Longman, 1861, p. 268).

¹¹ *Dialogues with Kohelet: The Book of Ecclesiastes* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), pp. 39-40. Perry is the only scholar I have read who has made any attempt to read the guise as present through the whole work: "...on inspection, the royal fiction is both pervasive in extant and remarkably complex. It portrays ambivalence less about the king's political status than about his psychological commitments and reservations" (p. 40; cf. p. 38). Perry sees a literal dialogue at play throughout the book and briefly explores the relationship between the kingship of one and the critical attitude towards kingship of the other.

¹² This verse likely draws on such tradition as 1 Kgs 3.12-13; 4.29-30; 10.23. See esp. 1 Chron. 29.25: "Now King Solomon was greater than all the kings of the land with regard to riches and wisdom" (RSV).

Jebusite kings (more strange ambiguities).¹³ What is more to the point, however, is Qoheleth's self-depiction. By it he sets himself up to conduct his tests and observations in a mode that is extreme. He is not just conducting them as a wise man but as the wisest king. This suggests that the conclusions he reaches are to be absolute. Yet it also implies that if he fails it is that same absolute wisdom that fails with him, and such constitutes a critical indictment of Solomon's wisdom and all for which it might have stood. And royal wisdom such as Solomon's wisdom, it has been suggested, may not have been a signifier of a time of peace as much as of a time of turmoil and exploitation.¹⁴

The strain is picked up again at 2.9: "And I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also, my wisdom remained with me." As in 1.16, David is a likely candidate for the "all who were before" Qoheleth. What would be a crucial error seems purposeful because of its recurrence. Qoheleth has hereby caused problems, again, for interpreters relying on Solomonic authorship. For example, *Targum Qohelet* solves the problem by suggesting a creative referent for "all": "I am the one who multiplied and increased wisdom more than all *the sages* who preceded me in Jerusalem..."¹⁵

¹³ Cf. Gen. 14.18; Josh. 10. Given the absence of David's God Yahweh, the latter may be preferable. But this is made unlikely since it is difficult to imagine that the author envisages any other way of being "over" Jerusalem than the way of Solomon—i.e., as a tribal descendant of Israel.

¹⁴ Frank Spina argues that Qoheleth's use of the Solomonic constituted a repudiation of the manipulation of people and events for strictly political ends which such royal wisdom affected: "...for the theology and ethic of Qoheleth is virtually opposite to that of Solomon, the king who made paganism fashionable, normative and even enviable, paving the way for all those 'wise' fools who followed in his footsteps and instituted policies that resulted in the ashes in the midst of which Qoheleth composed his eloquent rebuttal" ("Qoheleth and the Reformation of Wisdom", in H.B. Huffmon *et al.* [eds.], *The Quest for the Kingdom of God: Studies in Honor of George E. Mendenhall* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), p. 279. Spina quotes 2 Sam. 14.1-21 (Joab and the Tekoan woman); 16.20-17.23 (the deceitful counsel of Hushai) and other passages to support the idea that royal wisdom was oppressive and ethically inimical to Israel's "ancient religious traditions" (see pp. 274-77).

¹⁵ P.S. Knobel (trans.), *The Targum of Qohelet* (The Aramaic Bible, 15; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), p. 22 (italics Knobel's); see C.D. Ginsburg, *Cheleth*, p. 273.

The ambiguity in Qoheleth's text again suggests that his association with Solomon, while undeniably present, is purposefully nebulous, allowing Qoheleth to preserve his individuality with congruity to his association with Solomon. Entering ch. 2, however, the identification of Qoheleth's character as King Solomon is made somewhat more definite.

Briefly, then, the chapter is a relatively undisputed unit (which properly begins at 1.12) that relates Qoheleth's extreme experience as a king, and his consequent "considering" (2.11) and "observing" (2.12, 13, 24) that lead him to hate (כִּנְיָ, 2.17, 18; cf. 3.8a) and to despair (שָׁנָא, 2.20). It can be broken down into three stages:

- 1) Consideration of pleasure/success (2.1-11)
 - a) Introduction—how he will test (2.1-3)
 - b) Test proper—*what* he tested (2.4-8)
 - c) Conclusion (2.9-11)
- 2) Consideration of wisdom and folly (2.12-17)
 - a) Test proper (2.12)
 - b) How he tested/conclusion (2.13-17)
- 3) Consideration of toil (2.18-26)
 - a) Introduction—reasons for experiment (2.18-20)
 - b) Test proper (2.21-22)
 - c) Conclusion (2.23-26)

For each particular item listed in the first stage of Qoheleth's experiment (particularly in 2.4-8), a parallel exists in the biblical narratives about King Solomon.¹⁶ And there are other, more peculiar likenesses in the chapter. Qoheleth's taking of whatever his eyes desired (2.10), for example, echoes the motif in 1 Kings that Solomon took (or was given) all that he desired.¹⁷ Clearly,

The LXX simply drops the problematic preposition "over" of 1.16 and reads "ἐν ἱερουσαλημ" instead—presumably to denote all of the wise as opposed to a ruler?

¹⁶ Especially "silver and gold" (2.8); cf. 2 Chron. 1.15: "Solomon made silver and gold as common as stone, gathering them from provinces" (RSV). There is, however, one major defect in the list. Solomon's most celebrated achievement is missing: the widespread use of chariots and horses.

¹⁷ See 1 Kgs 5.7-12; 9.1, 11. For other linguistic parallels (even in word order) compare 1 Kgs 4.11 to Eccl. 2.24; 3.13; 5.18; 8.15. F. Zimmermann also suggests that such textual echoes strengthen Qoheleth's identity with Solomon (*Inner World*, p. 83).

the affinity with Solomonic tradition is too established to conclude from this section that it is only a fiction of "general kingship".¹⁸ It is more likely that the author was simply exercising a freedom that is witnessed in such roughly concurrent "Solomonic" texts as the Song of Songs which offers an imaginative, if inaccurate, description of Solomon's vineyards (Cant. 4.12–5.1; 6.2, 11; 8.11–12).

Although there may be a practical strategy at hand,¹⁹ Qoheleth has once again linked himself to the Solomonic for the purpose of critique. By first citing lists of improbable items and amounts ("concubines and concubines!", 2.8) and imaging to his younger self an omnipotence of imposing skill, know-how and entrepreneurialism, and then concluding that,

I considered all the deeds my hands had done and the toil in which I had toiled to do it. And behold, everything was absurd and a pursuit of wind, and there is no profit under the heavens (2.11),

his point is made in binary opposition: material profit versus true profit. Material profit in the light of considering where it actually gets you (the fate of the fool and the sage—the unsuccessful as well as the successful—is the same nonetheless)²⁰ becomes immaterial. Indeed, if Walter Brueggemann is correct in suggesting that wisdom in the context of such power and riches usually becomes "trivialized", then Qoheleth, in ch. 2 at least, trivializes Solomon's wisdom *in the context* of his (i.e. Solomon's and, by implication, Qoheleth's own feigned?) power and riches.²¹

¹⁸ So Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 71.

¹⁹ The Solomonic perspective helps make sense, for example, of Qoheleth's lament at 2.21 that one must leave his reward to someone who did not toil for it; presumably his son. Normally, it would be good to leave an inheritance for a son (Prov. 13.22; 19.14 etc.). But in Qoheleth/Solomon's case it is רָבַל that Rehoboam should receive it (cf. *Targ. Qoh.* 1.1–2 which sets up the whole book as an exposition of the loss of Solomon's kingdom).

²⁰ A recurring idea of 2.13–23. Further, see my application of the actantial model in Chapter 9.3, particularly the discussion of wisdom as Helper.

²¹ "Social Significance", p. 131.

The assertion that the guise ceases after ch. 2 is usually founded on the (legitimate) claim that such obviously Solomonic allusion no longer occurs after this point. The following related question, however, has not been (but should be) asked: "Why cannot the Solomonic guise be admitted as an interpretive strategy intended to encompass the whole of Qoheleth's narration?" I suggest that the guise is not wholly turned from; indeed, at times it is subtly reinforced. If my thesis can be accepted, that question becomes rhetorical.

One of the reasons proffered to limit the extent of the guise is that the perspective of the narrating Qoheleth has changed from that of ruler to subject after ch. 2. It is also argued that particular passages (3.16-17; 4.1-3; 5.8; 8.2-9; 10.5-7, 16-17) undermine Qoheleth's "royal" character since they are the opinions of one who "lacks power to correct human oppression"²² (and to correct human oppression was to be expected of an Israelite king²³), or "of a commoner who fears royal authority".²⁴ Most of the scholars listed in n. 3 above at one point or another list the above texts in marshalling their arguments but do not actually engage with those texts. This practice continues unabated, as I have recently discovered in a 1995 essay by O. Kaiser: "the viewpoint in iv13ff., vii 19, viii 2ff. and x 16ff. is clearly that of a subject, not a ruler [case closed]."²⁵ This "argument" is typical of those who reject the scope of the guise and who then often go on to make an issue out of Qoheleth's rejection of the Solomonic guise as either ironic cleverness or evidence of a redactional layer.

One of the disputed passages suggests that Qoheleth was a keen observer of oppression:

²² J. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (London: SCM Press, 1982), p. 146.

²³ An imperative forcefully expressed in Ps. 72 (esp. vv. 4, 14); Prov. 29 etc.

²⁴ So R.B. Salters, "Qoheleth and the Canon", *ExpTim* 86 (1974-75).

²⁵ "Qoheleth", in J. Day, R.P. Gordon and H.G.M. Williamson (eds.), *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J.A. Emerton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 83-93 (84).

Again I saw all the oppressions²⁶ that are done under the sun.
 And behold, the tears of the oppressed;
 and there was no comforter for them.
 Yet from the hand of their oppressors (עשקיהם) was power—
 and there was no comforter for them. (4.1)

This is an observation, a calling to attention. Quite simply, the whole question of intervention seems absent. There is no injunction to act positively and Qoheleth's concern, it seems, is only to make the reader aware. And if Qoheleth is counting himself among the "upper class", as Gordis suggests,²⁷ his position is morally bankrupt within the proverbial tradition and the Solomonic thereby undermined. For to relieve the suffering of the poor is to correct injustice (cf. Ps. 146.7; Prov. 14.31; 22.16; 29.13 etc.). But in one respect the moral framework is secondary here, for Qoheleth observes that although the oppressors had power it remains that there was none to comfort their victims. The real atrocity, for Qoheleth, is not so much the oppressions themselves but the very existence of both the oppressors and the oppressed. It would be better if all had never been brought into being (so the force of his ensuing argument in vv. 2-3). If an "anti-royalty" sentiment were really meant here it would have been far more effective for Qoheleth to count himself among the oppressed, but he counts himself among no one. Yet there is a moral aspect as well. Like a journalist, he reports his observations without "taking sides", yet, as with some journalists, his compassion is implied in the rhetoric of his account and it is a compassion that could have been intended to inspire his readers to do justice. For Qoheleth's dramatic "Behold!" (הנה) and his effective repetition of the lament, "there was no comforter for them",²⁸ may suggest that his observation, while not explicitly

²⁶ "Oppressions" (from עשק) may denote different types of oppression: political (Prov. 28.16; Eccl. 5.8), economic (Prov. 14.31; 22.16; Amos 4.1), of labour (Mal. 3.5).

²⁷ *Koheleth*, p. 77.

²⁸ מנחם at 4.1 ("comforter") is neither a soft nor passive word, but suggests decisive action (cf. Pss. 23.4; 71.21; 86.17; also, see Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 81). Eccl. 4.1-3

commanding action, was intended to stir it. To push the analogy a little further, when journalists in "closed" countries such as China and Saudi Arabia risk their lives to observe *and then relate* injustice and oppression they take a profound moral stance. There is no reason why the observational quality witnessed here and the narratorial voice of kingship in general, or even of Solomon, cannot validly co-exist.

Again, Qoheleth observes oppression (5.8-9):

If you see oppression of the poor and the plundering of justice and rights²⁹ in the province, do not be amazed at the matter; for a high one is watched over by a higher, and the highest is over them.

Here is something which, on the whole, benefits the land: a king, for the sake of agriculture.³⁰

Do not be surprised at oppression and injustice (says Qoheleth), for the hierarchical system is such that there are no safeguards.³¹ This verse comes at

is strikingly similar to some of Isaiah's and Jeremiah's laments in the course of judgments on Jerusalem. Cf. Isa. 51.19, where the prophet says to Jerusalem, "These two things have befallen you—who will grieve with you?—devastation and destruction, famine and sword—who will comfort you?" (here the NRSV follows variants ["Gk, Syr, Vg"] where the MT offers, "how may I comfort you?" [מִי אֲנַחֵמְךָ]; the basic effect of the rhetorical question, however, is the same in that the plight is highlighted); cf. Jer. 4.23-26 (where observation plays a similar, emotive role) and 15.5.

²⁹ See Prov. 31.9 (King Lemuel's mother to him): "Open your mouth, judge righteously (שֹׁפֵט צֶדֶק), maintain the rights of the poor and needy (וְדִין עֲנִי וְאֹבִיוֹן)" (RSV); cf. Prov. 8.15 and Isa. 32.1 also on this sense of צֶדֶק as the duty of kings.

³⁰ On this translation of 5.9 see D. Garrett, "Qoheleth on the Use and Abuse of Political Power", *TrinJ* 8 (1987), p. 164. Garrett extends "tilled field" (לְשׂוּדָה נִעְבְּרָה) to "agriculture" by metonymy.

³¹ Hence the meaning of כִּי גֹבַהּ מֵעַל גֹּבַהּ שֹׁמֵר וְגֹבַהִים עֲלֵיהֶם. The consecutive adjectives of comparison (גֹּבַהּ, "high") reflect increasingly higher persons of rank (cf. Ezek. 21.26 [21.31]) and a system which in essence traps people at the bottom (so Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 97). Note that the BHS margin offers וְגֹבַהּ מֵעֲלֵיהֶם for עֲלֵיהֶם וְגֹבַהִים (v. 8 [7]), making the final official singular and possibly making clear a reference to God (the plural could accomplish this as well, although not as clearly), fitting more appropriately with 5.1-7 which calls for the fear of God. Qoheleth may here be invoking God as judge over the entire schema of activity (as he does at 3.16-17 where he declares God to be judge over the righteous and the wicked, himself standing as observer—one who sees [רָאָה]—as here and as woven substantially throughout

the end of a small but potent critique of religious activity (5.1-7) and is in sharp contrast to the seriousness with which the addressee's relationship to God is to be taken. Do fear God, says Qoheleth (5.7), but this will not shield you from seeing oppression. Indeed, if God is the highest one who watches over the whole justice system (reading the divine plural), there is nothing you can do; for God is in heaven and you are on the earth (5.2). As in 4.1, Qoheleth is standing apart from the system, perhaps as a king (as the positive assertion of 5.9 might support), to comment critically on it.³² But again there is perhaps a positive aspect to Qoheleth's critical, even cynical outlook. Compare Garrett's slightly overstated but still (in my opinion) sound conclusion:

[Qoheleth] is far from naive and will not be shocked at the existence of corruption in high places when he sees it...he does not, in self-righteous arrogance, avoid the dirty world of politics... The *Sitz im Leben* of a large portion of Ecclesiastes is the power struggle in the royal court.³³

It could even be that Qoheleth observed injustice with such intensity, embittered with the idea that nothing (actually, wisdom and success in particular) can change the fate of the poor, the worker, the sinner, the sage—indeed of anyone (cf. 9.1-3)—that his words of advise had to be, Do not be shocked at what you see (cf. 7.16-17). Even a king and a wise man can do nothing to alter the absurd, which includes everything. This need not imply that Qoheleth did not accept the possibility of change at a more personal level (cf. 4.9-12, esp. v. 12 where empowerment in community can overcome oppression), for this observation concerns the *system* of justice (higher and higher authorities; not "lower and lower", where one-to-one change is accessible), which for Qoheleth was what had

Ecclesiastes [2.3, 13, 24; 3.2, 16, 22; 4.4, 7, 15; 8.10, 16, 17; 9.11]).

³² Contra H.L. Ginsberg (*Studies in Koheleth*, p. 13). Even if Qoheleth is criticizing the monarchy, it is ludicrous to assume (as Ginsberg does) that a king cannot (according to some unspoken principle?) be self-critical of the system of which he is a part. This assumption is basic to most scholars who deny any presence of the fiction after ch. 2. I will return to this faulty assumption below.

³³ "Qoheleth on the Use and Abuse of Political Power", *TrinJ* 8 (1987), pp. 176-77.

been made crooked and was never to become straight (cf. 1.15; 3.16-17; 7.13).

It has been suggested that another passage reveals Qoheleth's incongruity with royal authority (8.2-5):

Keep³⁴ the command of the king, because³⁵ of an oath of God.
 Do not leave in a hurry from his presence.
 Do not stand your ground about an unpleasant matter,³⁶
 for he takes delight in all that he does.³⁷
 The word of the king is supreme, and who can say to him, "What
 are you doing?"
 One who keeps a command will know no harm, and the heart of the
 wise will know the time and procedure of a matter.
 Indeed, for every matter there is a time and a procedure; although
 humanity's misery lies heavy upon them.

Is there a "sense of fear of royal authority" here?³⁸ Certainly, in 8.1 the king's command is not to be questioned. Qoheleth is offering friendly advice to the court sage to prevent embarrassment incurred by confronting the king.³⁹ The idea presumes the commitment of this implied reader to an oath.⁴⁰ The oath once made is tantamount to "an offer you can't refuse". All we can ascertain

³⁴ **אני** here is probably a scribal error. It makes little sense at all in this context and is not represented in any ancient versions.

³⁵ On **על דברת** meaning "in order that" or "because", see Dan. 2.30, where Daniel will interpret the visions and thoughts of the king "in order that the interpretation be made known" (**על־דברת רי פשרא**), and cf. Eccl. 3.18 ("concerning"). This meaning fits well with the word of the king being "supreme" (8.4, from **שלט**).

³⁶ That is, "Do not persistently champion an idea which the king opposes" (see Garrett, "Qoheleth on the Use and Abuse of Political Power", p. 169).

³⁷ **כי כל־אשר יחפץ** (lit., "for all that he delights in") functions as the object of **עשה** here. For a similar construct, cf. Est. 6.7.

³⁸ Thus R. Gordis (*Koheleth*, p. 41). For further evidence (besides 8.2-5) Gordis points out that there is a noticeable lack of any "national motif" throughout Ecclesiastes, but the consequences of this lack, and why such a motif should be present in the first place, are not made clear. Childs (*Introduction*, p. 584) also relies on this passage to support the limitation of the guise to the first two chapters.

³⁹ See Murphy's comments, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 82-83.

⁴⁰ Is it an oath made by the implied reader (a courtier?, sage?) to God, or is it an oath made by the king to God? Despite the linguistic ambiguity (lit., "because an oath of God") the latter hardly makes sense (how could the king's oath bind him to a sage or courtier except in unusual circumstances?). Translations are therefore probably correct in adding "your" to oath or "you made an oath" (e.g. NIV, NRSV, RSV, TLB). This finds support from Qoheleth's own seriousness on the issue of the reader's behaviour before God (5.1-7).

from such counsel, however, is that Qoheleth knew well the workings of the court, knew how sages came to be embarrassed and, being a sage himself, appreciated the task of dealing with a difficult king, who in any case should take heed of the words of the wise ("Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows to heed advice", 4.13). After establishing this counsel (vv. 2-4), Qoheleth brings wisdom itself into the equation. The sage will know the best time and way to escape tyrannical harm (v. 5). If the king is sinister or inexperienced (cf. 4.13; 10.16-17) then this becomes particularly relevant: obey the king's command with shrewdness. Even so, Qoheleth continues, *no one* can retain the spirit, nor escape the ultimate tyranny of death or war (8.6-8). Qoheleth hereby proceeds beyond the sphere of obedience and disobedience and seeks to contrast disobedience to the king with matters on a much larger scale. (He does so in the vein of wisdom after having praised wisdom at 8.1; cf. Prov. 16.15.) Again, wisdom may change one's fate at the person-to-person level, but it cannot deliver from those larger hazards in life that are connected to systems and institutions (war) or to God (death). Yes, Qoheleth is contemplating the misuse of authority (v. 9) and there is perhaps a latent attack on despotism, but to say that Qoheleth is himself *fearing* authority can only be speculation.

Two other texts have been cited as examples of the perspective of a subject, as opposed to that of a ruler or king: 10.5-7⁴¹ and 10.16-17.

There is an evil I have seen under the sun, as it were an error which proceeds from the ruler:
fools are set in many high places and the rich dwell in a low place.
I have seen servants on horses
and princes travelling as servants do, on foot. (10.5-7)

Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child,
and your princes eat [a great deal?] in the morning!

⁴¹ In particular, by Salters who labels it a criticism of "corrupt leadership" ("Qoheleth and the Canon", p. 341).

Happy are you, O land, when your king is the son of nobles,
and your princes eat at the proper time—
for strength and not for drunkenness. (10.16-17)

The first example is preceded by a word of caution: "If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place, for calmness will quell great offences." Like the knowledge of "court practice" demonstrated in ch. 8, this word of caution makes best sense coming from one who has seemingly had opportunity to grant forgiveness for an offence against a king (i.e. a king!),⁴² and such a construct of the speaker (as king) works nicely in the verses that follow as well (vv. 5-7). These verses just as likely form a lament of one who has known that place of power (and who regards this situation as an evil of direct consequence) as they do the reflections of a subject. However, given the presence of the guise we have so far seen and the absence of a change in that narratorial voice (as king), the former must be preferred. The same can be said of 10.16-17, where Qoheleth simply grieves the fact that in some lands power is not in the proper hands. And again, we might expect such words from someone in a position of power.⁴³

What else does Qoheleth have to say about kings? There are two pericopes (4.13-16; 9.13-16) which, while mentioning kings, seem merely to use the idea of kingship to contrast the poor man's praiseworthy wisdom. Their significance is marginal. Eccl. 4.13-16 is best summed by its first verse: "Better is a poor and

⁴² Compare Prov. 16.14: "A king's wrath is a messenger of death, and a wise man will appease it" (RSV); or, "My son, fear the LORD and the king, and do not disobey either of them" (Prov. 24.21 [RSV]; also, cf. Prov. 16.15; 25.6). The theme of 10.4 (proper behaviour towards a ruler) is reiterated at 10.20 in which Qoheleth simply praises wise demeanour towards a king: "Even in your thought, do not curse the king...for a bird of the air will carry your voice." This is in keeping with other proverbial convention on the matter: "He who loves purity of heart, and whose speech is gracious, will have the king as his friend" (Prov. 22.11, RSV).

⁴³ Prov. 19.10 offers a similar charge: "It is not fitting for a fool to live in luxury, much less for a slave to rule over princes" (RSV). Whybray suggests that 10.16-17 may reflect a reaction against Hellenistic attitudes towards kingship at a time when child kings were becoming more common (*Ecclesiastes*, p. 156).

wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knows to heed advice" (4.13). The poor youth became king, and it is הַבַּל that none who come later will rejoice in him (4.16; cf. 1.11).⁴⁴ The latter (9.13-16) is a more complicated narrative in which the poor man (although not a king) delivers a city from a *great king* by wisdom. From this Qoheleth draws a clear conclusion:

And I said, "Better wisdom than might."
 But the wisdom of the poor man is despised,
 and his words are not heeded.
 The calm words of the wise are heeded
 more than the shouting of a ruler among fools. (9.16-17)

In these passages there is neither criticism nor praise of kingship, but kings are the stratagem by which Qoheleth brings the wisdom of the poor into sharp relief. Perhaps ironically he thereby fulfils a mandate to be concerned for the poor—for he has "opened his mouth" in their favour (recalling the instruction of King Lemuel's mother at Prov. 31.9).

We have seen that there is an assumption in Qoheleth-studies which runs something like this: "Monarchs cannot be self-critical, or critical of the monarchy of which they are a part."⁴⁵ There is one ancient work concerning a monarch, a Roman emperor, which casts this assumption into a suspicious light: *The*

⁴⁴ G. Ogden has argued that this pericope is a thesis (the *Tôb-Spruch* of 4.13) with an observation that verifies it (4.14-16) and that the youth who went on to become "counsellor" (Ogden's reading of לַמֶּלֶךְ at 4.14a) may be a veiled historical allusion to Joseph or David. While I accept that some kind of allusion may be present, in order for Joseph to be a candidate Ogden is forced to argue for a rather ill-attested reading of מֶלֶךְ and to ignore the contrast present of the youth *becoming* king with an old king, which contrast gives full breadth to the point made in the *Tôb-Spruch* ("Historical Allusion in Qoheleth iv 13-16?", *VT* 30 [1980], pp. 311, 312-13).

⁴⁵ Obviously, I am generalizing the nature of the assumptions. J. A. Loader is one scholar who objects more thoroughly to what I am suggesting than most. His only objection that I have not yet dealt with, however, is that "[i]f the whole book were royal fiction, one would have expected it to occur in the first pericope [1.3-11], which is not the case" (making reference to Ellermeier in, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* [BZAW, 152; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979], p. 19). The problem with this objection is that the word "occur" begs definition. Why is it that the distinct identification of the narrator at 1.1-2, as well as its subsequent development, cannot continue to hold sway without its (perhaps unnecessary?) explicit reiteration?

Meditations of Marcus Aurelius. In this semi-autobiographical work, Aurelius offers some reflections on the state of concurrent political structure. I have chosen examples which, given the assumption I have just mentioned, could not have come from the mouth of a ruler or king.

Be not Caesarified [i.e. a courtier], be not dipped in the purple dye; for it can happen. (6.30)

...envy, tricking, and dissimulation are the character and consequences of tyranny. (1.11)

Be neither slave nor tyrant to anybody. (1.31)

Consider...how many tyrants, who managed the power of life and death with as much insolence as if themselves had been immortal...and here you will find one man closing another's eyes. (4.48; cf. esp. Eccl. 4.1; 5.8)⁴⁶

The work was written c. 175 CE and has some affinity with Ecclesiastes.⁴⁷ The narrator is a monarch who reflects on the mismanagement of political power structures. Like Ecclesiastes, the narrative of the *Meditations* is veiled in an obscure genre. As B. Rutherford puts it, the *Meditations* has no real literary counterpart, and "the absence of a familiar generic background" proves a hindrance to study, for "no single genre will provide the master key".⁴⁸ Here is an individual expression of criticism of corrupt power structures coming from one in power. As with Aurelius, if Qoheleth was critical of the monarchical or otherwise power structure of his day (as I believe is likely at Eccl. 5.8; 8.2-9;

⁴⁶ All translations are taken from *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* (trans. J. Collier; rev. A. Zimmern; London: Walter Scott, 1887), except for the first (6.30), which is from B. Rutherford's *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius: A Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 65. Rutherford comments that the tyranny (τυραννικη) in question may have often been self-referential (ibid.).

⁴⁷ I note here that the only other significant comparison of Ecclesiastes to Aurelius's *Meditations* I have come across is that of O. Loretz (following W. Rudolph), who suggests that both works employ a journal-keeping method ("Tagebuchaufzeichnungen") ("Zur Darbietungsform der 'Ich-Erzählung' im Buche Qohelet", *CBQ* 25 [1963], p. 52). H. Fisch does, however, make a brief comparison of Qoheleth's notion of circularity to Aurelius's of the same ("Qoheleth: A Hebrew Ironist", p. 194 nn. 15-17).

⁴⁸ Rutherford, *Meditations*, p. 7.

and perhaps 4.1) it need not in any way preclude his consistent and mischievous reference to Solomon.⁴⁹ To strike a modern analogy, there are a large number of lecturers in North America and Britain who are often more than self-critical of the educational systems in which they participate! The assumption is faulty.

Thus far I conclude that it is unfair to suggest that a royal fiction is either undermined or forgotten after ch. 2. But what else suggests that Solomon is alluded to? Besides 1.12–2.17 (27?) there are two other traces of a particularly *Solomonic* guise. It is a tradition of Solomon as a recognizable individual who had experiences peculiar to himself that the first passage, 7.25–29,⁵⁰ conceivably draws upon.⁵¹

I turned, I and my heart, to understand, and to search out and to seek wisdom and the sum of things; and to understand evil, folly and the folly of madness. And I found more bitter than death the woman who is traps and her heart nets, her hands chains. He who pleases God will be delivered from her, but he who sins will be taken by her. See, this I have found, said Qoheleth ([adding] one to one to find the sum, which my soul

⁴⁹ It is interesting to note on this score that Jewish rabbis of the middle ages were not afraid to associate kings with "anti-royal" sentiments. In 4.1–3 of *Targ. Qoh.* there is no attempt made to enhance the moral aspect, and sometimes even David was implicated in "anti-royal" sentiment (e.g. *Qoh. Rab.* 10.4). One may also compare some remarks in the ANE text, *The Instruction for King Merikare* (*ANET*, pp. 414–18). In the mouth of the king who is father of Merikare we find such advice as "impair no officials at their posts" (line 48; italics in *ANET*), and "there is no one free from a foe" (lines 114–15). It would clearly be spurious to suggest that since in these verses (decontextualized as they are) there is no explicit, glowing reference to the king, or anything to suggest clearly that the speaker is *not* a subject of the king, that the narrating perspective is therefore *not* that of a king.

⁵⁰ For textual comments and my treatment of the frame narrator's strategy in this section, see Chapter 4.2. For the question of Qoheleth's strategy in relation to the quest, see Chapter 9.3.

⁵¹ That tradition is a cohesive one from which a very particular character emerges. On this point (concerning 1 Kgs 1–11 in particular) see B. Porten, "The Structure and Theme of the Solomon Narrative", *HUCA* 38 (1967), pp. 93–128. Porten argues that from 1 Kgs 1–11 emerges a recognizable pattern of promise and fulfilment which created an unambiguous Solomonic tradition (see esp. pp. 94ff., 113–14, 124). F. Zimmermann assumes such a cohesive Solomonic tradition in his psychoanalytic treatment of Solomon in relation to Qoheleth, in *Inner World*, chapter 10. I am not suggesting that the case cannot be stated more loosely, as, for example, Brueggemann's remark that the author of Ecclesiastes "appealed to some abiding memory of the connection between Solomon and wisdom" ("Social Significance", p. 119).

has continually sought but I have not found): One man among a thousand I have found, but a woman among all of these I have not found. See, this alone I have found: God made humanity upright, but they have sought many devices.

Solomonic tradition portrays an exorbitantly xenophilic man concerning women:

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women...from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to Israel, "You shall not enter into marriage with them...for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods"; Solomon clung to these in love. He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart...and his heart was not wholly true to the LORD his God... So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD... Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh... And so he did for all his foreign wives... (1 Kgs 11.1-8, RSV)

It seems that in order to make some sense of this flaw in Israel's great wisdom teacher the "historian" turned to a seemingly simple and time-honoured solution: ascribe the problem to women. There is already a hint of this at 1 Kgs 11.3b; but only a hint. At Neh. 13.25-26 the excuse theme is picked up more clearly:

...I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons, or yourselves. Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless foreign women made even him to sin." (RSV)⁵²

God's displeasure ("Solomon did what was evil *in the sight* of the LORD") has been miraculously transformed into God's beneficence ("and he was beloved by his God"), and Solomon's shame ("his heart was not wholly true") to his exaltation ("there was no king like him"). This character make-over may have

⁵² The editorial cleansing of bad character traits is a well-known feature of the biblical historical books. One extreme example is that of Manasseh who, according to 2 Kgs 21.1-17, was irredeemably evil; and only by his own accord (21.16b). His evil results in a judgment from the "LORD's prophets" (21.10-15) and the final summary of his life is *not* good (21.17). However, the Chronicler (2 Chron. 33.1-20) apparently thought that Manasseh's image needed a good wash. Not only is the LORD's judgment replaced with a story of Manasseh's repentance (33.10-17), but the final summary has been redeemed (even presented as an example of repentance worthy of emulation!; 33.18-19).

reached yet another peak in Eccl. 7.25-29. First we need to remember that nothing stops the reader from reading with the same Solomonic context that is well established by the first two chapters. Furthermore, this passage is in no way an isolated text. It is entrenched in the course of narration (particularly, as we have seen, in that of the frame narrator's), couched in the language of experiment that is such a distinctive mark of the guise "proper" (see n. 59 below) and comprises *an experience* which is alluded to by the narrator: "I found more bitter than death..." (v. 26).

And in what context did Qoheleth search for one woman? Perhaps he searched in the numerical context of Solomon's experience: one woman among a thousand (of Solomon's wives?—1 Kgs 11.3) he could not find. Solomonic tradition is the ideal backdrop for this experiment. The "woman" (note, not a particular woman or "women") is likely a generic term meaning women in general (as אִשָּׁה is so often used generically to refer to men; cf. 2.8). Just as Solomon "fell victim" to women, "woman" is the accident waiting to happen to our unsuspecting Qoheleth/Solomon (the military imagery of traps and hunting reflects this; cf. 9.12). By offering such a hapless picture, however, Solomon may here be criticized for being too willing a "victim", and Solomonic tradition may thereby be under scrutiny.⁵³

It has been suggested that the frame narrator, in the epilogue, ignores the guise of Solomon.⁵⁴ But does the description, for example, of Qoheleth as a sage suggest an image incongruous with that of "king"? While the *association* of sage with king is not explicit in the epilogue, it is possible that the epilogue

⁵³ Ellul is in agreement on this point, but for very different reasons (*Reason for Being*, p. 20). Ellul notes that in the mouth of Qoheleth/Solomon the passage becomes a challenge to Solomon himself. But for Ellul the challenge consists of the idea that this is what Solomon would have said "were he truly wise" (p. 202). Both F. Zimmermann (*Inner World*, p. 86) and G. A. Barton (*Ecclesiastes*, p. 147) suggest a general Solomonic context as well.

⁵⁴ Notably, J. Crenshaw (*Ecclesiastes*, p. 29).

allows the already established image of Qoheleth as king in his narrative to merge with that of a celebrated image of sage.⁵⁵ Such Solomonic tradition as the following may be compared:

[Solomon] was wiser than all others...and he uttered three thousand proverbs [מִשְׁלֵי]... And they came from all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom. (1 Kgs 4.31-34 [5.11-14])

As I argued in Chapter 5.2, the epilogue implies that there are מִשְׁלֵי not included that the epilogist could have selected (12.9) and may therefore draw on such tradition as this concerning Solomon's great literary activity.⁵⁶ Further, the use of "shepherd" (מִרְעֵה, 12.11) may have found its prototype in such tradition as 1 Sam. 25.7, in which shepherds are likened to Israelite kings, possibly presuming Qoheleth's association with royalty.⁵⁷ Finally, if "shepherd" refers to God (see p. 102 n. 30, above), the divine origin both of Ecclesiastes and of Proverbs may here be asserted, and hence the putative author of *both* (Solomon) indirectly referred to.

One could easily imagine that the Qoheleth described in the epilogue is a king. The association brings the proverb to mind, "It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out" (Prov. 25.2, RSV).

⁵⁵ In rabbinic literature, מֶלֶךְ was sometimes substituted for חֹכֵם at 12.9. Again, no quandary was found in associating the two (e.g. *Targ. Qoh.* 12.8-10). One MS (110 of the Bibliotheque nationale, Paris) reads at 12.9: "King Qoheleth was wiser than all the people..." (as cited in Knobel, "The Targum of Qohelet", p. 54).

⁵⁶ See also, Fox, "Frame-narrative", p. 100. It was this tradition of Solomon having encyclopedic knowledge and being a prolific writer which the frame narrator may have seized upon. Hezekiah (reigned c. 716–687 BCE) may have been responsible for fostering hugely popular legends of Solomon's great literary reputation (so R.B.Y. Scott, "Solomon and the Beginnings of Wisdom", in M. Noth and D.W. Thomas (eds.), *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (VTSup, 3; Leiden: Brill, 1955), pp. 271, 272-79), and perhaps this vibrant tradition is alluded to in the epilogue.

⁵⁷ J. Crenshaw has suggested a possible association with Egyptian literature which likens shepherds to pharaohs (*Ecclesiastes*, pp. 32-33). Further, see Chapter 5.2, where I argue that in 12.9 it is Qoheleth's connection to Solomon that fills in an alluring gap—i.e., Who is the teacher? and How did he teach?

And the possibility that King Solomon is alluded to⁵⁸ (even celebrated!) as the sage in question (v. 9) works well with the notion of the frame narrative's incongruity to Qoheleth's narrative in that by connecting Qoheleth to Solomon without any of the apparently subversive strategies that Qoheleth evidences in his use of the guise, the frame narrator evidences an orthodox, Solomonic summary of Qoheleth's life that serves to marginalize his bitter-sweet cynicism.

The Solomonic guise is not simply a matter of a text here and there that "supports" it or remains silent about it. Besides what I have already touched on, the guise, which all admit is present in the first two chapters, is entrenched via the repetition of certain motifs that have their origin in the Solomonic guise proper of 1.1 and 1.12–2.26.⁵⁹ The fact that those motifs have their origin *there* suggests that the Solomonic is deeply embedded in Ecclesiastes. Also, it follows that the guise proper is likely *not*, as has been suggested,⁶⁰ a product of redaction. Attributions that are the product of redaction might more resemble that found at Prov. 10.1, where (unlike Ecclesiastes) what follows is not narrated

⁵⁸ Thus also, Michael Eaton: "The epilogue portraying Qoheleth has all the appearances of referring to an actual historical character: a wise man, a collector of proverbs, a teacher and writer. Who else but Solomon?" (*Ecclesiastes*, p. 23).

⁵⁹ These "throw-backs" to the guise proper are numerous. There are such recurring phrases as "absurd and a pursuit of wind" and "What is crooked cannot be made straight" (compare 1.15 at the commencement of the king's reflection to 7.13), which both can be found in the Solomonic guise "proper". Also, the experimental quality of the guise proper is felt throughout Ecclesiastes. Take, for example, sayings which suggest that Qoheleth is testing: "I observed" (2.12, 24; 3.16, 22; 4.1, 4, 7, 15; 8.17; 9.11); "I gave my heart over"—i.e. "I applied myself" (1.13, 17; 8.16); "I tested" (2.1; 7.23); or in which Qoheleth is concluding: "I said in my heart" or "I said to myself concerning" (1.16; 2.1, 2, 15; 3.17, 18; 7.23; 8.14); or the **הביל** judgments (1.2, 14; 2.1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3.19; 4.4 etc.). All are a natural validation of Qoheleth's narrative springing from the guise proper of chs. 1–2. As Whybray says of the relation of ch. 2 to the rest of Ecclesiastes, "The reflections attributed to Qoheleth-Solomon are not peculiar to him but are echoed throughout the book; and since the whole book is expressed in the first person singular, it is impossible to be certain at what point the 'I' of Solomon gives place to the 'I' of Qoheleth himself" (*Ecclesiastes*, p. 46).

⁶⁰ E.g. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 28–29, 56–57.

strictly in the first person (as if the person introduced at the title continued to speak in that same person), but is a series of relatively isolated proverbs.⁶¹

In some sense I agree with Fox that "the king fiction is a rhetorical device, not an attempt to assert Solomonic authorship for the whole book".⁶² At times the narrator is an intensely personal "I" that is unconventionally non-historical. But the guise continually reasserts itself. This is why Fox's statement cannot be principally agreed to. The Solomonic guise is more complex than that. It provides for the reader a sometimes elusive, sometimes insinuated context in which to grasp the experiments of Qoheleth.

2. *The Solomonic, the Canon and the Rabbis*

It is widely held that Ecclesiastes was received into the Jewish canon due mainly to its association with Solomon.⁶³ We know that rabbinic debate about the book in general was abundant. Ecclesiastes and Esther were perhaps the most frequently discussed books. The precise issues of those discussions are, however, difficult to determine.

First, we can likely rule out the issue of "canon".⁶⁴ After an exhaustive

⁶¹ Compare D. Dimant's comments on the Wisdom of Solomon: "[The association with Solomon is] organic to the original framework [... Wis.] does not state explicitly the pseudonymic author, nor the *precise* circumstances of his life. Instead, it employs a complete system of biblical allusions in order to indicate the pseudonymic author" ("Pseudonymity in the Wisdom of Solomon", in N.F. Marcos [ed.], *La Septuaginta (V Congreso de la IOSCS)* [Madrid: C.S.I.C., 1985], p. 245; italics mine). The same can, I believe, be said of Ecclesiastes.

⁶² Fox, "Frame-narrative", p. 86.

⁶³ This view seems to have been "traditionally" accepted in biblical scholarship; recently advocated by Svend Holm-Nielsen ("The Book of Ecclesiastes and the Interpretation of it in Jewish and Christian Theology", *ASTI* 10 [1976], p. 55), R.B. Salters ("Qoheleth and the Canon", pp. 340-42) and R.N. Whybray (*Ecclesiastes*, p. 3), although Whybray is hesitant.

⁶⁴ As I.H. Eybers reminds us, the terms "canonical" and "canonization" are relatively new (fourth century CE) and do not appear in the discussions of the rabbis before this time ("The 'Canonization' of Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes and Esther", in W.C. van Wyk [ed.], *Aspects of the Exegetical Process* [OTWSA, 20; Pretoria West: NHW Press, 1977], p. 33). I use the word for convenience because of its acquired usage and the

analysis of the subject, Sid Leiman suggests that only books used in teaching and disputes by the rabbis were considered canonical; that is, part of a group of books accepted and recognized as Scripture that a given community uses to establish ethical and religious practice and ideology. In other words, a *canonical* book became such because it was used pragmatically and frequently in rabbinic circles. This is why talmudic discussions reveal indifference towards the question of a book's "use", for its canonical status was already assumed in any such discussion. Instead, according to Leiman, the discussions give greater weight to a book's ability/inability to "defile the hands",⁶⁵ or to its inspirational status in general.⁶⁶ Take, for example, *t. Yad.* 3.5:

All the holy writings defile the hands [ל-כתבי הקדש משמאין] [אתהדירים]. The Song of Songs defiles the hands, but there is a dispute about Ecclesiastes. R. Jose says: Ecclesiastes does not defile the hands, but there is a dispute about the Song of Songs.⁶⁷

Other factors suggest that canon was not an issue. Discussions at the so-

specific definition I take on board should become clear.

⁶⁵ That a book is capable of defiling the hands shows that it is holy or inspired. This notion was "a protective measure which the rabbis enacted in order to keep sacred literature from being mishandled" (S.Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* [Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1976], p. 116; also, see pp. 104-20). Some books were considered both uninspired *and* canonical (e.g. *Megilloth Taanith*; *ibid.*, p. 112), including, at least for some rabbis, Ecclesiastes. After reviewing a plethora of rabbinic discussion on the matter, Leiman argues that the definition of canonical as that which is used pragmatically (instead of only inspired) corrects a misunderstanding in biblical scholarship with a long history. In opposition to Leiman, D. Kraemer argues that Leiman falsely assumes that "the challenge to...[the] inspiration [of the books in question] could have been divorced from the question of their inclusion in the canon" ("The Formation of Rabbinic Canon: Authority and Boundaries", *JBL* 110/4 [1991], pp. 628-29). But Leiman does not attempt to "divorce" these questions as much as to show the lack of evidence for their causal relationship. Besides, it may be that the question of the defilement of hands was not one of inspiration per se. As James Barr comments, "the question is a truly ritual one: the discussion is not, whether this or that book is canonical, but whether it, canonical or not, had certain ritual effects" (*Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983], p. 51; see also, pp. 49ff.).

⁶⁶ E.g. *t. Yad.* 2.14 (see below).

⁶⁷ Translation from "Yadayim", in *The Babylonian Talmud* (trans. I. Fishman; London: Soncino Press, 1948). See also, *t. Yad.* 2.14; 'Ed. 5.3; *Meg.* 7a; *Lev. R.* 28.1.

called Council of Jamnia (c. 90 CE) suggest that Ecclesiastes was in danger of being deemed **שְׁכֵּל**—"that which is stored away"—since it fostered heretical ideas. But the reported debate likely served to confirm its canonical status early on, since only problematic *canonical* books were at risk of being "stored away".⁶⁸ Also, the Solomonic connection fades to the background. In none of the discussions at Jamnia was Solomonic authorship even mentioned, and in the end no books discussed at Jamnia were withdrawn from canonical use.⁶⁹ Ecclesiastes was spared **שְׁכֵּל**, but not because of any association with Solomon.⁷⁰

Furthermore, as early as the second century there were rabbis who were unwilling to divulge (or who were truly ignorant about) the origin of uneasiness about the inspiration of Ecclesiastes (and, at the time, the Song of Solomon). They believed that "their uneasiness went back to their predecessors".⁷¹ This forms, again, an ironical reflection of Ecclesiastes' long-standing canonical

⁶⁸ So Leiman, *Canonization*, pp. 79-80, 86, 104-109.

⁶⁹ Indeed, Jamnia may have only been an "academic discussion" which made no "authoritative" decisions (so Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon*, pp. 276-77).

⁷⁰ Contra R.B. Salters, G.A. Barton and R. Gordis. It is most likely that Ecclesiastes survived a selection process by which it was finally deemed orthodox (late third century CE?) because it "begins and ends with Torah". As *Qoh. Rab.* at 1.3 reads, "Is it possible that the words might be applied to man's labour in the Torah?" (taken from "Midrash Rabbah Koheleth", in *The Midrash*, VII [trans. A. Cohen; London: Soncino Press, 1939]; all citations of *Qoh. Rab.* are taken from this edition). That is, one should not toil for one's own material need but for and in the Torah (and, according to *Qoh. Rab.*, Ecclesiastes ends with the Torah at 12.13). This might have been appealing at a time when wisdom and religion were at a low ebb (so Salters, who suggests this tentatively as an alternative; "Qoheleth and the Canon", p. 341). According to some Talmuds, it was only because the men of Hezekiah had copied and examined Ecclesiastes, finding it acceptable, that it was saved from **שְׁכֵּל** (along with the Song of Songs; cf. David Halperin, "The Book of Remedies, the Canonization of the Solomonic Writings, and the Riddle of Pseudo-Eusebius", *JQR* 72 [1982], pp. 277-78, 281; cf. Prov. 25.1). L. Ginzberg (*The Legends of the Jews* [7 vols.; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1968], VI, p. 368) notes another "legend" concerning the men of Hezekiah in which Ecclesiastes was withdrawn by them from public use because of its "unholy nature". Overall, it is precarious to determine just how Ecclesiastes escaped **שְׁכֵּל**.

⁷¹ Halperin, "The Book of Remedies", p. 277. Halperin also argues that discrepancies between *Yad.* 3.5 and *Meg.* 7a concerning the Ushan authorities cited, "add to the impression of uncertainty in traditions".

status. Its canonicity may never have been disputed. As Roger Beckwith puts it,

Is it not possible that the disputes [i.e. rabbinic disputes in general] were about books long acknowledged as canonical...and all of them privately studied as Scripture, before and during the period of the disputes, no less than afterwards?⁷²

This may explain why the Shammaites who argued that Ecclesiastes did not "defile the hands" nevertheless expounded verses from the book publicly, treating it, according to Leiman, canonically. In their infamous dispute on this topic with the school of Hillel, Solomonic authorship was not brought into play.⁷³

Finally, in the early third century CE we find the reported opinion of R. Simeon ben Menasya:

The Song of songs defiles the hands, because it was spoken through Divine inspiration; Ecclesiastes does not defile the hands, because it is [only] Solomon's wisdom. They replied: Did he write this alone? Scripture says, "He spoke three thousand parables, and his songs were a thousand and five" (1 Kgs 5.12), and "Do not add to [God's] words, lest He rebuke you and you be found a liar" (Prov. 30.6).⁷⁴

And again from Jerome:

...the Hebrews say that, among other writings of Solomon which are obsolete and forgotten, this book [Eccl.] ought to be obliterated [*oblitterandus*], because it asserts that all the creatures of God are in vain.⁷⁵

In both examples any correlation to Solomon was irrelevant (or even damaging)

⁷² Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon*, p. 276. Evidence outside the rabbinic disputes may further substantiate this claim. I.H. Eybers lists several possible allusions to Ecclesiastes from the Thanksgiving Hymns at Qumran (fragments dated 150 BCE). In my opinion, only the following allusion seems plausible: compare 1QS 6.7 to Eccl. 11.9, which both employ the rare biblical idiom, "the way of thy heart" (Eybers, "Some Light on the Canon of the Qumran Sect", in S.Z. Leiman [ed.], *The Canon and Masorah of the Hebrew Bible: An Introductory Reader* [New York: Ktav, 1974], p. 26). The New Testament betrays no sure knowledge of Ecclesiastes, which tips the scale of judgment in neither direction. Additionally, although any substantial use of Ecclesiastes was slow-coming among the early Christian church (see below), there is no evidence among the fathers of dispute over its use.

⁷³ *t. Yad.* 3.5; *'Ed.* 5.3.

⁷⁴ *t. Yad.* 2.14 (with variations); *b. Meg.* 7a (trans. by Halperin, "The Book of Remedies", p. 277).

⁷⁵ As cited by C.D. Ginsburg, *Cohelath*, p. 15.

to Ecclesiastes' canonical status.

Usually debates instead focused on some of the acknowledged contradictions of the book (even the "defiling of hands" debate may have had this problem at its centre). *Qoh. Rab.* 11.9 records what was perhaps the most serious of debates on Ecclesiastes:

The Sages sought to suppress the Book of Koheleth because they discovered therein words which tend toward heresy. They declared, "This is the wisdom of Solomon that he said, 'Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth!'" (Eccl. 11.9). Now Moses said, *that ye go not about after your own heart* (Num. 15.39)... Is restraint to be abolished? Is there no judgement and no Judge? But since he continued, "But know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgement", they exclaimed, "Well has Solomon spoken".

It seems natural to assume that in order to solve such dilemmas rabbis would have turned to the argument that Solomon was incapable of heterodoxy, and that since he wrote Ecclesiastes, there must be some other explanation (i.e. other than that "Qoheleth" was in fact a heretic) to account for its heterodoxy.⁷⁶ However, there is no evidence to suggest that this critical line was ever taken up. In the example above, it is only what can at best be called a contrived reading of Eccl. 11.9b that "redeemed" the text.

Most debates of ancient readers are mainly concerned with the content of Ecclesiastes. In fact, the references to the use of the book seem to act as a ruse to discuss what is in it and how it affects one's reading of it.⁷⁷ Ancient readers did not seem to be bothered with the much asked modern question, Why is Ecclesiastes in the canon? And we cannot come up with a satisfactory answer anyway. We have seen that there is no evidence to suggest that any association

⁷⁶ So, for example, Gordis, *Koheleth*, p. 42.

⁷⁷ Compare Eybers's statement: "the discussion surrounding these books [Cant., Eccl., Est.] were more of an academic exercise, based on certain objections which could be raised against these books" ("Canonization", p. 34).

with Solomon was responsible for it.⁷⁸ Other suggestions, however, have been offered. For example, J. Jarick suggests that, in the end, this "little scroll...was simply too attractive to be surrendered".⁷⁹ S. Schloesser suggests that the profoundly moral stance of Qoheleth's scepticism (a more honest and authentic expression of experience than the older schools of wisdom) is what granted it a place in the canon.⁸⁰ While these suggestions are more feasible to me than the Solomonic connection, in this case, of the making of many speculations there is no end, regardless how well-informed. Ancient readers did not seem to question the fact that for one reason or another Ecclesiastes was there. The connection with Solomon was assumed but did not raise any significant interpretive issues (compare section 5 below). As T. Perry suggests, the more interesting question than "How did Ecclesiastes get into the canon?", is "What is the nature of a canon that includes such books?"⁸¹ To the reader who would demand a seamless cohesion of ideology, its nature is strange and potentially graceful.

3. *The Solomonic and the Pseudonymic*

Putting a label on the device that I have until now for the sake of convenience called the Solomonic guise is made difficult by the fact that there is little concurrent with Ecclesiastes which is like it: the ruminations of a "Qoheleth" (of any kind) who playfully, elusively and problematically sets his words in the

⁷⁸ J. Barton is in agreement (*Oracles of God: Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy in Israel after the Exile* [London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1986], p. 62).

⁷⁹ Jarick further suggests that Solomonic authorship was relevant to the extent that it would have placed the writing of Ecclesiastes before the time when, traditionally, "the Holy Spirit ceased out of Israel" (*Gregory Thaumaturgos' Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes* [SBLSCS, 29; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990], pp. 288, 317-18).

⁸⁰ "A King is Held Captive in her Tresses': The Liberating Deconstruction of the Search for Wisdom from Proverbs through Ecclesiastes", in J. Morgan (ed.), *Church Divinity* (Bristol: Cloverdale Corporation, 1989-90), p. 228.

⁸¹ *Dialogues with Kohelet*, p. 48.

mouth of a king.⁸² A host of appellations have been offered: "Organ of himself", "abstraction of the historical", "Pseudo-Solomon", "effective foil", "*nom de plume*", "putative author" and so forth.

Is it a pseudonym? Strictly speaking, the answer is no. The name of Solomon appears nowhere in the book. However, this may be attributed to the fact that, in a culture whose notion of authorship was much more fluid than our own,⁸³ the association to Solomon may not have required the name. Such fluidity may have meant, in the end, that Qoheleth's readers found only a blurred distinction between Solomon and Qoheleth/Solomon. That "construct" of authorship is partly assumed of the reader by the use of the name "Qoheleth" in, for example, the superscription; for even a secondary editor would there have had ample opportunity to anchor the work more solidly and clearly to the name of Solomon. Also, the fictitious quality of the frame narration coupled with Qoheleth's imaginative use of Solomon and first-person narration suggests a seemingly conscious effort to achieve pseudonymity.⁸⁴ That is, it seems that

⁸² Martin Hengel is in agreement: "The semi-pseudonymity of the work is unique" (*Judaism and Hellenism*, I, p. 129). Hengel goes on to compare Ecclesiastes to other pseudonymous works roughly concurrent with—e.g., Wisdom of Solomon (he dates this about 200 years later than Ecclesiastes) and the final recension of Proverbs.

⁸³ For example, school children in the Hellenistic empire of the third to second century BCE were expected to write a *χρεια* ("fable") as part of their secondary school literary studies, and attribute it either to Aesop or "some sage of antiquity". Ecclesiastes may therefore have been written in a culture whose populace was at least familiar with a loosely structured form of pseudonymity from an early age (see I.H. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* [trans. G. Lamb; London: Sheed and Ward, 1956], p. 174). Furthermore, J. Barton argues that within the biblical tradition itself existed a very fluid concept of authorship; i.e., as to the "historicity" of authors (*Oracles of God*, p. 61). Modern readers have been uncomfortable with the notion of pseudonymity or anonymity. As Foucault comments, "We cannot tolerate literary anonymity. We do not welcome its enigmatic quality" ("What is an Author?", *PrtRev* 42, [1975], p. 609). Indeed, according to Foucault, we apply principles that reach back to the time of Jerome to determine whether a text was written by the author it is purported to be written by and thereby rubber stamp its "authenticity" (*ibid.*, pp. 609-10).

⁸⁴ Geyer (*The Wisdom of Solomon* [London: SCM Press, 1963], p. 18), contrasting Ecclesiastes to the Wisdom of Solomon, argues that the nature of the guise had the effect of *anonymity*; i.e., the book deceived no one and was hence rendered anonymous (E. Bickerman [*Four Strange Books of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), p.

there is an effort, to whatever degree, to achieve a suspension of disbelief that involves "believing" that Solomon is the primary narrator and therefore the "author" of the framed material. To speak in such a guise, then, is partly analogous to pseudonymity.⁸⁵

The use of the "semi-pseudonym", it is widely recognized, did not likely create moral problems for readers. The "voice" of Solomon in Ecclesiastes was simply an amoral strategy of communication, one that ancient readers would likely have recognized as such.⁸⁶ Readers were neither fooled into thinking this was Solomon nor were they concerned about the issue anyway.⁸⁷ This said, to what *extent* did readers come from Ecclesiastes with the impression that this, as Michael Eaton comments, is "what Solomon would have said had he addressed himself to the subject of pessimism"?⁸⁸ To answer that in real terms is impossible, but we can conjecture good reasons for the author of Ecclesiastes to have wanted readers to believe it.

First, in an odd way, Solomon's "presence" in the book protects Qoheleth from himself. As Brevard Childs puts it, since the book functions as an "official

142] agrees with Geyer that Ecclesiastes was essentially anonymous). This is only partly true. While the theory of anonymity does justice to Qoheleth's individuality it leaves no room for the rather complex relationship Qoheleth undeniably has, as a character, to Solomonic tradition.

⁸⁵ Compare the comments of David Meade, who suggests that the authoritative stamp of revelation in the tradition of God revealing himself to Solomon is "passed on", as it were, to Ecclesiastes through the use of the Solomonic guise. Says Meade, "Authorship [in the Israelite wisdom tradition] is more concerned with authoritative tradition than literary origins [and Ecclesiastes represents] an entirely new work issued under the authority of another...[If] this is not the essence of pseudonymity, what is?" (*Pseudonymity and Canon* [WUNT, 39; Tübingen: Mohr, 1986], p. 59).

⁸⁶ However, that pseudonymity was not so readily "amorally" accepted in antiquity, see S. Robinson, "Lying for God: The Uses of Apocrypha", in G. Gillum and C. Criggs (eds.), *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-Day Saints* (Religious Studies Monograph Series, 13; Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1986), pp. 138-40.

⁸⁷ This is widely accepted and impossible to refute but I cannot account for the fact that no one questioned the idea of Solomon as author until Luther. Further, see section 5b below.

⁸⁸ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 24.

corrective" to/against more traditional wisdom texts, the Solomonic guise was necessary to guard it from "interpretations which would derive Koheleth's views from his changing moods or pessimistic disposition rather than to see them as playing a critical role within Israel's corpus of wisdom literature".⁸⁹ If this is at all true then the guise is, as the frame narrative, analogous to the modern picture frame. Just as some producers of frames used more socially acceptable frames which would guard it from "interpretations which would derive [the painter's] views from his changing moods or pessimistic disposition", so the guise enables Koheleth's words a "smoother" entry into a dialogue with other works (in a larger, better attended "gallery") that would not have been otherwise possible.

Second, it may be that the power of Solomon's "voice" was not limited only to the immediate Jewish culture, but that it earned Ecclesiastes a hearing in a wider Hellenistic culture. The garb of Israel's skilful orator of wisdom, Eissfeldt suggested, was conceivably respected among Greeks who prized rhetoric.⁹⁰ Indeed, any of the pseudo-Solomonic works at the time may have intended to demonstrate, says Hengel, "the great age and...superiority of the national wisdom over against that of Greece".⁹¹ This was the natural outworking of hero worship and it may have struck critical chords in the traditions that

⁸⁹ Childs, *Introduction*, pp. 584, 588. To evaluate Childs's claim that Ecclesiastes functioned as a "corrective" against a particular school of wisdom it would be necessary to discern Qoheleth's alleged counterparts with at least some degree of definitude. While this is beyond the scope of this thesis, Childs's point (that the guise would have functioned as a distraction from Qoheleth's overall tone in order for his readers to better focus on the content of his thought) can be readily accepted. This would also grant Qoheleth's unorthodox wisdom (as troubled the rabbis) a graver tone in Solomon's mouth. J. Crenshaw agrees (ironically, in light of his fractured view of the Solomonic guise) that the connection to Solomon was made in order to keep the book's authority from being questioned (*Ecclesiastes*, p. 28; similarly, see Meade, *Pseudonymity and Canon*, pp. 49, 56).

⁹⁰ *Introduction*, pp. 429-30.

⁹¹ So Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, I, p. 129. Hengel strengthens his argument with other plausible suggestions: "The riches and the wisdom of Solomon form a pendant to the splendour of the Ptolemaic kings [like Solomon] the richest and most learned of their time" (p. 130).

surrounded it. Similarly, D. Dimant has suggested that the Wisdom of Solomon was written in a vein much like that of concurrent Hellenistic literature (e.g. Pythagorean treatises on kingship, Jewish apocrypha such as the *Letter of Aristeas* [second or first century BCE] etc.). For Dimant, the author of the Wisdom of Solomon utilized the Solomonic partly because Solomon was a character who traditionally had enough of something like stoic virtue and could meet the stoic and Platonic criterion of "proof from example" (*παραδειγμα*); hence its "teaching" would receive a hearing.⁹² If Ecclesiastes is at all connected with a Hellenistic culture (as Hengel and others suggest), then a similar background is possible. In this regard, as Christopher Rowland has argued concerning the biblical prophets, the pseudonym may have been used to communicate, in effect, with more authority.⁹³

Finally, with the guise Qoheleth may have been enabled to turn conventional notions of *general* kingship (as particularly expressed in Prov. 16–22.16) on their heads, particularly the idea, as W. Lee Humphreys describes it, that "Yahweh's powers and judgement and his ultimate incomprehensibility" place the king "in a sphere above other human beings".⁹⁴ If it can be accepted that the king was placed on a level above human understanding (often equating

⁹² Dimant, "Pseudonymity", pp. 249-50, 254-55.

⁹³ This phenomenon, Rowland argues, was very common in the prophetic tradition, and there is no reason to suggest that it was foreign to the wisdom tradition either (although Qoheleth does not make any prophetic claims—i.e. as one "speaking for" God; the closest Ecclesiastes comes to this is the frame narrator's comments at 12.10-11). To speak (even partly) in the voice of a great figure of the past would have lent a greater credibility to Qoheleth's conclusions (see *The Open Heaven* [London: SPCK, 1982], pp. 61-70). J. Barton argues similarly concerning the prophetic tradition (*Oracles of God*, p. 210). Interestingly, *Targ. Qoh.* begins, "The words of prophecy ..." (again at 3.11; 4.15; 9.7; 10.7; cf. *Qoh. Rab.* 1.1-2).

⁹⁴ "The Motif of the Wise Courier in the Book of Proverbs", in J. Gammie *et al.* (eds.), *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978), p. 182. Humphreys is not suggesting that the king and Yahweh are "interchangeable" nomens, but that the king was more divine than human, and that that interchange could *sometimes* be made without significantly altering the meaning of the text.

the king with Yahweh) then it must be said that Qoheleth, because he is a king and because he is unable to discover the nature of things (see chapter 9.3), makes the king thoroughly human, and has, in a sense, derobed him of his heavenly powers of discernment.

I have still not considered a question which the rabbis *did* ask about the guise: Why Solomon? There is one obvious answer: The association with Solomon was determined by the nature of the book. Wisdom literature is attracted to the name of Solomon as the Psalms are to David, or nomic texts to Moses. David was a "psalmist", Solomon a "wise man".⁹⁵ The choice was natural. But this is likely only a fraction of the answer.

Qoheleth does not lose his identity in Solomon's. He enjoys the unique opportunity of being "Solomon the Qoheleth", or simply the more elusive "Qoheleth"—at times a wholly separate identity. Ultimately, one must answer the question "Why Solomon?" with the question: "Who else but Solomon could have spoken with such vehement denunciation on the vanity of riches, wealth, and even human existence?" As R. Eleazar is reputed to have so aptly noted, "but for Solomon... I might have said that this man who had never owned two farthings in his life makes light of the wealth of the world".⁹⁶ But historically, Qoheleth is an unknown man to us, whose "pretentiousness would have amused Rabbi Eleazar".⁹⁷

⁹⁵ B. Porten concludes thus by comparing Psalm ascriptions ("The Structure and Theme", p. 117). While it is doubtful that לָדָוִד (the "ascription" at the beginning of each of the Davidic psalms) was an attempt to claim Davidic authorship, the slight nature of the ascription may be similar to what we have in Ecclesiastes (see Peter Craigie, "Psalms and the Problem of Authorship", in *Psalms 1-50* [WBC, 19; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983], pp. 33-35). This said, that "ל" sometimes suggests actual authorship has recently been convincingly argued by Hebraist Bruce Waltke ("Superscriptions, Postscripts, or Both", *JBL* 110/4 [1991], pp. 586-88). His most illuminating biblical examples of such a use of "ל" are Isa. 38.9-10 and Hab. 3.1.

⁹⁶ *Qoh. Rab.* 3.11.

⁹⁷ So Bickerman, *Four Strange Books*, p. 142.

To summarize so far, Solomon's lurking presence in Ecclesiastes is obviously multi-faceted. Solomon's authority (for all it is worth) is present in the text on its own terms. That there are no "apologies" from the editor or the narrator, or any appeal to superlative virtues (i.e. apart from the Solomonic), suggests that the authority already imbued in the figure of Solomon rendered redundant any appeal to further authority by the author of Ecclesiastes. It was already present in the Solomonic tradition. Only a Qoheleth with the meandering aid of that "Solomon" could deliberate a critique on the \aleph of wisdom which would be received earnestly. However, in the next two sections I will turn to those issues that my exploration of the questions raised by canon and pseudonymity has not satisfactorily dealt with; namely, the problems that the guise presents to reading.

4. *The Implied Author and/as Qoheleth/Solomon*

["Mythologized" writing is] a transposition of the person into symbolic figures, references, etc., which may be taken from events private in the [real author's]...experiences and therefore not known to the reader (unless the writer explains them), or may be taken from external sources—from books, other men's experiences, and so forth...even if the reader manages to identify them [the external sources etc.], he cannot know their points of contact with the writer's person, which gave them their potency for [the author].

—Patrick Cruttwell⁹⁸

It was Wayne Booth who first coined the phrase, which is now frequently found in biblical and literary studies, "implied author". Booth argues throughout his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* that the implied author is a "solid" existant which has its own moral codes and is an implied version of the author's self. The idea has not been without its critics⁹⁹ but the basic notion of this "second self" has

⁹⁸ "Makers and Persons", *HudR* 12 (1959–60), p. 493.

⁹⁹ Chatman rightly points out, for example, that the codes of the implied author may not only be moral, but cultural and aesthetic as well (*Story and Discourse*, p. 149). Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan also validly criticizes Booth's "second-self", calling it a "construct based on the text" (which Booth would likely admit!). So, instead of being a "voice" or "speaker" the implied author is a set of implicit norms (*Narrative Fiction*, p.

proven valuable as a model for thinking about the writing process and enables consideration of the relationship between the narratorial "voice" and the author's commitments or passions as expressed in the text.

This second self is a creation (conscious or not) of any and every author. But the construct itself is a product of the text in that authors are capable of presenting many different implied authors in various works (e.g. we present different implied versions of ourselves as we write letters to different people for different reasons). In the case of Ecclesiastes the implied author is made prominent through the narrative of Qoheleth, the language and style of which is teeming with self-referentiality (see Chapter 8), particularly that which arises from the elements of autobiography. With the further "complication" of the Solomonic guise, Qoheleth the character is sometimes masked, and we are not sure who lies "beneath" or for what commitments expressed in the text that masked character is responsible.

It may very well be that the immediate success of Ecclesiastes depended upon the extent to which the real author lurked safely *behind* the implied author. For, according to Booth, in fiction, real technical brilliance lies in the successful transformation of explicit norms (the author's loves, hates and judgments) into norms that are implicit—veiled in the codes of the implied author. While Ecclesiastes was probably not written as fiction *per se*, its narrator is used to "persuade the reader to accept [the work that it functions within] as living oracles". For with the real author's untransformed, plain revelation of opinion, failure to persuade is likely at hand.¹⁰⁰ In relation to this effect, Booth discusses how, in fiction, the plain and boastful intrusion of the author makes for inevitable failure: "An author who intrudes must somehow be interesting; he must live as a

87). My own understanding of Booth's construct is defined in the light of such criticisms.

¹⁰⁰ Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, pp. 218-21; cf. also p. 86.

character...dull minds have produced dull statesmen who emphasize their dullness by claiming to be brilliant."¹⁰¹ (Although this may smack of a highly evaluative view of what makes "good literature", the issue is a different one—Booth is suggesting a rhetorical and hence readerly and subjective effect.) One way such failure is avoided is to have the narrator take on an "implicit character". The "Qoheleth" of Ecclesiastes has/is such a character. Even when he is Solomon he is not heavy-handed. This is evidenced, for example, by the liberty exercised in the list of Qoheleth's experiment of 2.4-8. The subtleness of Solomon's presence allows Qoheleth to be more effective. Thus, as Qoheleth reflects on his experiment, the author's own opinion is not ponderous: "And I considered all that my hands had done...and behold, everything was absurd..." (2.11) Who is speaking? The real author *as* Qoheleth, *as* Solomon.

This protection which the implied author tenders is fortified by the use of the name Qoheleth. The identity of the real author has been so well hidden that very little can be said about him or her as a historical character; as "one who lived". The complexity of the guise, and its relation to Qoheleth as an individual character in the text, is the main contributor to our lack of surety on this score.¹⁰² Through this use of "Qoheleth", the Solomonic guise may be an attempt to be rid of "ego-ridden private symbols" and to transform the text's vision into "something that is essentially public".¹⁰³ This is what the implied

¹⁰¹ *Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 219.

¹⁰² This is because the Qoheleth which can be "known" is strictly the Qoheleth of Ecclesiastes; there is no other *authorial* referent. As Chatman rightly comments, "the speaker of a literary work cannot be identified with the author". That is, unless we are given a "pragmatic context" by the real author we may only reconstruct the "character and condition of the speaker...by internal evidence alone" (Chatman citing M. Beardsley, *Story and Discourse*, p. 147). In this sense it is by virtue of Ecclesiastes' being written after the time of Solomon, and by virtue of the displacement of origins that the frame narrator has effected, that there is no such "pragmatic context" concerning the real author. Qoheleth (for readers) is a truly separate existent from the real author and from the tradition of Solomon.

¹⁰³ Booth's description of the real author's use of the implied (*Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 395).

author does. In this process of separation the author is able to create a person who is accessible to his or her reading public. In the case of Ecclesiastes, that accessible person was, to a large degree, Solomon. To speak about the Solomonic aspects of the implied author, however, is in no way to equate the traditional persona of Solomon with the implied author. The implied author is bigger than the Solomonic of Qoheleth.¹⁰⁴ In fact, the investigation of the implied author yields the "totality of meanings that can be inferred from a text"¹⁰⁵ and embodies the cultural and moral values which both Qoheleth and the frame narrator, on the whole, express.¹⁰⁶

5. *Solomonic Readings and Readers*

Before proceeding I will clarify what I mean by a "reading". I do not refer to the sense associated with reader-response criticism, where a "reading" may entail an entire vision of reality which shapes the whole interpretation of a literary work. A *feminist* reading, for example, would require that the reader reads as a woman. This is not merely a matter of assuming sexual and "gender inflections", but seeks to encapsulate "the way in which the *hypothesis* of a female reader changes our apprehension of a given text".¹⁰⁷ Instead, my notion of "reading" is more text-based. By a "reading" I mean any given comment, interpretation and so on,

¹⁰⁴ In the same way, it should be noted, Qoheleth and Solomon do not merge seamlessly into one character but remain somehow separate. As P. Höffken remarked, "Qohelet sagt zwar auf eine individuelle Weise 'ich', aber so, dass diesses Ich sich in der Rolle der Salomo artikuliert" (as cited in Isaksson, *Studies in the Language of Qoheleth*, pp. 41-42).

¹⁰⁵ Bal, *Narratology*, pp. 119-20. Similarly, Booth: "the implied author includes... the intuitive apprehension of a completed artistic whole; the chief value to which *this* implied author is committed, regardless of what party his creator belongs to in real life" (*Rhetoric of Fiction*, pp. 73-74; italics Booth's).

¹⁰⁶ Michael Fox brings this duality well into focus when he argues that the epilogist and Qoheleth both vie equally to be the dominant content of the implied author ("Frame-narrative", p. 105).

¹⁰⁷ Jonathan Culler citing E. Showalter in, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (repr.; London: Routledge, 1989 [1983]), p. 50 (italics Culler's). I am oversimplifying in order to illustrate the essential difference present.

as to the nature of the book in question. By Solomonic reading I mean any such expression by a reader who reads in the belief that Solomon is the *real* author of the given work.

a. *The History of Solomonic Readings*

The most substantial biblical narrative about the eventual dispersement of Solomon's kingdom (1 Kgs 11.9-40) is sparse, even ambiguous. Ambiguity leads to a proliferation of explanations, and this particular ambiguity may have been the impetus for a number of legends about Solomon.¹⁰⁸ In those books attributed to him (including Ecclesiastes) early Jewish tradition sometimes made attempts to understand the particular circumstances of Solomon's writing. The most fascinating example is that of Solomon and the demon Asmodeus. According to the legend,¹⁰⁹ when Solomon gained too many wives for himself and desired too many horses and too much gold, the Book of Deuteronomy (i.e. the Law) stepped before the LORD and requested that Solomon be chastised. The chastisement was Solomon's dethronement. While Solomon was dethroned the demon Asmodeus assumed his likeness and took his place. During that time Solomon experienced the life of a beggar and consequently returned to his throne in Jerusalem, a repentant king.¹¹⁰ *Targum Qoheleth* says that Asmodeus was

¹⁰⁸ The same holds true in regard to the process of "character-cleansing". For example, since Israel's hero is reputed to have followed after foreign women there is an attempt via legend to make sense of his flaws (see Svend-Holm Nielsen, "The Book of Ecclesiastes and the Interpretation of it in Jewish and Christian Theology", *ASTI* 10 [1976], p. 71). That this attempt is present in biblical accounts as well, see above in section 1 of this chapter.

¹⁰⁹ Knobel ("The Targum of Qohelet", pp. 22-23) discusses the presence of the legend in the Targum and concludes that although Targum Qoheleth is dated to the seventh century CE, this version is known among other Babylonian and Palestinian talmuds and the source for them is not known. This tradition possibly pre-dates those talmuds (as early as 200 CE).

¹¹⁰ As cited by Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, IV, pp. 165ff. Of course, this is wildly different from the biblical account of Solomon's punishment which was that the kingdom was to be torn away from him. But this with two consolations "for David's sake": 1) the kingdom would be torn away from his son *after* his death, and 2) his son

sent because Solomon became too proud. Solomon went about the world weeping during his dethronement, saying, "I am Qoheleth, who was previously named Solomon", and it was in this time of dethronement that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes.

A midrash tradition of authorship relates to Solomon's whole life. In his youthful lusts, it says, he wrote the Song of Songs, while Proverbs contained "the ripe fruit of a man who knows life [middle-age]; but when he became old he composed Ecclesiastes".¹¹¹ And another states that "Solomon wrote Qoheleth in his old age, when weary of life 'to expose the emptiness and vanity of all worldly pursuits...'"¹¹² While the Solomonic in such readings is not exploited in order to colour the meaning of specific texts, such readings do attempt to understand the whole book in *the context of Solomonic authorship*. To say, for example, that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes in a time of dethronement is a commentary on the nature of the book as a whole. It implies that the content of the book is necessarily bitter and cynical (being written before Solomon's repentance and specifically during his weeping). It makes sense of the content of Ecclesiastes by ascribing to Solomon a disposition at the time of writing.

Targum Qoheleth drives home the notion that Solomon not only wrote Ecclesiastes, but did so by the Holy Spirit:

When Solomon king of Israel saw through the holy spirit that the kingdom of Rehoboam his son would be divided with Jeroboam the son of Nebat and that Jerusalem and the Temple would be destroyed and the people of the household of Israel would go into exile, he said to himself, "Vanity of vanities...of everything for which I and David my father laboured." (1.1-2, 4)

Here we are told to read Ecclesiastes as an exposition of the vanity which is the

would have one tribe to rule, "that David may always have a light before [the LORD] in Jerusalem" (1 Kgs 11.13). And then an adversary, Hadad the Edomite, was raised against him (v. 14; and even more adversaries later, vv. 23-25).

¹¹¹ Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, IV, pp. 301-302.

¹¹² As cited by Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 19.

loss of Solomon's kingdom.¹¹³ The Targum continues (1.13), "And I set my mind to seek instruction from the LORD at the time when he revealed himself to me at Gibeon" (cf. Eccl. 1.13; 1 Kgs 3.5-9). This link with Solomon is subtle. It is not to support a particular rabbinic argument or (as far as we can tell) to correct some previous misunderstanding of Eccl. 1.13, but rather it is to underscore the presence of Solomon as the primary narrator/author of these words. The perspective of Solomonic authorship is kept throughout the Targum.¹¹⁴

What of early Christian readings? On the whole it seems that there was little value attached to the idea that Solomon actually wrote Ecclesiastes. Origen began the Christian tradition of a "Solomonic corpus" which included Ecclesiastes, and, as R.E. Murphy states, this "context created a way of looking at the book".¹¹⁵ There were some Church Fathers who explicitly indicated and/or made significant use of Solomonic authorship in their paraphrases or commentaries, such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory Thaumaturgos, Cyril, Chrysostom, Jerome and Augustine.

From Gregory (a student of Origen) onwards it seems that Solomonic context was significantly more than the formulaic "Solomon said..." As Gregory's paraphrase begins we are left in little doubt as to the importance of Solomonic authorship:

Solomon (the son of the king and prophet David), a king more honoured and a prophet wiser than anyone else, speaks to the whole assembly of

¹¹³ Svend Holm-Nielsen argues that in *Targum Qoheleth* there are instances in which "the verity of the words [of Qoheleth] is not denied, but their validity is restricted to certain situations to be found in the history of Israel" ("The Book of Ecclesiastes", p. 64; here commenting on 1.2). See also R.E. Murphy, "Qohelet Interpreted: The Bearing of the Past on the Present", *VT* 32 (1982), p. 335.

¹¹⁴ In fact, such emphases are not limited to the "royal fiction" section (1.12-2.17); for example, *Targ. Qoh.* 3.12; 4.15; 7.27; 9.7.

¹¹⁵ Cf. R.E. Murphy, "Qohelet Interpreted", pp. 331-32.

God... (1.1)¹¹⁶

John Jarick, in his study of the paraphrase, states at length the influence of Solomon throughout the work:

This presumption of Solomonic authorship gives rise to certain motifs in Gregory's interpretation. One idea referred to throughout...is that Solomon lost and subsequently regained wisdom—he had received wisdom from God but had afterwards rejected it... And since Gregory sees Solomon as being...a prophet, a number of statements are treated as speaking in a somewhat visionary way of the cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil...this apocalyptic motif reaches its climax in an ingenious paraphrase of the final chapter's "Allegory of Old Age" as a prophecy of the end of the world.¹¹⁷

And Gregory was not alone in finding Solomon's presence worthy of note.

Augustine, for example, stated (c. 410 CE) that "Solomon, the wisest king of Israel, who reigned in Jerusalem, thus commences the book called Ecclesiastes, which the Jews number among their canonical Scriptures: 'Vanity of vanities, said Ecclesiastes...'"¹¹⁸ More importantly, however, he rejected Origen's interpretation of Eccl. 1.9-10 (that it suggested the cyclical nature of all things until they returned to their original state): "At all events, far be it from any true believer to suppose that by these *words of Solomon* those cycles are meant."¹¹⁹ In the latter example, it may be that the appeal to Solomon was an attempt to clinch the argument.

Chrysostom (c. 370 CE) has unusually high praise for the words of *Solomon* in Ecclesiastes when he says, in the flow of another topic of discussion altogether, "[Solomon] who enjoyed much security...that very sentiment of Solomon...so marvellous and pregnant with divine wisdom—'Vanity of

¹¹⁶ Translation by J. Jarick, in *idem*, *Gregory Thaumaturgos' Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes* (SBLSCS, 29; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), p. 7.

¹¹⁷ *Gregory Thaumaturgos' Paraphrase*, pp. 314-15.

¹¹⁸ *City of God*, XX.3.

¹¹⁹ Augustine, *City of God*, XII.13; Origen, *de Princ.*, III.5.3.

vanities.'"¹²⁰ However, it is Jerome (c. 400 CE) who is the first of the Christians to have written substantially *about* Ecclesiastes. He grouped it with Proverbs and the Song of Songs, each representing successive stages of Christian growth. He often used the "fact" that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes to make sense of certain texts. Following the rabbis, at Eccl. 2.18-19, where Qoheleth lamented the fact that he must bequeath the reward of his toil to a fool, the fool becomes Solomon's son.¹²¹

These examples reflect a secure standing in the early church of both the status of the book (Solomon's words are safe) and the notion of Solomonic authorship in general. This notion of authorship among the early Christians is, on the whole, only assumed and not really exploited. This is most evident where allegorical interpretation held sway. With allegory the character of Solomon eventually became lost among other concerns. While with midrashic interpreters there is a concern for "earthly" matters (e.g. expositing the history of Israel) it was more the habit of the early Christians, with their "Jesus is the Ecclesiast" approach, to allegorize to the extent that a Solomonic framework was rendered unnecessary.¹²² For example, Gregory of Nyssa identified the "Ecclesiast" with the true king of Israel, Jesus.¹²³ The basis for the typology "Ecclesiast" could have come from any figure. And it should be pointed out that the inconsequence of Solomon's presence is not found only in the Christian texts. In *Qoheleth Rabbah* authorship becomes a non-question early on since the more pressing concern is to have a forum for rabbinic discussion on an unbelievably vast array of topics. The Solomonic context was only faintly kept.

¹²⁰ *Concerning the Statues* (cited in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers edition, IX [New York: Christian Literature Co., 1889], pp. 439-40).

¹²¹ *Ad loc.*, *Commentarius in Ecclesiasten*. See Svend Holm-Nielsen, "The Book of Ecclesiastes", p. 70.

¹²² So M. Hirshman, "The Greek Fathers and the Aggada on Ecclesiastes: Formats of Exegesis in Late Antiquity", *HUCA* 59 (1958), pp. 155-57.

¹²³ Referring to Jn 1.49. See Hirshman, "The Greek Fathers", p. 147.

While the relative importance of the "fact" of the Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes seems to have either been constant or diminished only slightly through the centuries, in Jewish and Christian readings it is not until Luther that the "fact" itself is challenged.

b. *The Consequences of (Not) Reading Solomonicly*

The Solomonic guise is perhaps stylistically comparable to the frame narrative of Ecclesiastes. Both help to create suspensions of disbelief that enable the reader to focus the reading process through interpretive frames. For inasmuch as Qoheleth and the frame narrator are made believable as characters, so the Solomonic codes they each employ are made credible tenets.¹²⁴ But what about when Solomonic authorship is considered more critically by readers? That is, what happens when the reader *reads against* that strategy and refuses to suspend his or her disbelief?

In Luther's *Table Talk* he is reported to have said that

Solomon himself did not write Ecclesiastes, but it was produced by Sirach at the time of the Maccabees... It is a sort of Talmud, compiled from many books, probably from the library of King Ptolemy Euergetes of Egypt.¹²⁵

He was followed by Hugo Grotius in 1644 who wrote that Ecclesiastes was a collection of opinions of different sages "written in the name of this King Solomon, as being led by repentance to do it" (he goes on to cite Ezra, Daniel

¹²⁴ That is, the (implied) reader "pretends" that Qoheleth is Solomon and helps to create the "Teller of this tale" and believes it "as if" it happened. The Solomonic illusion is created by the reading of Solomonic allusion. See Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 430.

¹²⁵ Either this is unreliable or it represents a change of opinion after Luther's *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (1532), for in the commentary he is emphatically of the opposite opinion: "[Solomon spoke these things] after dinner, or even during dinner to some great and prominent men...and afterwards what he said was put down and assembled... This is then a public sermon which they heard from Solomon" ("Notes on Ecclesiastes", in J. Pelikan [gen. ed.], *Luther's Works.XV.Notes on Ecclesiastes, Lectures on the Song of Solomon, Treatise...* [St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972], p. 12; cf. also pp. 22, 28, 38, 144, where Luther appeals to the notion of Solomonic authorship to make sense of what is happening in the text).

and the "Chaldee paraphrasts" as the sources).¹²⁶ After Grotius, critical, non-Solomonic readings escalated in Germany, reaching a plateau of sorts in the nineteenth century.¹²⁷ Today, that critical stance is universally held even by the most conservative of scholars.

Relatively suddenly, commentators were free to speak about the disunity of Ecclesiastes as a manifestation of its non-Solomonic authorship. For example, Paul Haupt in 1894 wrote, "[Ecclesiastes] reminds me of the remains of a daring explorer, who has met with some terrible accident, leaving his shattered form exposed to the encroachments of all sorts of foul vermin".¹²⁸ Or take Elias Bickerman's more recent, simple observation that "[Qohelet is] a scholar turned haranguer".¹²⁹ Both are "random" selections yet are representative of a prevailing attitude since Luther's ground-breaking observation. This general shift in view of Ecclesiastes' overall meaning reflects a shift in the "consensus" perception of the implied author. Of course, there may be much to commend both the new and the old perceptions. One inescapable result, however, is that Qoheleth is no longer sitting comfortably behind any Solomonic mask. That whole conglomerate of protection, criticism and commentary is suddenly vacant in readings. Because of the new vision of authorship that scholars operate with, the "remains" of the (oddly unified) implied author, *as Solomon as*, Qoheleth are much more scattered. Allow me to offer two examples of readerly consequences; first, a contrast to an ancient example.

The early Christian paraphrast Gregory Thaumaturgos understood Qoheleth's need for wisdom to be a result of Solomon's historical loss of a

¹²⁶ Quotes from Luther's *Table Talk* and Grotius are from G.A. Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 21.

¹²⁷ Barton lists five from the eighteenth century and reports many more in the nineteenth century, when, apparently, only a few scholars argued seriously for Solomonic authorship—notably, Wangemann in 1856 (Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 21-22).

¹²⁸ Cited in G.A. Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 27-28.

¹²⁹ Bickerman, *Four Strange Books*, p. 143.

wisdom which was once divinely imparted. As I outline in Chapter 9.3 below, Qoheleth did seek wisdom and could not find it. If we therefore read Ecclesiastes with the idea that Qoheleth, as Qoheleth/Solomon, *once had* true wisdom and understanding, his need to find it becomes indicative of the divine punishment inflicted on him instead of becoming an example or even metaphor of the human predicament of folly. To state the case more generally, Qoheleth as just Qoheleth is able to be owned by anyone. He is able to be placed in our own historical contexts because he is context-less. Reading Qoheleth as *not* Solomon enables readers to appropriate his experience of wisdom and the world and the text becomes, in a way, more open. Now I offer a more modern example.

In my research I came across an anonymous work from 1880 (which I later discovered was written by D. Johnston) entitled, *A Treatise on the Authorship of Ecclesiastes*.¹³⁰ It is a 557-page scathing attack on the arguments of Ginsburg, Bleek, Hengstenberg, Grotius and Delitzsch who each represented fairly well-received "non-Solomonic" approaches of the author's day. One half of the book is an impressive compilation of grammatical analysis. But the author proceeds a posteriori in his thesis, for anything like pseudonymity in a biblical book makes for a near-blasphemous denial of that book's general trustworthiness (see esp. pp. 413-18). While the work does not appear to have achieved acceptance, it remains an interesting example of one author's dilemma about authorship. Any incongruity between what Johnston saw to be the implied author (the sum of the Solomonic codes and norms which Johnston believed Ecclesiastes to express) and the (nineteenth-century constructed) real author of Ecclesiastes (i.e. *not* Solomon) was entirely unacceptable. (And yet by writing anonymously he refused to take responsibility for how readers might understand his own work in this respect!)

¹³⁰ London: MacMillan and Co., anonymous edn, 1880.

In sum, perhaps the biggest obstacle to the approaches of canon and pseudonymity, in terms of exegetically unpacking the guise, is the relationship between the effects of the guise I have suggested and historical constructs of milieus that are largely intangible (such as a reading audience's given understanding of pseudonymity). Yet the model of implied authorship is useful since a text that allows for such complicated constructs of authorship as *Ecclesiastes* solicits decisions from readers. We are free to choose, for example, whether the implied author of *Ecclesiastes* is "in agreement" with the real author. Or perhaps the real author exercised irony in the form of a critical commentary on wisdom or Solomonic tradition. The complexity of the implied author, I believe, suggests that "he" is not always in agreement with the real author. This was the real author's way of cluing the reader in on the character of Qoheleth's discourse—not of Solomon's, but of Qoheleth's, who sometimes speaks as, sometimes evokes the authority of, Israel's King of wisdom.

Chapter 8

QOHELETH AND THE BIBLICAL SELF AMONG THE DECONSTRUCTED

For words, like Nature, half reveal
And half conceal the Soul within
—Tennyson ("In Memoriam A.H.H.", Canto 5 [1850])

Run my name through your computer
Mention me in passing to your college tutor
Check my records, check my facts...
Pore over everything in my C.V.
You'll still know nothing 'bout me
—Sting¹

This chapter addresses the fact that readers of Ecclesiastes often gain the impression that they somehow "know" Qoheleth. It seems that an interaction takes place, one in which the reader feels the concern of identity and of the formation of Qoheleth's character. That transaction is not likely superficial, for if there is any intimation of Qoheleth's "self" it refers to something embedded deeply in his narrative. I refer to a transference of identity, the reader's to the narrator's, whereby a self is recognized whose experience is identifiable and able to be appropriated. The readerly experience this entails is undeniably difficult to grasp. Elizabeth Stone makes the following poignant remark that reflects the experience well:

Like a candleflame in mist, we cannot see him or touch him or name him, and yet he is there. And as surely as food gives a fragrance and drums resound, Koheleth gives us his own particular light, whether he is one or many men, whether the page has felt the point of one or many pens.²

How do we get at that candleflame in mist? What makes it shine at all? How can

¹ "Epilogue (Nothing 'bout me)", from the album, *Ten Summoner's Tales* (A & M Records, 1993).

² "Old Man Koheleth", p. 98.

a reader say with such confidence that Qoheleth "is there", as sure as the fragrance of a good meal to the nose and the tenor of music to the ear?

1. *Self-Presence?*

You could not discover the limits of the self,
 even by travelling along every path:
 so deep a *logos* does it have.
 —Heraclitus (frag. 45)

The self...is infinitely difficult to get at, to encompass, to know how to deal with: it bears no definition; it squirts like mercury away from our observation; it is not known except privately and intuitively; it is, for each of us, only itself, unlike anything else experienced or experienceable. And yet, the man who commits himself to the whole task of the autobiographer intends to make this self the subject of his book and to impart some sense of it to the reader.

—James Olney³

As discussed above (Chapter 1.3), readers of autobiography naturally *expect* the source of its cohesion to be the author's self, and Qoheleth's "chosen" form of narration, whether we like it or not, is that of autobiography. His narrative is primarily concerned with his experience. And so, as with all autobiography, Qoheleth's form of narration allows him his loose approach to his subjects. This, as I have already mentioned, forms the literary integrity of Ecclesiastes. It does so because the reader is enabled to follow the lexical signs that indicate that the character who is speaking and experiencing throughout the narrative is one and the same. Yet while the autobiographical form intimates self, it leaves largely open the question of that self's essence and substance. In other words, the autobiographical form gives it a name, a history and a foundation for its action, but its principal function is to be only the arena *through which* the narrator may discourse all the past of its life in a particular interpretive light.

³ *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 23.

It is because the first-person form at least intimates self that we are prone to see something more imbedded *in* it—Stone's candleflame in mist. As Ian Michael remarks, "It is easy to regard the first person as more than a grammatical category, it seems to contain the speaker's conception of himself as being distinct from other people."⁴ Michael is alluding, of course, to a reading experience. Likewise, the density of the autobiographical form in Ecclesiastes gives one the impression, as Elizabeth Stone expressed, of brushing with the narrator's person, a self that is somehow more than a grammatical category.

The self can have so formidable a presence in autobiography as to solicit from the reader a query, an invitation to question its sincerity. In Ecclesiastes the combination of the autobiographical form and the frame narrator's historical presentation contribute to this invitation. Is this a believable self? Does not "I" beg the question of sincerity? When we read "I" we want to know if the author of that "I" is telling the truth.⁵ If there is only "I", the witness to what the "I" asserts becomes nothing less than the very integrity of that speaker, and this becomes an issue. Because the author speaks about him- or herself (however indirectly) the question is begged: does he or she offer a true reflection of (narrated) experience? The frame narrator reflects this concern when he finds it necessary to assert that Qoheleth did in fact write words of truth with integrity (12.10—and how can he know that Qoheleth was, like Job, אִישׁ?). This is a question of character, and character is a question of identity. Just what kind of person are we dealing with? And because what this person says is so individualized and affecting, how do we judge that it is true?

⁴ Cited in R.C. Elliott, *The Literary Persona* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 30.

⁵ That is, the "I"'s narrator or historical author. The distinction can become blurred. This is true in the case of Ecclesiastes due to the fictional premises of the frame narrative. I will use the word "author" to denote the character who says "I" because Ecclesiastes, despite its fictional premise, is autobiography, and assumes the telling of someone's life. That "I" therefore makes the kind of claim to truth I am here discussing.

That we live in a society obsessed with questions of identity and sincerity is evident. The question of who or what people are (of their individuality or essence) rears itself again and again in popular culture, and the crisis is clear: instances of the media's failure or relative success in communicating the essence of a self demonstrate the fallibility of image and also the popular concern of identity. In the early 1970s American popular culture suffered a "minor crisis" when the notion was put about that the real Paul McCartney of the Beatles had died a few years previously and been replaced by the winner of a Paul McCartney look-alike contest. The furore ceased when people came to accept that as long as the face and the voice were essentially the same, it mattered little who the flesh and blood person actually was. The veracity of Paul McCartney's self was reduced to the quality of an audio-visual image.⁶ In the spring of 1994 in, yet again, America, O.J. Simpson shocked millions who were under the illusion that they, in some significant sense, knew him. When the sports celebrity was implicated in the murder of his ex-wife and her friend the protective walls of his public persona came tumbling down.⁷ The image of the self, whether text or media-based, is elusive and virtually unknowable by its signs.

In Qoheleth-studies scholars have often made similar assumptions concerning our ability to "know" Qoheleth's self through referential signs. For example, Frank Zimmermann sees in Ecclesiastes "a mirror of the chain of neuroses that afflicted [Qoheleth]".⁸ This is because Zimmermann, like Leon

⁶ So Michael Sprinker, "The End of Autobiography", in Olney (ed.) *Autobiography*, p. 322.

⁷ Jonathan Alter, in an incisive piece on the Simpson case in *Newsweek International* ("Television's False Intimacy", 27 June, 1994, p. 25), argued that the public at large fell victim to the false intimacy created by television. The Janus face of the television personality given to the world is at one time friendly, yet born of violence. The visual image elicits judgments. We are invited to decide for ourselves who is speaking the truth. The frame of reference that people in the U.S. made use of in their time of disillusionment was that of Simpson's media character which, while familiar, was unknowable.

⁸ *Inner World*, p. ix.

Edel, views the semiology operative in a literary text as "symbols of...[the author's] self, signature of his inner being".⁹ Also, Michael Fox is able to perceive in Ecclesiastes a "single brooding consciousness" through which all of Qoheleth's observations are filtered.¹⁰ Why? Of course, Fox presents his evidence (mostly concerning Qoheleth's epistemological procedure), but is what Fox sees so obvious that we shouldn't even ask why? Kurt Galling recognized that Qoheleth's autobiographical style was necessary to depict his "prevailing inner posture".¹¹ Michael Eaton feels confident enough to say of Ecclesiastes that "Within its pages there is a *person* who unobtrusively appears in the words 'says the Preacher'."¹² Is Eaton recognizing the signified of a linguistic sign? Harold Fisch regards so seriously the density of first-person forms in Ecclesiastes that he is confident to remark that "Qohelet could have said with Montaigne, 'It is my portrait I draw... I am myself the subject of my book.'¹³ How or why aside, all of these scholars have in some way or another felt the weight of Qoheleth's self in his narration.

Of course, in literary criticism authorial presence has been a nearly constant point of contention. For example, a committed notion of authorial self-representation was expressed in John Frey's 1948 article, "Author-Intrusion in the Narrative." He summarizes the "objective" view thus: "Self-presentation *occurs* when the author actually appears as a character in his story, as in some novels of

⁹ Zimmermann, *Inner World*, p. xiii. He then aligns himself with an even more emphatic expression: "Anatole France has said that it makes no difference whether a man writes about a fly or Julius Caesar, he is not writing so much about his subject as about himself" (p. xiv).

¹⁰ *Qohelet*, p. 159.

¹¹ That is, his "jeweiligen inneren Haltung" ("Kohélet-Studien", ZAW 50 [1932], p. 281).

¹² *Ecclesiastes*, p. 21 (italics mine). Ironically, the words he refers to are the frame narrator's.

¹³ "Qohelet: A Hebrew Ironist", p. 158.

the Romanticists", and this is *prima facie* observable.¹⁴ But this position is rarely, if at all, to be found today. Towards the more popular and subjective end of the spectrum, Judith Fishman suggests that authors enjoy a richness of choice in how they represent themselves (or selves) as characters:

The insight into self as character...within the narrative, both of self and others, opens further still the complexity and richness of choice...[and] writers of autobiography must first know "how much fiction is implicit in the idea of a 'self'".¹⁵

Whether the essence of its narrator is made purely of symbolic signatures or embedded in the rich fictive choices of character open to authors, autobiographical literature will always be approached with some notion of the self in mind. As in popular culture, however, we are faced with the problem first that the self seems virtually unknowable by its signs, and second, as we shall now observe, that we cannot even be sure what we mean by "subject" or "self". Are we dealing with a soulful or a soulless sign? And how can a review of Qoheleth's attitude both of *himself* and *the self* inform this discussion?

2. *The Deconstructed Subject*

Ours is the age of what Robert Elliott once termed "the denigration of the subject".¹⁶ Critics such as Barthes, Foucault and Derrida have argued (to a wide and receptive audience) that the subject (i.e. *ego*, self—see below) is a construct determined by its socio-linguistic context, whose only reference is itself and nothing more. The author, who had been thought for ages to lurk stealthily

¹⁴ "Author-Intrusion in the Narrative: German Theory and Some Modern Examples", *GR* (1948), p. 278 (italics mine). Frey himself argues that there are no pre-established tenets that determine exactly what the author's intrusion is (if any), but rather, the more significant question to ask of self-representation or intrusion, is How?: "how harmonious a constituent of the whole work is it made?" (p. 289).

¹⁵ "Enclosures: The Narrative within Autobiography", *JAC* 2 (1981), pp. 27-28 (citing Elizabeth Bruss).

¹⁶ *The Literary Persona*, p. 119.

behind the text simply waiting to be unearthed with the appropriate tools, is now, quite simply, dead. As Barthes wrote in 1968, in his classic essay, "The Death of the Author", the linguistic subject "I" is "empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it",¹⁷ and at least one critic has observed that the death of the author has heralded the death of the self.¹⁸ The present impasse in speaking about the self, then, is coming to terms with its death.

To come to terms with the self or subject at least as an issue, an attempt at definition will help. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* offers the following two (among 14!) definitions of "subject": 1) *philosophy*—"a thinking or feeling entity; the conscious mind; the ego, esp. as opposed to anything external to the mind" ("the central substance or core of a thing as opposed to its attributes"); 2) *psychology*—"the ego or self and the non-ego; consciousness, and that of which it is or may be conscious". In both definitions the concept of difference is operative. Compare the same dictionary's first definition of "self": "a person or thing's own individuality or essence". (The second definition is "a person or thing as the object of introspection or reflexive action [*the consciousness of self*]".) To be a subject in the sense that I have thus far used the word is to be a self (*ego*) capable of consciousness and able to be distinguished from *another*.¹⁹

The deconstructed view of self (which heralds the death of author and self) has difficulty maintaining that sense of difference and otherness. Where it

¹⁷ Barthes, "The Death of the Author", in *idem, Image, Music, Text*, p. 145.

¹⁸ So Sprinker, "Fictions of the Self", pp. 324-25.

¹⁹ In his book, *Oneself as Another* (trans. K. Blamey; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), Paul Ricoeur fills out the idea of otherness implicit in the idea of self. Commenting on the philosophical intention of his work, Ricoeur states that implicit in its title is the notion that "otherness of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other...[and to] 'as' I should like to attach a strong meaning, not only that of comparison (oneself similar to another) but indeed that of implication (oneself inasmuch as being another)" (p. 3). That is, for the self to exist it must be in relationship to the other as much as it *is* the other for another. Self and the other, for Ricoeur, enjoy a transferential relationship. My use of "self" and "subject" assumes this concept of otherness. This will become particularly relevant when discussing Qoheleth's concept of the self and its connection to the notion of otherness.

differs from an older, Cartesian view is in its emphasis on the self's origin, and therefore its relationship to the text and the reader. In his recent book, *Narrative and the Self*, Anthony Paul-Kerby neatly sums up the deconstructed position: "self arises out of signifying practices rather than existing prior to them as an autonomous or Cartesian agent".²⁰ This statement is key to Kerby's position and forces him into the unfortunate position of regarding the computer named HAL in Stanley Kubrick's film *2001* as more of a person than the preverbal child.²¹ To be fair, as Kerby states, HAL is not, of course, a person by our "societal definition" which entails embodiment, and the Cartesian as opposed to language-based subject, for Kerby, is only *a way* of accounting for the notion of self-identity which, he admits, we all have, and which is expressed in our narratives (and what Kerby calls our quasi-narratives—the constructs by which we attempt to understand the events that propel our whole lives). However, Kerby cannot escape the absurdity of his alarming admission that persons can only *exist* through acts of expression. We are all, in Kerby's world, soulless selves, hollow bodies except for the mental constructs of language. And, of course, the question that he never addresses, presumably because he cannot answer it, is "What is the source of language itself (not only its genesis, but the determinism implied in its ongoing development) if it is not the (even preverbal?) self?" Furthermore, how can any one self relate to another self with any real significance? Is the whole idea of communication between selves that are able to exist outside of the linguistic act absurd, since "I" has no referent? Indeed, Kerby says of his own implied self as conveyed in the first person of *his* text that he can only live with the absurdity of its presence, for his own "I" has no referent. The problem of referentiality is the

²⁰ *Narrative and the Self* (SCT; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 1. Kerby draws heavily on continental deconstructionist theory and as his treatment of such issues relates specifically to the relationship between theories of the self and their expression in narratives, I will discuss and critique his work (as representative) the most.

²¹ *Narrative and the Self*, pp. 70-71, 123 n. 11.

most serious for the deconstructive theory of the subject, but most especially for Mr Kerby since he cannot exist.²²

Other well-known implications of Kerby's position are worth restating. Because of the paradigm shift from Cartesian to deconstructed self, language is to be regarded as strictly material and no longer "merely" the tool of a Cartesian self but rather the house of Being where "meaning is only provided by a systematic arrangement of differences".²³ Self, then, has become a product of language. Language can no longer be regarded as "a more or less neutral medium of communication for ideas".²⁴ External reality requires language to be what it is. Semiotics has overthrown the metaphysics of referent, for a referent only IS in a closed system of signs. Kerby himself suggests that this overthrowing of the self from its previously privileged place has engendered a crisis; namely, "a loss of causal efficacy for the self and a stress on the subject's social setting".²⁵ (Such a loss is reflected in the popular media crisis in identity discussed above.)

What can a study of the self in Qoheleth's narration contribute to this

²² *Narrative and the Self*, p. 14. See also Michel Foucault's, "What is an Author?", where he argues that the self (particularly as author) can no longer exist outside of its enunciation. Foucault's arguments overall suffer from the conflicting notions that writing refers only to itself, yet, in order for it to create the space through which the *subject* (does he mean author?) can continually disappear (which "transference" is, for Foucault, the "true" function of authorship) it must pass outside itself, by which is assumed a notion of self (see esp. pp. 604, 608). This is, in my view, the most potent critique *against* the deconstruction of the subject: that in order for meaning to occur, some kind of *referential* movement (not necessarily metaphysical!) must take place. See furthermore, B. Polka's comments on the paradoxical self-referentiality of Freud's critique of religion ("Freud, Science, and the Psychoanalytic Critique of Religion: The Paradox of Self-Referentiality", *AAR* 62/1 [1994], pp. 59-81; esp. pp. 67-68, 74, 78-81). Polka sees in Freud's critique of religion the assumption that the neuroses of individuals and communities are indeed accessible to the critical psyche, and that in championing that assumption Freud commits what is his perception of religious illusion. As Sprinker comments, Freud's psychoanalytic approach as adopted by Jacques Lacan has been an important motivating force in the modern (particularly French intellectual) deconstruction of the self ("The End of Autobiography", pp. 324-25).

²³ R. Coward and J. Ellis, *Language and Materialism: Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 3.

²⁴ Kerby, *Narrative and the Self*, p. 3.

²⁵ *Narrative and the Self*, p. 5.

discussion? How can different versions of the self (i.e. meta-narratives—see section 5, below), such as Qoheleth's and the deconstructed, be viewed in light of each other? If the subject (indeed, the language) of the self is so problem-ridden, why even bother to bring it to bear on Ecclesiastes? The evidence we have seen for readers (*others*) seeing a self (*subject*) in Ecclesiastes is essentially credal and suggests that Ecclesiastes, perhaps more than any other biblical book (we shall see if this is so), is a text that is self-attesting. And there may be plenty that Qoheleth has to say about his own self and the self as subject, to the extent that he perhaps "re-privileges" the self to the centre.

3. *The Biblical Self*

I have already discussed the way in which first-person narrators refer to themselves in biblical Hebrew. The presence of the suffixed ך is the most prominent feature of this self-referentiality. But how does the Old Testament convey the self *as a subject*? In my own review of this question, three words have consistently come to the forefront: לֵב, נֶפֶשׁ and רוּחַ ("heart" or "mind", "soul" and "spirit"). There is no Hebrew word for "self" or "person" (נֶפֶשׁ comes closest), but the idea is often conveyed through the use of these words. The Old Testament authors preferred both to speak indirectly of the self and to assume its palpable (sometimes even tactile) existence. To grasp something of the composition of the human person in the Old Testament—the "candleflame in the mist"—I will explore the semantic possibilities of these words, and review two particularly informative passages (Job 10.8-11, 18-22 and Jer. 1.4-10).

a. לֵב—"Heart", "Mind"

The [Hebraic] heart is 'the very hearth of life's impulses—the supporter of the personal consciousness, combined with self determination and activity of the reason—the training place of all independent actions and conditions ... In the heart are found the postulates of speech...and all by which בְּשָׂרָא

and **נֶפֶשׁ** is affected, comes in **לֵב** into the light of consciousness.²⁶

Obviously, the word "heart" carries with it an impressive modern repertoire of images. By it we signify our romantic inclinations, our emotional disposition, our stamina and so on. In the Old Testament, **לֵב** carries with it just as impressive a repertoire. The word is used more than any other in the biblical literature to make reference to the metaphorical "insides" of a person. It conveys a wide range of emotional, intellectual and physical experience. It can be applied to an individual psalmist or to the whole nation of Israel whose heart melts in sight of the enemy. The semantic range is extraordinary, and a look at some informative examples will demonstrate why this can be said confidently.

One of the most well-known examples of the word shows its volitional connotations. The **לֵב** of Pharaoh is described in a series of *Leitmotifs* (in Exod. 7-14) as being hardened (**קָשָׁה**) by Yahweh. The end of this is always to control the outcome of Pharaoh's decision, and results in an inability on Pharaoh's part to listen.²⁷ The realm in which the word operates here is the will—it is to change or it is not to change, according to the disposition of the **לֵב**. Hardness of heart reveals a stubbornness to conform to God's will, to not *hear* it (i.e. obey, **שָׁמַע**). In a similar example, Ezekiel informs us that Yahweh will give Israel one heart and a sanctified spirit. He will remove their heart of stone (**לֵב אֲבֵן**) and replace it with a heart of flesh (**לֵב בָּשָׂר**). The new heart, being now able to listen, will enable them to follow the statutes that he provides (Ezek. 11.19-20; 36.26). Elsewhere, it is the **לֵב** of the people itself (along with their **נַפְשׁוֹת**) that must seek Yahweh for the purpose of building a sanctuary (1 Chron. 22.19); that is, its

²⁶ I. Cohen, citing Beck, in, "The Heart in Biblical Psychology", in H.J. Zimmels (ed.), *Essays Presented to Chief Rabbi Israel Brodie* (London: Soncino Press, 1967), I, p. 47.

²⁷ E.g. Exod. 7.13. It is interesting to note, however, that despite the exerted control on Pharaoh, the hearts of his servants are able to change (14.4-5). Compare Prov. 21.1-2, in which Yahweh is said to control the hearts of kings as he does the flow of rivers.

ethical imperative is to seek the will of Yahweh.

Another volitional aspect is the pliability of the **לב**; that is, its "ability" to become soft. With Job the softness results in his being terrified by Yahweh's presence (Job 23.16). Similarly, the **לב** may melt like wax and become utterly demoralized (Josh. 2.11; 5.1; 7.5; 14.8; 2 Sam. 17.10; Ps. 22.14), implying inversely that the **לב** may be a source of courage. In the **לב** may be found the capacity to (courageously?) enjoy life, as well. It can be gladdened with wine (Judg. 19.5, 6, 8, 9; Ps. 104.15; cf. Eccl. 2.3; 9.7; 10.19) and strengthened with nourishment (**לרחם**) for the tasks ahead (e.g. Gen. 18.5).

The **לב** can also be a source of moral judgment and conscience. David's heart smote him (violently struck him, **נכה**) after he counted Israel (2 Sam. 24.10). If a person has no integrity of speech they may be described as speaking with a double intention (**בלב ולב**, Ps. 12.3),²⁸ reminiscent of the Hollywoodized Indian's indictment, White man speak with forked tongue! And because the inner self (**קרב**) and the **לב** are deep (**עמק**), they are aloof, difficult to understand, and potentially deceptive (Ps. 64.6; cf. Ps. 51.6). Connected to this moral sense is Israel's stated duty to love the LORD their God with *all* (**כל**; i.e. not doubly) their **לב**, **נפש** and strength (Deut. 6.5-6), by which the words Yahweh speaks shall be inscribed upon their hearts.

The **לב** has an important intellectual aspect as well. It should be applied (**נזן**) to wisdom and truth (Prov. 22.17; 23.12; cf. Eccl. 1.13; Ezek. 44.5). Also, to speak in one's heart (**אמר בלב**) suggests a kind of thinking or considering, an inner thought process. At 1 Kgs 12.26, for example, Jeroboam thought to himself (**אמר...בלבו**) that his actions might secure the kingdom. Such an insight into his inner plotting is key to the way in which that narrative unfolds. Shimon Bar-Efrat cites several examples of this phrase as an effective narrative

²⁸ Cf. the Ezekiel texts above that refer to the *one* heart that Israel should have.

device for referring directly to a character's inner thoughts and feelings.²⁹

Some miscellaneous meanings are worth mentioning. It is the **לב** that reveals the true person.³⁰ The word itself can even signify wisdom or "good sense" which protects its possessor from evil or foolishness (Prov. 19.8;³¹ Hos. 7.11). Acquiring **לב** gives one the sense to carry out acceptable human behaviour. Hence when Nebuchadnezzar's heart was exchanged for that of an animal he lost his capacity to be human and became like an animal (Dan. 4.13). It may also seek truth through reflexive meditation (Ps. 77.6).

As I. Cohen has suggested, and as the intellectual nuance especially implies, the **לב** is often the centre of consciousness, of thinking about something as a subject, revealing "the states and condition of the self as experienced in various circumstances".³² That is, it serves as an indicator through which experience of the self is expressed. Through it, in it and by it a person can experience an express change of will, fear, courage, pangs of conscience and the consciousness of intellectual enquiry. The heart thereby serves as a focal point for thought, will and strength.

b. **נפש**—"Soul"

This word is probably the closest Hebrew can come to the English "person" (see Gen. 27.4; 49.6; Num. 31.19, 28, in which each occurrence signifies a whole physical person, an entity that acts). Of course, the most emphatic expression of

²⁹ *Narrative Art in the Bible* (JSOTSup, 70; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), pp. 63-64. Further, see below.

³⁰ So, for example, Prov. 18.2: "The fool takes no delight in understanding, but only in expressing himself" (**כי אם־בהתגלות לבו**), the hitp. of **גלה** meaning "to become known", "manifest"; cf. Gen. 9.21).

³¹ In this text the heart as a general noun actually benefits the **נפש**—for the one who loves their soul will gather **לב**, "good sense".

³² "The Heart in Biblical Psychology", p. 43. He states elsewhere, citing M. Lazarus, that the heart "is the most all-embracing expression which 'comprises the whole world of psychic phenomena'" (p. 41).

the person as **נֶפֶשׁ** is found in the genesis of human creation (Gen. 2.7). God forms the first human from the dust as a potter would form (**יִצַר**) a pot of clay. The result is a living **נֶפֶשׁ** in which God's breath is blown. The physical created separateness of God and humanity (in contrast in particular to the physical correspondence between humanity and the gods found in other ANE myths) is a fundamental tenet expressed by this text—the *imago dei*. Through creation, humanity has not become simply a part of the substance of the Other, but has become separate from the Other—the Another of the Other. I will take up this important point again below.

The word **נֶפֶשׁ** occurs several times in one particularly curious anthropological formulation, Lev. 17.10-11:

If anyone of the house of Israel...eats any blood I will set my face against that person [**נֶפֶשׁ**] who eats blood... For the life [**נֶפֶשׁ**] of the flesh [**בָּשָׂר**] is in the blood; and I have given it to you to make atonement for your lives [**נֶפֶשׁ**] on the altar; for, as life [**נֶפֶשׁ**], it is the blood that makes atonement.

The person (**נֶפֶשׁ**) is judged for violating the life element (**נֶפֶשׁ**) of the physical body (that which makes the flesh live, God's breath) that is in the blood. Eating the blood is cannibalistic in that by consuming it one consumes the essence of Another, and the fundamental tenet of separateness is thereby defiled. Oneness of the body (**בָּשָׂר**) and the life element (**נֶפֶשׁ**) is central here, as it is in biblical formulations of human rights elsewhere (cf. esp. Gen. 9.4-6).

This said, **נֶפֶשׁ** also lends itself to the most dualistic notions of person in the Old Testament. Many passages imply that the soul is a separate entity from the body (e.g. Gen. 6.17; 7.15, 22; Josh. 11.11; Job 34.14-15; cf. Eccl. 12.7), and when that final separation occurs, human existence ceases (cf. Job 14.22; Eccl. 9.10). However, rather than concluding from these instances that the **נֶפֶשׁ** is only *part* of the whole self, we should understand them, suggests R. Laurin,

"as expressions of the life principle in specific functions of the organism".³³

That is, since the soul often appears to be the motivating life-force of the body (that which causes life), it cannot enjoy proper human existence outside of the body (as evidenced by the Leviticus text). Although the נֶפֶשׁ is separate, it remains dependent on the body to live.

Finally, the נֶפֶשׁ, like the לֵב, makes up that part of a person that interacts with God's grace and judgment. It is encouraged to seek things out of its own accord (1 Chron. 22.19; cf. Deut. 6.5), and, as is particularly evident in the Psalms, the נֶפֶשׁ is capable of seeking Yahweh as an act of worship or of blessing (Pss. 42.1, 2; 103.1, 2; cf. 131.2), and yet it may very well experience painful bitterness towards Yahweh (Job 7.11). It is the centre in and from which God's grace can be experienced—affirmed or denied.

c. רוּחַ—"Spirit"³⁴

Although there are some informative examples elsewhere,³⁵ it is in the book of Job that רוּחַ has its most significant nuances for this analysis.

At 7.11 Job remarks that he cannot restrain his speech. He is so overcome from the distress (צָרָה) of his רוּחַ that he must give vent to his speech and complain in the bitterness of his נֶפֶשׁ. The idea occurs again, more forcefully, at 32.18-19, this time from Elihu:

I am bursting with speech! My spirit within me constrains me. Behold,
my insides are like wine with no vent, like new wineskins ready to burst!
I must speak to find relief. I will open my lips and reply.

³³ "The Concept of Man as a Soul", *ExpTim* 72 (1961), p. 132.

³⁴ As discussed above (excursus 1), רוּחַ is one self-referential word that Qoheleth put a fascinating twist to. Here I will limit myself to the more narrow question of its significance to the Old Testament notion of the self.

³⁵ A few significant examples: the psalmist's רוּחַ, along with his נֶפֶשׁ, is actively self-reflective (Ps. 77.6); God has a רוּחַ which acts in creation (Gen. 1.2); at death, the רוּחַ returns to God who gave it (Ps. 104.29; cf. Eccl. 12.7); the רוּחַ has a moral aspect (as a "place" of iniquity; Ps. 32.2).

Elihu describes his insides (בטן) as a bursting wineskin, and his רוח is so overcome that it is in danger of restraining his speech. He is full of discourse (מלחי מלים; cf. Job 30.9). That is, his inner person is so full of experience waiting to be expressed that it must find release. Through speech he will find the space to relieve his pent up emotions.³⁶ We learn from 32.1-5 that he had become angry that Job had "justified himself" and that his three friends had given no answer to him, and he had now waited as long as he could stand. In other words, his experience, which had become internalized, motivated his speech to the point where it could be controlled no longer. The disposition of both his physical (בטן) and spiritual (רוח) self so affected him that his actions became determined. This movement from the inner self to outward speech (i.e. the image of the self as source of speech) is apropos for the age of the lexical and soulless self.

Our term has an intellectual nuance in Job as well. At 20.3, Zophar states that "a spirit (רוח) from my understanding (מבינתי) answers me" (here paralleled to a word of instruction [מוסר] that has just "defamed" him). And, foreshadowing God's final speech, Elihu states that it is not so much the passing of days and years that teaches wisdom (the experience of growing old), but "it is the spirit (רוח) in a person, and the breath of the Almighty, which causes understanding (תבנים)" (32.8). The notion that the רוח in a person provides understanding above and beyond that of acquired wisdom or received instruction adds an interesting ingredient to the discussion on Qoheleth and the self which will be concocted below.

³⁶ The metaphor of wineskins makes the aspect of space come to life here. In that constrained amount of space, too much wine will press outwards in search of an expanse. Also, keeping in mind that רוח often means "wind", it is worth noting that it is through the physical release of air that we speak as well as breathe.

d. *Two Texts of Interest*

1. *Job 10.8-11, 18-22*. Well into the stride of his complaining, Job states that he will tell Yahweh that he has despised the work of his own hands. Job loathes his metaphysical predicament—he has been created intricately and wonderfully by Yahweh, yet the same creator, it now seems, has turned upon him to destroy him (10.8-11):

Your hands fashioned and made me;
 yet at the same time you turn and destroy me.
 Remember that you fashioned me like clay
 and you will return me to dust.
 Did you not pour me out like milk
 and curdle me like cheese?
 With skin and flesh you clothed me,
 and with bones and sinews you knit me together.

Job somehow knows what God has done—how God has formed and fashioned him—and uses this argumentatively. His argument is expressed in highly stylized speech. In the first two strophes of vv. 8-11 the activity of God vacillates between first creating, then destroying, then creating, then destroying. In the final two strophes he is only creating, and this is where the emphasis lies. The materials for creation (skin, flesh and bones) and even their corresponding expressions (milk and cheese) are raw and tactile. Even the operative metaphors for creation itself are textile (clothing and knitting). This self, the existence and eventual destruction of which Job is lamenting, forms as tangible an experience for the sufferer as the covering of a coat on a windy day.

A little later in the same chapter Job asks Yahweh (10.18-22),

Why have you taken me from the womb?
 O that I would expire—that no eye would have seen me;
 that I would be as though I had never been,
 carried straight from the womb to the grave!
 Are not my days few? Cease! and leave me alone!
 Let me find a little comfort before I go (and I shall not return!)
 to the land of darkness and of deathly shadow.

Job wishes things were different, and the implied anthropology is striking. In the

extraordinary statement of v. 19a (כֹּאשֶׁר לֹא־הָיִיתִי אֶהְיֶה), he wishes his very existence away. Existing itself has become the source of his misery (cf. Eccl. 4.3; 6.3-5). His existence consists in the absolute opposite of nothingness, and because God actively took him from the womb, Job could not have escaped the experience that his self now faces. The existential dilemma foregrounds the self as an experiencing subject (further, see Excursus 2).

2. *Jeremiah 1.4-9.*

And the word of Yahweh came to me saying,
 "Before I formed you³⁷ in the womb, I knew you.
 Before you came out of the womb, I sanctified you.
 As a prophet for the nations I appointed you."
 I said, "Ah, Lord Yahweh, behold, I do not know how to speak,
 for I am only a youth."
 Yahweh replied to me, "Do not say 'I am only a youth',
 for to all to whom I send you, you shall go,
 and all that I command you, you shall speak.
 Do not fear their presence, for I will be with you,
 in order to deliver you", said Yahweh.
 Then Yahweh put out his hand and touched my mouth;
 And Yahweh said to me, "Behold, I have set my words in your mouth."

As Jeremiah is faced with Yahweh's call, an impotency of the human spirit freezes him—he is unable to speak.³⁸ For Jeremiah, this impotence is the critical problem that Yahweh is addressing, and he addresses it by affirming Jeremiah's created origin and the tangibility of his self. The substance of that self existed before birth and constituted, in some sense, a person—for Yahweh himself *knew* it. It could even be set apart, made separate; for his principal activity in life (his profession?) was/is determined. Jeremiah can face the conflict with the knowledge that Yahweh will be with him and will place his words in his mouth (cf. Isa. 49.1-3).

³⁷ From צוּר, the steel forger's word—cf. Exod. 32.4; 1 Kgs 7.15.

³⁸ לאִי־יִכְלֵא אִישׁ; cf. the strikingly similar phrase at Eccl 1.8: לאִי־יִכְלֵא רֹבֵר לְרֹבֵר.

The prophet is concerned about the futility of his speech, impaired by his youth. The concern, then (if speech is so connected to the quality of being), is for the formation of his character. "The most striking literary achievement of that chapter [Jer. 1]", Sean McEvenue suggests, "is to render in words a most sensitive encounter of a divine self and a human self... Jeremiah presents an imposed upon and querulous and suffering self."³⁹ The self that Yahweh knew before bringing it into being will now be affirmed by asserting (as in Job's case) the expression of its speech by which it will be self-empowered. Although the self is inner and not humanly graspable, it is affirmed in this encounter between Jeremiah and Yahweh—through the promise of its being sent (to the nations) and its empowerment (speech). Here speech finds its genesis in the creator and in turn has a determinative effect on the subject.

Of the very few studies of the Hebraic conception of the self, most or all seek to address the issue of Hebraic wholeness over against that of Western dualism (body/soul) which, some hold, finds expression in the New Testament.⁴⁰ My review confirms that stance against Western dualism. The self as expressed through the metaphors may be contrasted to other "parts" of the self, but it can in no way be made separate, especially those metaphors that are *organic*.⁴¹ Other words that refer to the inner person are בֶּטֶן ("belly", "womb"), כְּלִיא ("kid-

³⁹ Personal correspondence, January, 1995.

⁴⁰ See G. Whitlock, "The Structure of Personality in Hebrew Psychology", *Int* 14 (1960), p. 10; Laurin, "The Concept of Man as a Soul", pp. 131-32; Cohen, "The Heart in Biblical Psychology", p. 41; E.W. Marter, "The Hebrew Concept of 'Soul' in Pre-Exilic Writings", *AUSS* 2 (1964), pp. 106-107; M.J. Boivin, "The Hebraic Model of the Person", *JPsT* 19/2 (1991), p. 159. Boivin argues that the duality that scholars have argued against has been oversimplified, but agrees with the basic assertion that the Hebrew notion of self is far more holistic than the more Platonic notions assumed in the New Testament.

⁴¹ I.e., of human organs. נֶפֶשׁ may be related to cognate words meaning "throat" or "breath" (cf. BDB, p. 659a) or "stomach" (see Marter, "The Hebrew Concept of 'Soul'", p. 103; רוּחַ can mean "breath"; לֵב can refer to "heart" as the physical organ (e.g. 2 Kgs 9.24).

neys", Ps. 139.13), and simply קרב (that which is inner). The former two are obviously physical, while the latter can refer to the physical inside of a person as well as the emotional and intellectual psyche. The physical overtones constitute an intricate part of the portrait of the individual. As Edmund Jacob argues, the person in the Old Testament "is a psycho-physical being and physical functions are bound so closely to [its] physical nature that they are all localized in bodily organs which themselves only draw their life from the vital force which animates them".⁴² Or, as R. Gundry puts it, the Hebraic person doesn't *have* a body, it *is* a body.⁴³

R. Murphy is surely right in suggesting that "there is no logical consistency within the OT regarding the terms used to convey the make-up of the human individual".⁴⁴ Yet from this brief analysis a portrait, if incomplete and even partially fragmented, of the Hebraic understanding of the self has emerged. It is whole, physical, created by God, a centre of existence, of courage, of will, of worship, of meditation and of intellect. For most biblical writers the identity of self was individual, for the prophets in particular it was national. Yet there is an awareness in all of the biblical texts that God creates something solid—a self that is as substantial as the metaphors suggest. The idea of self, as far as can be implied from these examples, is not merely language-based. Indeed, in the Old Testament the self-construct pre-exists the process of speech. The language of self is referential, referring beyond itself to Another. That Another (self) is an object of mystery which, like God, cannot be empirically known but is intuitively sensed—felt in the most extreme of circumstances (Job, Psalms, Jeremiah), yet

⁴² As cited in Boivin, "The Hebraic Model of the Person", p. 161.

⁴³ As cited in Boivin, "The Hebraic Model of the Person", p. 161. Boivin goes on to relate the consequences of this understanding of the physical person to psychoanalysis: "the essential aspects of personhood...extend to the actions performed by the flesh (behavior), as well as to the physiology which mediates those actions" (p. 161); and this, says Boivin, is just the sort of corrective psychoanalysis needs.

⁴⁴ *Ecclesiastes*, p. 37.

assumed in everyday existence (Pentateuch, Proverbs). It is made up of the body (the heart, the breath, the guts) and what we might call the mind or heart, soul or spirit; yet each is bound to the other. The self in the Old Testament is full of significance and tangibility.

4. *Qoheleth on the Self and his Self*

How did Qoheleth assume (or not?) the kinds of constructs of the self we have so far seen? To what extent did the Hebraic portrait of the self figure in Qoheleth's own? What thoughts or themes echo between them? To determine this I will mimic the outline of the last section by reviewing in Ecclesiastes the three key biblical words of self-reference. After that I will discuss some key passages in which Qoheleth delineates not only the self as subject, but the centre of his own experiencing self. This will bring us back, at section 5, to the forum of our initial concerns about the self and will show the kind of alternative Qoheleth's meta-narrative of the self and his self-portrait offer in the deconstructed age.

Two of the three words of self-reference, **לִב** and **רוּחַ**, are among Qoheleth's favourite words, and while **נֶפֶשׁ** is not a favourite word, its presence is still relevant to the topic at hand. The first two words occur with surprisingly high frequency. In fact, **רוּחַ** has its highest relative frequency in the Old Testament in Ecclesiastes, at 5.36 occurrences per 1000 words (Haggai and Job have the second and third highest frequencies with 4.33 and 2.54 respectively). Also, **לִב** has its second highest frequency in Ecclesiastes, with 9.15 occurrences⁴⁵ (Proverbs is just ahead of Ecclesiastes with 9.77, and Obadiah follows on with a paltry 4.57).

⁴⁵ Although these statistics show the relative frequency as against occurrences in other biblical books, it should be noted that **לִב**, not **רוּחַ**, has the highest absolute frequency in Ecclesiastes—42× as opposed to 23×. **נֶפֶשׁ** occurs 7×.

a. לב

In Ecclesiastes this word can be classified into seven aspects, with few borderline cases. They are as follows (in descending order of frequency):

- A) instrument⁴⁶ of searching and/or testing (11×)⁴⁷
- B) instrument of moral "good sense" (or its opposite) or belief (10×)⁴⁸
- C) seat of reasoning, inner-dialogue (6×)⁴⁹
- D) seat of joy, gladness (6×)⁵⁰
- E) seat of vexation, striving (4×)⁵¹
- F) instrument of knowledge (3×)⁵²
- G) instrument of speech (1×, 5.1)

Among the biblical connotations reviewed in the previous section, it is the intellectual that finds its fullest expression in Ecclesiastes. For example, when the word is used in connection with Qoheleth's procedure of discovery (A), it is the לב that is marked to advance along the lines of intellectual inquiry, to seek and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the sun. It is the instrument by which Qoheleth makes his observations, and in this capacity it appears to take on a life of its own. In fact, it is the לב itself which often does the observing. At 9.1 Qoheleth states, "I set my mind⁵³ to all of this [i.e., all that he had just

⁴⁶ Most instances display an understanding of the לב as *instrumental* in human experience. That is, it is an instrument of (channel of, vehicle for) Qoheleth's experiences (and of humanity's or "the wise"); experiences that primarily consist of testing the value of wisdom and coming to know its vexation.

⁴⁷ 1.13, 16b, 17; 2.3 (2×); 2.10 (2×); 7.25; 8.9, 16; 9.1.

⁴⁸ 7.2, 4, 7, 21, 26; 9.3 (2×); 10.2 (2×), 3. At 7.26, the לב of the woman that Qoheleth observes is *like* the nets of a hunter. Although the heart can be anthropomorphized (2.10; cf. 2.20, 22, 23), this is the only instance where Qoheleth uses another concept to illustrate the nature of the/a heart. The woman's heart, for Qoheleth, exhibits her moral essence/sense. For in v. 25 he states that he is determined to understand evil and he then states in v. 26 that the woman is more bitter than death and that the sinner is taken by her.

⁴⁹ 1.16a; 2.1, 15 (2×); 3.17, 18.

⁵⁰ 7.3; 9.7; 11.9a, 10. At 11.10 the removal of כעס may be aligned with the previously mentioned "gladdening" (יטב) of the heart.

⁵¹ 2.20, 22, 23; 8.11.

⁵² 3.11; 7.22; 8.5.

⁵³ The MT margin reads נחמי אל-לבי for נחמי אהל-לבי. Either way the sense remains that Qoheleth's לב is being *applied to* the matter at hand. On the use of אל with לב, see n. 58, below. Also, most translations offer "mind" as opposed to "heart" for לב (although cf. LXX which, in typically literal fashion, opted for καρδιά instead of, e.g.,

observed in the previous section, the unit of 8.15-17⁶⁴], and [my mind] observed it all—that the righteous..." By this he makes clear that his procedure of discovery revolves around the activity of the לָב itself. For Qoheleth, this centre of consciousness is vital to the overall tone of his queries.

It is perhaps significant that the first occurrence of לָב (both the first intellectual nuance and the first occurrence of לָב in the book) coincides with Qoheleth's proper introduction of himself. At 1.13 he sets out clearly what arenas of the self he will be operating in—observation, knowledge and the mind:

I set my לָב to investigate and to search out by wisdom all that has been done under the heavens. It is an evil business God has given to human beings to be busy with.

The duality present here has unique implications. Because Qoheleth invokes his לָב as a *separate* entity, he invites the reader to explore and observe his inner person as he does, for Qoheleth is, as Fox contends, "his own field of investigation".⁵⁵ The לָב enjoys this privileged place as Qoheleth's intellectual centre, and it is from here that all of his observations will flow. Is this centre therefore the same as the "I"? Not always. Qoheleth would have us view his experiences as he does, through a diversified lens. For example, at 1.16b it is again his לָב that does the actual observing, acting as a narrative focal point for the reader. And in the next verse Qoheleth applies (נָתַן) his לָב *for the purpose* of knowing wisdom and folly (1.16-17):⁵⁶

I said to myself, "Behold, I have become great and increased in wisdom more than all who were before me over Jerusalem"; and my mind observed much wisdom and knowledge. And I set my mind to know wisdom and knowledge, madness and folly. I knew that this too was a

νοῦς, "mind"). I shall discuss the distinction further below. See above on the intellectual nuance of לָב, which is likely present here.

⁵⁴ See p. 206 n. 84.

⁵⁵ *Qohelet*, p. 87.

⁵⁶ This duality features in most of the occurrences in the intellectual categories (A, C, F), particularly when the לָב is applied to something or does the actual observing. In fact, any usage in which the לָב is *instrumental* (A, B, F, G) implies separateness.

pursuit of wind.

His לב justifies its own private existence as a narrative character and, along with the "I", the student and the frame narrator, serves to fill out Qoheleth's tale.

Another undertone that emerged from the biblical overview and which is present in Ecclesiastes is the capacity to employ "good sense"; that is, "sound judgment in practical behavior and practical affairs".⁵⁷ For example, it is better to avoid the house of feasting, says Qoheleth, and the living will "take this to heart" (יתן אל-לבו, 7.2).⁵⁸ Yet the same phrase has a subtly different implication in 7.21, where Qoheleth urges his student in a moral tone:

To all things that are spoken do not *set your heart*,
lest you hear your servant cursing you.
Surely your heart knows that many times
you yourself have cursed others. (7.21-22)

While the subject matter is different, the imperative to "not take to heart" (or better, "not believe") remains a moral one, ratified by the "golden rule", "Do unto others..."

At 9.3, the moral significance of the heart is made more clear. The לב of the children of humanity, Qoheleth laments, is full of evil and there is madness (חוללות) in their hearts⁵⁹ while they live—and afterwards, to death. The heart here is a moral *place*, a nexus of being as over against behaviour, and lies at the core of Qoheleth's reflections on the fate of humanity. Whether they are wise or foolish, whether they sacrifice or do not sacrifice, what matters is that their hearts are full of evil—or, as he says elsewhere (8.11), the heart of human beings is set on *doing* evil—and this bears witness to the fate that humanity will be

⁵⁷ Fox, "Wisdom in Qoheleth", in L.G. Perdue *et al.* (eds.), *In Search of Wisdom* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) p. 118.

⁵⁸ Qoheleth uses the stock biblical idiom אל-לב. Compare, for example, Gen. 6.6 (God was grieved to his heart); 2 Sam. 13.33 (David believed [שׁים] in/to his heart that his sons were dead); 2 Sam. 19.19 (Shimea asks David not to remember—not set [שׁים] to heart—what he has done); cf. Eccl. 9.1.

⁵⁹ בלבבם—the only occurrence of the related form, לבב.

unable to avoid in this life. Compare Gen. 6.5:

The LORD saw that the wickedness of humanity was great in the earth and that every imagination of the thoughts of their hearts (וכל־יצר מחשבת) (רק רע כל־היום) (לבו) was only evil continually.

Here, as in Qoheleth's text, the concern is with the moral quality (רע) of inner life (the יצר—intent, imagination [cf. צור, from the same root in the Jeremiah text above]—of the thoughts of the mind/heart). It is a question of being that motivates behaviour. In fact, at Eccl. 9.3 and elsewhere, the only characteristic of people that Qoheleth seems sure of is that which comes within the sphere of being and which involves the לב. He is sure that it exists outside of the enunciation that defines it and that it is linked to behaviour.

When Qoheleth is thinking, or reasoning at an inner, dialogic level⁶⁰—that is, in the form of his "I spoke in my heart" sayings (בלב אמר—equivalent to the phrase, "talking to oneself"? or not talking out loud?; cf. Gen. 24.45)—we are given a privileged glimpse *inside* his character. It is worth noting that בלב אמר is a frequently employed device used to demonstrate the inner processes of a character in a *narrative* fashion. As Bar-Efrat comments, after reviewing a host of examples, the phrase, 'said in my/his/her heart' usually suggests that "characters wish to convince themselves that the action they are taking, rather than an alternative course, is the right one".⁶¹ That is, the phrase represents an inner struggle. At Eccl. 2.1, for example, the implication is that Qoheleth's struggle is/will be *with* himself, essentially as another:

I said in my heart [אמרתי אני בלבי], "Come, I will test you [his heart?] with mirth and enjoy good things." But behold, that too was absurd.

Indeed, it is in ch. 2 that this inner dialogue culminates and the heart is

⁶⁰ Reference may be made again to Perry, *Dialogues with Kohelet*. Perry pushes the notion of dialogue between two major characters (P, the presenter and K, Koheleth) throughout Ecclesiastes, with interesting if sometimes excessive results.

⁶¹ *Narrative Art in the Bible*, p. 63.

established as Qoheleth's fixed position of reference for the experiences of his youth that he reflects upon, and yet the intense inner-dialogic language persists throughout Qoheleth's narration. His heart bears the brunt of his most vexatious and joyous experience (cf. 9.1a), and we are again left with the distinct impression of a tangible experiencing self. This leads us to another general biblical category of the word, the emotional.

In his **לב** Qoheleth *feels* despair, striving, even **רע**: "And I turned to despair my heart (**ליאש את-לבי**) concerning all the toil at which I toiled under the sun" (2.20; cf. 2.22, 23; 8.11). And it is this disposition of misery that will find its redemption in the same *place*. That is, the **לב** will also be the locus where one of Qoheleth's most important themes is realized: joy and gladness. The heart is the place of **שמחה**:

Everyone to whom God has given riches and wealth and has enabled to partake of them, and to take their portion and rejoice in their toil—this is a gift of God. Indeed, they will rarely remember the days of their lives, for God answers them⁶² in the joy of their heart (**בשמחת לבו**). (5.18-19)

Recent attempts to show the importance of joy to Qoheleth's narrative have relied heavily on this passage,⁶³ but little if any attention has been given to the function of the heart here. The noun in the construct state possibly shows that the **לב** is capable of *owning* joy. But can joy be owned or is it something experienced? Does such a construct suggest a consistent quality of heart or an

⁶² The root **ענה** is usually taken to mean "occupy" or "be busy with" (as is more clearly the case in 1.13 and 3.10, where it plays off of **ענין**, "occupation"). But cf. the convincing arguments of N. Lohfink ("Qoheleth 5:17-19—Revelation by Joy", *CBQ* 52 [1990], pp. 625-35; esp. pp. 626-29). Lohfink's article takes **ענה** here to mean "answer" or "reveal" ("God answers [reveals himself] by/in the joy of humanity's heart"). The consequence is the startling proposal that Qoheleth's theology is revelatory, being offset by his more cynical approach to God and wisdom, but not overcome by it. Lohfink suggests that 5.18-19 is representative of a theme which permeates throughout the book via such key phrases as "fear of God" (3.14-15; 5.6; 7.18; 8.12-13; 12.13) and the joy theme in other passages; all part of the "divine gift" of the knowledge of God.

⁶³ Particularly the influential articles of Lohfink ("Revelation by Joy") and Whybray ("Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy", *JSOT* 23 [1982], pp. 87-98).

encounter with joy (an event)? Other biblical occurrences of the construct suggest the latter.

At Cant. 3.11 the daughters of Zion are encouraged to

Go forth!...and behold King Solomon, with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, on the day of the gladness of his heart (וּבְיוֹם שִׂמְחַת לִבּוֹ). (RSV)

Solomon's heart knows joy on an appointed day. It is a singular event. At Isa.

30.29 the prophet informs Jerusalem (in contradistinction to Assyria) that they

shall have a song as in the night when a holy feast is kept; and gladness of heart (וּשְׂמֵחַת לִבָּב), as when one sets out to the sound of the flute to go to the mountain of the LORD, to the Rock of Israel. (RSV)

At Jer. 15.16, in the course of seeking the reassurance of his position, Jeremiah responds to the LORD:

Thy words were found, and I ate them, and thy words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart (וַיִּשְׂמַחַת לִבִּי); for I am called by thy name, O Lord, God of hosts. (rsv)

In the above examples the construct state suggests not that the heart is to "become" always joyful, but that it is to *experience* joy as sacrament (Canticles), worship (Isaiah) and self-understanding (Jeremiah); that is, as a unique event.

Likewise, in Ecclesiastes the place of the heart is partly to receive the reply of the divine to its own misery, enabling it for a time to forget the toil of living.

Other texts, while just as important to realizing the overall theme, relate the לֵב more indirectly to joy. For example,

Better vexation than laughter;
for with a downcast face the *heart is made glad*. (7.3)

And in Qoheleth's celebratory passages:

Go! Eat your bread with joy,
and drink your wine *with a glad heart*;
For God has already approved your deeds.
At all times let your garments be white,
and let oil not be lacking on your head... (9.7-8)

Rejoice, O young man, in your youth.

And *let your heart gladden you* in the days of your youth.
And *walk in the ways of your heart*,

and in the sight of your eyes.
 And know for certain that concerning all of these things
 God will bring you into judgment.
Remove vexation from your heart,
 and take away misery from your body;
 For youth and the prime of life are fleeting. (11.9-10)

The heart should be glad (צוּר) and it should gladden (יִצַּח). The reference to Num. 15.39, which states that the ways of the heart are not to be followed after, is worth mentioning again (see the discussion at Chapter 5.4). The heart is what inclines a person. It is a motion of the will which, for Qoheleth, is a source of gladness. However, following after this inclination, according to the Numbers text, is no less than outright disobedience. The heart must be dedicated wholly to the LORD, and any aberration is to be rejected. Qoheleth's reversal in theology is a reversal in anthropology as well. He has no fear of his experience, and affirms the episode of the heart to be authentic and human.

In discussing this last aspect I have used the word "heart", since the emotional implications, I believe, cannot be rendered well by "mind". But "mind" is surely the best rendering in those instances when the לֵב functions as a centre of consciousness—most clearly in the dialogic and intellectual instances of Ecclesiastes. It is due to elements such as these that Qoheleth has earned himself his reputation as the Old Testament's foremost individual thinker. Indeed, it is the *intellectual* self that rules Qoheleth's realms of thinking, yet it is offset by his acceptance of the emotional. While for Job the intellectual heart dominates, in Qoheleth we find a more balanced integration. Qoheleth's depiction of "heart" as a place of emotion is a breath of fresh air in the biblical wisdom literature.

b. נֶשֶׁה

This word occurs only 7 times in Ecclesiastes. Three of those can be passed over briefly. The first instance signifies a receptacle of pleasure and occurs within one of Qoheleth's "better than" sayings (2.24). The second occurs in a narrative aside

in which Qoheleth asks rhetorically, "Why have I deprived *my soul* of good things?" (4.8). By such usage he effectively demonstrates an *inner* turmoil, and draws readerly sympathies. The third also employs the traditional sense of "person", and describes Qoheleth's procedure of discovery. It was his **שׁוֹפֵט** which sought to know the sum but could not find it out (7.28). The remaining four occur in ch. 6, in a remarkable set of statements.

Qoheleth's discussion in 6.1-5 is preoccupied with the satisfaction that the **שׁוֹפֵט** is able (or not able) to obtain in its existence. The implication is that although some people enjoy a wealth of material goods, their inner selves remain insatiable. The lament is tragic and poetic:

There is an evil that I observed under the sun, and it prevails upon humanity: [There is] a man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honour [so that] he lacks nothing for his soul from all that he desires; yet God does not enable him to partake of them. Instead, a stranger partakes of them. This is absurd and a grievous ill.

If [that] man begets one hundred children and lives many years, though many be the days of his years, and his soul is not satisfied by [these] good [things]—and indeed, there is no burial for him—I said, "The stillborn child (**הַנּוֹפֵל**) is better off than he is." For in absurdity it comes and in darkness it goes, and in darkness its name is covered. Although it has neither seen the sun nor understood it, it finds rest rather than he. (6.1-5)

Qoheleth is obviously not referring to himself, but to an example of absurdity and evil that he has observed. The tragic comparison of the stillborn (an "untimely birth" [cf. Job 3.16]—"in absurdity it comes and in darkness it goes") to the lack that this man's **שׁוֹפֵט** experiences, suggests that the consciousness of absurdity and evil—which the **שׁוֹפֵט** knows from living/experience—is worse than having never come into consciousness. The **שׁוֹפֵט**, then, is what participates in living. It is what separates the living from the stillborn—from those who cannot or will not be. If its name is covered it cannot be remembered and can never know existence. It has not been able to see or *know* the sun. (And remember that seeing the sun is, for Qoheleth, living, being conscious of existence—7.11; 11.7; 12.2 [inversely].)

The stillborn has not been aware of—nor has it perceived—the life the נפש knows.

A few lines later Qoheleth twice puts a new twist to the word:

All the toil of humanity is for their mouths, but the appetite [נפש] is not satisfied.

What advantage has the sage over the fool?

What have the foolish in knowing [how] to conduct themselves among the living?

Better the sight of the eyes
than the wandering of the soul.

This too is absurd and a pursuit of wind. (6.7-9)

Verse 7 serves as a neat summary of what has gone immediately before. The consciousness of the נפש is a vexation, for it has embodied an insatiable desire (cf. 1.8). In v. 9 the "sight of the eyes" probably suggests what is immediately obtainable and, by implication, desirable (cf. 2.10), keeping well within the present motif. However, the phrase "wandering of the soul" (or "desire"—מהלך נפש) is the problem here. The phrase may be, as Whybray points out, a "circumlocution for dying",⁶⁴ since the verb הלך, in Ecclesiastes and elsewhere, can mean to "depart", as in "return to God". If this is so, then Qoheleth is rejecting death (not to be confused with Ecclesiastesan non-existence) as an alternative, even an alternative to the vexation of existence. This is a splendid example of the primacy of existence to Qoheleth's thought.⁶⁵

Another divergence can be observed here between Qoheleth and the biblical tradition. Gone is any seeming duality between the נפש and the body. It is not so much that the נפש and the body are separate as that in Ecclesiastes they are not distinguished as such. The "experiences" of each are affirmed equally by Qoheleth. Indeed, the נפש desires substance (צרכ) as the body desires food. But the otherness of the נפש and its inherent quality in defining existence remain intact.

⁶⁴ *Ecclesiastes*, p. 109.

⁶⁵ Further on 6.7-9 and the significance of הלך, see my discussion in Chapter 9.2.

c. רוּחַ

It is worth remembering that this word has its highest relative frequency in Ecclesiastes. I have already discussed the significance of the phrases רעות רוּחַ and רעיון רוּחַ (see Excursus 1), which account for 9 of the 21 occurrences of רוּחַ in Ecclesiastes. But more significant to Qoheleth's concept of self are the remaining instances. Outside of the couplings with רעה (in all of which רוּחַ most likely means "wind"), רוּחַ designates one of two meanings of "spirit": 1) a characteristic or trait,⁶⁶ or 2) a "life-force" (of an animal or person).⁶⁷

The first meaning has some significance for our discussion. Two of the four examples occur in constructs in one of Qoheleth's "better than" sayings. A patient spirit (ארך־רוּחַ), says Qoheleth in 7.8, is better than a proud spirit (גבה־רוּחַ). (Note the spatial play: a long spirit is better than a high one!) Such adjectival usage is common in the biblical literature as a means of delineating the expected behaviour of a person or group, or simply of stereotyping for rhetorical effect.⁶⁸ As in Qoheleth's usage, it is a means of easily "understanding" one's relation to others and to the world. The next verse further expands on the "better than" saying: "Do not let your spirit be quickly vexed [אל־תבהל ברוּחְךָ], for vexation rests in the bosom [בחיֶק] of fools." By assigning the quality of patience to the spirit,⁶⁹ Qoheleth offsets his own ontological experience, for early on he had described his own self as racked with despair and vexation (1.18; 2.17-23 etc.), and will conclude in ch. 11 by admonishing the student to remove vexation from his heart (11.10).

Where it occurs, the second meaning has generated much discussion.

⁶⁶ 7.8 (2×), 9; 10.4.

⁶⁷ 3.19, 21 (2×); 11.5; 12.7.

⁶⁸ Cf. Exod. 6.9; Num. 21.4; Job 21.4; Mic. 2.7.

⁶⁹ Qoheleth also associates the spirit with *anger* at 10.4, and prescribes calmness as its antidote: "If the spirit of the ruler [המושל] rises against you, do not yield your place; for calmness [מרפא] will quell great offenses."

More than any of the references reviewed in Qoheleth's narrative so far, these reflect a theological concept of person. The most elaborate formulation of this comes at 3.18-21:

I said in my heart concerning human beings, "God has set them apart⁷⁰ to show them that they themselves are animals." For the fate of human beings and the fate of the animals is the same fate: as one dies, so dies the other, and all have the same spirit (וְרוּחַ אֶחָד לְכֹל). Humanity has no advantage over the animals, for everything is absurd (כִּי הַכֹּל הַבֵּל). Everyone goes to one place. Everyone is from the dust and returns to the dust. Who knows whether the spirit of human beings goes upwards, or whether the spirit of the animals goes down into the earth?

It is significant that this group of observations is set in terms of inner reflection ("I said in my heart"). Qoheleth's observation on what constitutes the human self and its fate is intensely personal. From the narrative structure that we are given we can only assume that this is what Qoheleth *said* as a result of his test of wisdom and pleasure "just" experienced in the first two chapters. Its primary narration is *tunc* (*then* as opposed to *now*), and roots the saying firmly in the experiential. Qoheleth himself *knows* that just as it is fair to say that the fool and the sage die the same death (2.14, 16), so it is fair to equivocate the fate of human and animal. The experiential strain is kept in the foreground.

Qoheleth concludes that "the way of all flesh" (their wandering and their demise) under the sun is inherently flawed. He posits no blame to anyone or anything. That the human spirit is like this is simply a fact. It is the way things are, and it is connected to the absurd. It is *due to*⁷¹ הַבֵּל (i.e. as a principle

⁷⁰ לְבָרַם הָאֱלֹהִים, "God set them (humanity) apart". "Set apart" or "separate" is the most clearly attested meaning for the root בָּרַר, but does not agree with some commentators and most translations (RSV, NASB, NIV, NRSV) which opt for "test". But, as Fox argues, with the accompanying verb "to show" (וּלְרְאוֹתָם), "[in order] to show them"; so the sense of Peshitta and LXX), "to separate" makes the most sense. It is by placing humanity below the heavens, to share mortality with the animals, that God shows them that they are like the animals, yet not (as made clear in Gen. 3) like God (*Qoheleth*, p. 198).

⁷¹ Such is the causative force of כִּי in 3.19, as in, for example, 2.17; 4.10; 6.11; the second כִּי in 9.5; and 12.3.

observed in the world) that the spiritual fate of humanity is reduced to the same as that of the animals of the earth (בהמה).⁷² Qoheleth has already perceived that there is no logical relationship between deed and consequence, particularly as regards what he can grasp of the human predicament of toil and fate, so this comes as no surprise. It is inescapable, and the fact of it raises the question of advantage.

This again sets Qoheleth apart from the rest of the biblical literature. The virtual equation of the human "life-breath" to that of the animal is not necessarily a radical one (Gen. 1.30; 2.7), but it is so rarely expressed in the Old Testament that it may seem so. Also, Qoheleth takes the Genesis formulation further; that is, to death. The prophets and sages had not asked, as Qoheleth does, what profits humanity given such a plight? If humanity is to Qoheleth's experience so strictly isolated from God (3.18b; and cf. 5.2: "God is in the heavens and you are on the earth"), even in death, what can set them apart? To push the case further, what makes them human? What constitutes the self? Whereas elsewhere in the Bible the constitution of the self is assumed, Qoheleth raises questions about it.

Another occurrence of רוח also brings out this concern. At the conclusion of Qoheleth's elegant contemplation on old age, his final words are as follows (and it is worth remembering that since the frame narrator commences his text in the next verse, these are *Qoheleth's* final words to the reader):

And the dust returns to the earth as it was,
and the spirit returns to God who gave it. (12.7)

Here he alludes to the question at 3.21: "Who knows...?" But the narrative

⁷² As virtually all the commentaries point out, the force of the question is negative and Qoheleth is likely refuting a concurrent notion that there was a difference between the fate of humans and of animals. In other words, people may claim to know that humans go one way and animals another, but as far as what is observable (and we should expect this meaning from the Bible's chief empiricist), their fate in death is the same.

context is significant. In ch. 3 Qoheleth's *tunc* stance placed his statement within an experiential context which made his question a rhetorical "fact" based on his own empiricism. Here, however, Qoheleth is at the story's end and he has shifted from observation to wise counsel. Indeed, the context of the poem itself forces the reader to allow Qoheleth a certain laxity with his technicity of vocabulary. This is not a formulaic statement, but a poetic climax imbued with a great deal of rhetoric so that the reader—as the poem has rhythmically established—should remember (further see Chapter 9.5). Here is a lyrical affirmation of creation's link with God, insinuating its intrinsic worth: the self originated from its creator and will return to it.

There is one borderline case that is worth considering. At 8.8a Qoheleth states that

No one has authority over the spirit (שליט ברוח) to retain the spirit (לכלוא את-הרוח) and no one has authority over the day of death (שלשון ביום המות).

If רוח does mean "spirit" here⁷³ then Qoheleth is reiterating human ignorance and impotence in the face of death. The spirit, its fate and movement, is not bound to the realm of human governance. The logical conclusion is that such fate rests in the hands of God.⁷⁴ Like the נפש in the general biblical review, the prospects of the רוח are likely caught up in the divine will, and this affirms, more explicitly than 3.18-21, the value of the human spirit and its essential freedom (that is, from human governance, but not from what may befall humanity at any time).

While the Job texts reflect the idea that the רוח in a person provides understanding above and beyond that of acquired wisdom or received instruction,

⁷³ So, for example, Gordis ("spirit of life", *Koheleth*, p. 280) and Murphy ("life-breath", *Ecclesiastes*, p. 80), who perhaps opt for "spirit" over "wind" on the grounds of the following paralleled thought concerning the "day of death".

⁷⁴ Cf. 3.10, 18; 5.18; 7.14; 8.15; 9.1; 11.5; 12.7.

this aspect appears to be missing here. Also missing is Job's idea that the **קוֹהֵלֶת** is a provocation of speech. Instead, in Ecclesiastes, this favourite word of Qoheleth's⁷⁵ has more to do with the individual's relationship to the future unknown—death especially. More than in any other biblical texts dealing with the **קוֹהֵלֶת**, Qoheleth uses it to show a concern for the value of self-hood and the individual spirit and its freedom.

d. *Two Key Texts*

1. *1.12–2.26*. What can we learn about Qoheleth's attitude to the self from what he has to say about his own self? First of all, Qoheleth tells us very little "about" himself. Apart from the frame narrator's text most of the relevant material comes from chs. 1–2. On its own that passage reads like the beginning of a good story. It is preceded by Qoheleth's poem on the circuitry of the cosmos and is proceeded by his list of achievements (2.4–10) which continues the story-telling style of the passage. There is, however, something odd about this passage that is likely noticed only on reflection. The quest is not happening as we read. We are reading about it as a past event. The tense fluctuates from past narration to present and back and so forth. It begins with a clear past tense (1.12–13a) and then returns to the present with a conclusion/reflection (1.13b). It is a style that is found elsewhere in the book but is particularly striking here. It is thoroughly engaging and continues throughout the passage:

<i>storytelling</i>	1.12–13a
<i>conclusion/reflection</i>	1.13b
<i>storytelling</i>	1.14a
<i>conclusion/reflection</i>	1.14b–15
<i>storytelling</i>	1.16–17
<i>conclusion/reflection</i>	1.18
<i>storytelling</i>	2.1a–b

⁷⁵ It appears 16th in Loretz's list of Qoheleth's 28 favourite words (cited in Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, p. xxix).

conclusion/reflection
storytelling

2.1c
2.2-3

The effect of the reflections is to engage the reader in the present of narration/reading. It is to remind us that there is a critical distance being kept. And although the interspersed reflections precipitate Qoheleth's final attitude to the story being told, it is the story-telling parts that dominate here. This suggests that the most important thing for Qoheleth is to *relate* his story. This dominating style sets the narrative tone for the whole book. The narration is "spoken" directly to the reader in that there is no intermediary figure; Qoheleth, as elsewhere, stands alone. This solitude is enhanced (if not caused completely) by the use of the first-person preterite. The preterite sets the story in the past and the narrator in the "present" moment of telling/reading, and unless there is a story-setting for the narrating moment, there is no audience but the reader. Like Job (see above on Job 7.11), Qoheleth will only find relief through this unhindered speech. His (remembered) experience is pent up and in need of release. The experiencing subject is thus foregrounded as the quest begins.

He was a king (of sorts!), a builder of vineyards, of parks, of gardens; a wealthy man. He made these things *for himself* (לְבִי, "for me", is the operative phrase that frequently occurs in the references to building and acquiring). In other words, he virtually "made" himself and leads us to believe that, as a result, he considered himself a man of great importance. His importance was both social and intellectual, for *he defined himself* in terms of status and material wealth. His intellectual ability had even become part of that status ("I said... 'Behold, I have become great and increased in wisdom more than all who were before me over Jerusalem'", 1.16). It was this "definition" of himself that he set out to test at the beginning of ch. 2:

I said in my heart, "Come, I will test you with mirth and enjoy good things." But behold, that too was absurd. "To laugh", I said, "is madness; and to be merry, what use is it?" I set out in my heart to cheer my flesh

with wine (my heart conducting itself with wisdom), and to take hold of folly until I should see what was good for human beings to do under the heavens the few days of their lives. (2.1-3)

Here is a full-blown interest in the constitution of his own self, and it results in a concern for action: What is the best humanity can do given their situation? In this regard, it is no coincidence that the majority of Qoheleth's advice to his reader occurs towards the end of his narration, after the majority of his experiences have been related.

As a result of the definition of self that Qoheleth chooses, he comes to despair his very life:

I hated life, for the work that has been done under the sun was grievous to me. Indeed, everything was absurd and a pursuit of wind! And I hated all my toil at which I toiled under the sun, seeing that I must bequeath it to the man who comes after me; and who knows whether he will be a sage or a fool? Yet he will be master of all my toil at which I toiled and at which I was wise under the sun. This too is absurd.

And I turned to despair my heart concerning all the toil at which I toiled under the sun. (2.17-20)

His toil and reputation—that is, all by which he defined himself—will leave him in death and will probably go to a fool. Qoheleth found little satisfaction in what he regarded his own self to be, and such failure was a source of vexation.

This passage crystallizes the many subtle intimations to inner experience that Qoheleth makes throughout his narration. As W.P. Brown states, "The bulk of this book...consists of a person who, like Job, shares his personal discoveries and bares his soul in a testimony without dialogic partners."⁷⁶ For example, because each **הביל** judgment emanates from Qoheleth's "brooding consciousness" (Fox), an *individual* relationship to the absurd is evoked. The absurd is both defined by Qoheleth's experience and the self which that experience reflects.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ A soon to be published study on character formation in the wisdom books.

⁷⁷ Compare Brown's statement: "*Hebel* is as much a description of the absurdity of the cosmic and human condition as it is an indication of how the self is positioned in relation to the world in its totality" (soon to be published study).

2. 7.23-24.

All this I tested with wisdom [בַּחֲכָמָה]. I said, "I will become wise [אֲחַכְמָה]." But it was far from me. What has been is far off and deep, surely deep. Who can discover it?

Commentators have long recognized the glaring problem here. Qoheleth has clearly stated that he did achieve wisdom (esp. in ch 2), and even here wisdom is the instrument by which he will explore,⁷⁸ but now he claims that becoming wise was far from him. To solve the dilemma it has been suggested that Qoheleth is employing two types of wisdom: the practical (by which he explores), and the elusive divine wisdom that he cannot attain.⁷⁹ What has been outrightly overlooked, however, and which also sheds light on the passage, is both the significance of the verb חָכַם and its narrative context.

What does Qoheleth mean by אֲחַכְמָה? Of all 28 occurrences of the verb, חָכַם ("be/become wise"), in the Old Testament only 3 are first-person singular: Eccl. 2.15, 19 and 7.23.⁸⁰ Therefore, only in Ecclesiastes is the idea of becoming wise related so reflexively to the speaker. In the *tunc* of Qoheleth's story, becoming wise is within the grasp of the experience of his self. Unlike Job 28 and Proverbs 8, where the poet seeks wisdom itself, Qoheleth seeks to *be* wise—to *become* wise. There is, perhaps, an intimation towards a philosophized sense of becoming here, a becoming which is far off and deep. This would not be too rarefied an idea to attribute to Qoheleth, particularly considering that he recognized "being" as an entity unto itself, including in the passage under consideration: "What has been [שֶׁהָיָה] is far off."⁸¹ The notion of becoming

⁷⁸ Note Fox: "...it is precisely *bēhokmâ*—"by intellect"—that one inquires into such matters [as the frustration of inquiry]" ("Wisdom in Qoheleth", p. 119).

⁷⁹ E.g. Gordis, *Koheleth*, p. 270. See the discussion in Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 71-72. Also, see my discussion on wisdom as Helper, Chapter 9.3.

⁸⁰ 7.23, as G.A. Barton noted, is the only instance of a cohortative verb in the book, and therefore "expresses strong resolve" (*Ecclesiastes*, p. 147).

⁸¹ Other texts which reflect this recognition of "being" are 1.9; 3.15; 6.10; 8.7; and 10.14.

supports the idea that there are degrees of wisdom at work here, for Qoheleth draws a sharp distinction between practical and spiritual wisdom: one a wisdom of action, the other of being.

The other instances of the first-person verb in ch. 2 refer to the past failed experiment. Eccl. 2.15 is especially notable:

And I said in my heart [וַאֲמַרְתִּי אֲנִי בַלְבִּי], "As is the fate of the fool, so it will befall me." Why, then, was I exceedingly wise? [וְלִמָּה חֲכַמְתִּי] [אֲנִי אִזּוֹ יוֹתֵר] And I said in my heart [וְדַבַּרְתִּי בַלְבִּי], "This too was absurd."

The הַבֵּל judgment suggests that becoming wise should have been a successful enterprise, but, as in 7.23-24, it had clearly failed. To be sure, the language suggests that, if within the realm of possibility, becoming wise would involve the self in its entirety.⁸² Furthermore, as with all the other "I said in my heart" passages, Qoheleth is referring to past experience.⁸³ This puts a striking twist to the observation. Qoheleth is narrating from an enlightened perspective. Having observed its trappings, he concludes resolutely (in his heart) the failure of the process of becoming wise. This is enhanced by the fact that in 7.23-24 he, in effect, concludes *from* the preceding observations, which have to do with wisdom's value.⁸⁴ The failure of this process is one thing that Qoheleth can be sure of, and the narrative device heightens this sense of resolution.

⁸² Note the repetition of "heart" and the emphatic אֲנִי.

⁸³ 2.1, 2; 3.17, 18; 6.3. In each of these cases the narrative stance is clearly reflective. Take, for example, 3.17: "I said in my heart, 'God will judge the righteous and the wicked'; for [there is] a time for every matter and for every deed." And consider the context of 3.16: "But still I observed under the sun that in the place of justice there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness there was wickedness." Like the test just narrated in ch. 2, Qoheleth is *telling* the reader his thoughts which result from self-reflection and experience.

⁸⁴ That "all this" refers to the preceding observations of ch. 7 as opposed to the preceding section (vv. 25-29) is supported by the fact that what precedes is also concerned with the failure of wisdom; particularly the ambiguity of its value (7.15-19). Admittedly, "all this" could serve as a link to what follows *as well* (cf. 7.28 esp.).

e. *Splitting Image*

Were we to imagine Jacques Lacan's question, "Is the subject I speak of when I speak the same as the subject who speaks?,"⁸⁵ delivered as a pensive, reflective aside in Qoheleth's narration, the result would be illuminating. The answer, as befitting Qoheleth's rhetorical style, would obviously be no. It cannot be yes since Qoheleth distances himself as a speaking subject, an observing subject. Both H. Fisch and W.P. Brown have observed this phenomenon in Ecclesiastes. For Brown it is because Qoheleth cites his "accomplishments" as failures that he makes his narrated self a "stranger", and therefore separates his "reputation" (public image) from his individuality or essence. Qoheleth thereby "steps out of himself" and creates a ghost.⁸⁶ Fisch sees in Qoheleth's "self-duplication" an "ironic mode" which, by its smiling awareness of what happens to itself, constitutes something "near the very ground and origin of all irony".⁸⁷

As autobiographer, Qoheleth is capable of distinguishing himself from his (narratorial) past point of view. That is, because he is aware that he is narrating his own subjective past (the "event of self-consciousness is inseparable from the history of saying 'I'"⁸⁸), he transcends it and creates two characters in the process: the one whom we envision writing or speaking—in real time—and the one who is written or spoken about—in narrated time. As James Olney says of reflective autobiographical literature,

...while it is true to say that one can see with no other eyes than one's own, it is also true to say that one can, after a manner, see oneself seeing

⁸⁵ Cited in Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives", p. 112.

⁸⁶ "Character Reconstructed: Ecclesiastes", forthcoming.

⁸⁷ Fisch comments further that "even as the philosopher contemplates himself as the passive *object* of a universal *process*, his active contemplation of this process in the language of philosophy detaches him from the process, affirms his freedom and independence as a *subject*... Irony brings together man as object, immersed in the world, and man as a subject, capable of rising superior to pains and pleasures" ("Qoheleth: A Hebrew Ironist", p. 169; italics Fisch's).

⁸⁸ Calvin Schrag, cited by G. Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography", p. 38.

with those eyes: one can take a point of view on the point of view one has taken, and so...transcend the point of view through the point of view.⁸⁹

Qoheleth sees himself seeing with the same eyes. He sees a youthful king who saw that his life was abhorrent. He saw a sensitive sage who saw that the oppressed had no comforter to comfort them. Qoheleth is thus a thinker in that he thinks/sees/observes *about* thinking/seeing/observing. Qoheleth understands the process of (failed and, by implication, successful) understanding. In such a way Qoheleth transcends himself. Through his continually self-conscious narration Qoheleth demonstrates his awareness of the past. And so arise interpretive possibilities for the reader to participate in his transcendence of his past: does he smile wryly at it?; does he frown at his past folly?; does he weep? Both the self (*subject*) and Qoheleth's self, through his reflective redoubling, are brought into the sharpest relief.

5. *Accounting for the Self*

Qoheleth's way of accounting for the self offers an adequate measure of experience—a way of understanding what it means to be human—and we may consider/judge it in contradistinction to the deconstructive approach of accounting for the self outlined above. I do not claim to pass judgment by some objective standard but rather I offer my subjective consideration. Mine is merely an attempt to question the adequacy of these distinctive world-views as a reader.

I began this chapter by outlining two elements for consideration. 1) Qoheleth is, like a candleflame in mist, "there", in and through his narration. Readers reflect this experience of "brushing with" Qoheleth the person in their responses to and renditions of his story. I answered the "why" of this fact by suggesting that his narrative demonstrates a concern for character formation and

⁸⁹ *Metaphors of Self*, p. 43.

reflection on experience through autobiography, cohesion, the splitting of image and so on, through all of which Qoheleth leaves an indelible impression on readers. 2) The deconstructed notion of self heralds the death of the author and of the subject. The self is dead because we cannot find it. There is no referential link available that enables interaction with Another—with a person. The most important implication from this is that since the self can only be a product of language (and not vice-versa) self-existence is made difficult to affirm, establish or communicate.

These two elements are separated by the fact that the first is a reading experience while the second is a broad theory that, while encompassing reading, attempts to account for human communication in general. They are, however, able to be linked by three points. 1) The second element is discussed and formulated through writing and reading, and at any rate I have discussed the theory as it relates to narrative questions. 2) Both elements are credal. The first is founded on a reading hunch and yet can be critically discussed while the second asks us to believe that, contrary to our expectations, we do not exist outside of the enunciations that define us. 3) The first element is made "conversable" with the second in that Qoheleth's claims about his own self, as we have seen, amount to claims about the subject and the self in general. His treatment of the *subject* forces us to look hard at it— and "What you look hard at", said Gerard M. Hopkins, "seems to look hard at you."⁹⁰

To clarify the matter, in Qoheleth's concern for the formation of his own self is implied a wider view of the self. That is, the language that demonstrates a concern for his self acts metaphorically as a way to understand the concept of self as a whole—it is a mirror text. Qoheleth's narrated experience is a way of observing the development of the self over the expanse of time. As autobiography

⁹⁰ Cited in Olney, *Metaphors of Self*, p. 33.

it becomes a way for readers to examine the arenas in which the formation of the self might take place. We look hard at Qoheleth's self (he gives us no choice) and our gaze is returned, with the frightening prospect that the quality of our own selves will be reflected (to be *הבלי*?).

Qoheleth's view shares an interesting trait with the deconstructive. Qoheleth acknowledges that he cannot discover the reasons why things happen the way they do and in this he is skeptical of ideologies that he has received.⁹¹ In fact, just as the deconstructive competes with the Cartesian, Qoheleth's way of accounting for experience, as has been widely commented on, competes within its own canon by overturning received ideas. But the similarity ends here.

Qoheleth tests a way of accounting for his experience—one that is not unlike the deconstructive position—and is wholly dissatisfied by it. As the reader follows Qoheleth on his self-journeying (and this decidedly more intensely than in any other biblical book) the question of fate is a constant sub-text. What will be the end result of testing wisdom *with* his heart? How will Qoheleth's self (part Qoheleth, part Solomon, part disillusioned, part full of life) fare in the face of the absurd world? For Qoheleth attempted first to define himself in terms of wealth and reputation, and it failed miserably. In this respect it was the media-based image of self (an image connected as we have seen to the death of self) that Qoheleth tried and tested. He did attempt to define his own identity in reference to a public persona—based on material wealth and so on—and this failed him. That failure was itself absurd. For Qoheleth, the self was in need of a more substantial base for definition than the experience of extreme folly and mirth could offer. In the end result, the self must be further defined by an honest confrontation with the absurd. There are also, beyond the test of wisdom (which was really a test of his own self), some germane observations: relationships do fail (many are based

⁹¹ Further, see my discussion of his ideological differences with the frame narrator in Chapter 5.

on envy, 4.4); the attempt to understand God fails (3.11; *passim*); and Qoheleth asks repeatedly of human striving and of toiling for good things, For what purpose—what advantage—is it? Qoheleth's is the failure of living, for not only is it better never to have been born (cf. esp. 4.1-3 and ch. 6) but the day of death is better than the day of birth (7.1). To put it another way, the failure of living is the failure of the self to achieve definition satisfactorily—otherwise life is not absurd but merely meaningless.

Ultimately, and most importantly, Qoheleth's narrating stance radically sets apart his idea of the self from the nihilism of the deconstructed self in its assertion of what it means to be human. Although the category of failures dominates his observations, it is precisely because they are in the form of observations that they cannot be said to emerge from a soulless self. That "brooding consciousness" is simply irresistible. To my mind it is this book's crowning achievement. It is no disembodied or immaterial construct of the person that can taste the bitterness of life in such a pungent fashion as Qoheleth's. In Qoheleth's acknowledgment of the failure of living he affirms the reality of the experience of those who live. By saying that the stillborn is better off than the living he affirms that it is because there is a defining faculty in the individual that that person, while living, is prevented from being consigned to the designation, "cipher of words". By thinking, by reflecting on events, by centring the place of experience and by feeling the weight of absurdity so deeply he acknowledges that the self is not simply a mental peg on which to hang his ideas and observations. The self is at the centre. The movement of expression is from Qoheleth's mind/heart, soul and spirit (all of which relate to *Another* and/or affirm the authenticity of the self⁹²) to speech. In fact, Qoheleth exhibits the primacy of

⁹² The **לב** is the place of **שמרה** where God answers and where the act of feeling life is not feared but is affirmed. Although not linked directly to God, the **נפש** establishes the primacy of existence by rejecting death as an alternative to vexatious existence. The **רוח** returns to God who made it and the origin of the self and of its speech and the

existence (see Excursus 2)—and it is an existence not of words and the constructs of speech but of his self outside of the words that enunciate its presence, for those words are regardless **הבל** in the end and ultimately fail to express life's brightest and darkest experiences. God answers humanity not with words in the wind, but with joy in the heart, in the innermost and secret places.

The crisis in which the self has lost its privileged place, and in which we can find no more "causal efficacy for the self", is alien to Qoheleth's world. In Qoheleth's world the causes, if absurd, for the failure of the self are brutally clear. The world and the self's relationship to it are not as they should be. This places every individual in Qoheleth's world (everything and everyone under the sun) under the vexatious curse of futile toil and circular existence. There is redemption (and I will discuss that more extensively in the next chapter), but the point here is that the self cannot escape its very real existence.

(intellectual) comprehension of its experience is thereby asserted.

Excursus 2

QOHELETH AND THE EXISTENTIAL LEGACY OF THE HOLOCAUST¹

He who has a "why" to live for can bear almost any "how".

—Victor Frankl, Holocaust survivor

There is no why.

—Simeon Levi, Holocaust survivor²

This excursus is a comparative study, and I feel the need to make two things clear about it from the start. First, Qoheleth's subject matter is, in one sense, in no way comparable to the Holocaust.³ The Holocaust is a unique event in human history, and I do not presume to belittle the uncommon suffering of its victims by presuming an *experiential* likeness between their observations and those of Qoheleth (either diachronically or by regarding Qoheleth strictly as a narrative character). My interest lies in the themes that have emerged from reflections on the Holocaust—from its survivors and its commentators—and which bear likeness to some of Qoheleth's themes.⁴ Second, I do not regard the Holocaust as merely

¹ This excursus is soon to appear in a slightly expanded form as an article in *The Heythrop Journal*.

² Both quotes cited by Leon Stein, "The Holocaust and the Legacy of Existentialism", in *RTF*, II, pp. 1943-55 (pp. 1951, 1945, respectively). Frankl's quote is directly from Nietzsche and it, along with another Nietzschean quote ("What does not kill me makes me stronger"), formed the starting point of his controversial psychological theories.

³ Or "Shoah", as it is often called. Shoah (שואה) is the modern Hebrew word for the Nazi Holocaust, meaning "catastrophe" or "devastation".

⁴ The distinction between focus on reflections as against historical analyses is, as S.M. Bokolsky has shown, an important one. In his essay, "The Problem of Survivor Discourse: Toward a Poetics of Survivor Testimonies" (in *RTF*, I, pp. 1082-1092), Bokolsky discusses cases where the testimony of Holocaust survivors differs from academic historical accounts and the problems which such confliction raises. "[Students] of the Holocaust", says Bokolsky, "do not listen to survivors to learn about historical facts" (p. 1087). The same point can be emphasized concerning my approach to this study. The truth I am after is that of the memory of experience, or even the experience of memory.

"an example" of the existential themes under review (whereas Qoheleth's thought is merely "an example"). Again, its uniqueness must be remembered. Why, then, am I making the thematic comparison at all? My reasons are twofold.

First, comparisons at any level have the potential to shed interpretive light. Because of my lack of expertise in Holocaust studies and philosophy, I intend to shed light only on the themes of Qoheleth—any illumination beyond this is hoped for, but incidental. The second and more important reason is my own interest, which was initially sparked by a visit to the Yad-va-Shem⁵ Holocaust museum in Jerusalem. From my own subsequent reading and viewing of films on the subject (such as Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* [1985],⁶ and Agnieszka Holland's *Europa, Europa* [1991]), I have been struck by the recurrent themes of absurdity, fate and death, and the thematic resemblance of them to Qoheleth's narrative. The step towards this excursus was, therefore, a natural one.⁷ While some have drawn significant parallels between, for example, the Holocaust and Job,⁸ Ecclesiastes and existentialism (see below, n. 33), and existentialism and the

⁵ יָד וְשֵׁם, lit. "hand and name"—symbols of the importance of remembering. The phrase originates from Isa. 56.5: "I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name [יָד וְשֵׁם] better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name [שֵׁם עוֹלָם] which shall not be cut off" (RSV).

⁶ Stein said of *Shoah* in 1989 that it was arguably "the greatest film of the Holocaust yet made" ("Legacy of Existentialism", p. 1953).

⁷ It would be unfair of me not to admit, I think, another reason for my interest. With many others my attention has recently turned to the 50-year commemorations of VE day, and of the liberation of Belsen and other camps. A revival of general public interest seems to have accompanied these as well. I refer to a host of television specials and of course, Steven Spielberg's film, *Schindler's List* (1994).

⁸ See Stein, "Legacy of Existentialism", p. 1949. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, in his semi-autobiographical novel *Night*, describes the talk that surrounded him at night in the barracks of Auschwitz: "Some talked of God, of his mysterious ways, of the sins of the Jewish people, and of their future deliverance. But I had ceased to pray. How I sympathised with Job! I did not deny God's existence, but I doubted his absolute justice" (London: Robson Books, 1987 [1960], p. 53). It is worth noting here that I am in agreement with the sympathy underlying Frank Crüsemann's comment, "Koheleth brings Job to its logical conclusion" ("The Unchangeable World", p. 61).

Holocaust,⁹ I have not come across any study that links the three I am attempting to link.¹⁰ I will return to what precisely forms the links below.

1. *Existentialist Themes: Material for a Response*

Existentialism for a long while dominated arenas of continental philosophical thought and has had a far-reaching influence on humanities areas such as philosophy, theology and drama. Defining existentialism is made a complex task by the fact that so many diverse thinkers have claimed the nomen as their own. While Søren Kierkegaard is widely regarded as the "founder" of modern existentialism, others point to Augustine, even Socrates. Even the mainly post-World War II writers who are regarded as clearly existential (e.g. Sartre, Camus, Heidegger) differ amongst themselves on such central notions as the existence of God and the nature of human responsibility. Perhaps the best approach is to discuss existentialism in terms of its defining themes. Key themes I will focus on are the role of extreme circumstances, (confrontation with) absurdity and (particularly in relation to the existential legacy of the Holocaust) the individual struggle with or against death and fate.

As A. MacIntyre suggests, "stress on the extreme and the exceptional experience is common to all existentialism".¹¹ One prime example of this comes from the Preface (*Exordium*) of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, in which four

⁹ I will be drawing heavily (as I already have for the title of this excursus) from Leon Stein's engaging and perceptive essay entitled, "The Holocaust and the Legacy of Existentialism". There he details the host of existential reactions that the Holocaust engendered—from its survivors (Victor Frankl, Filip Müller and others) to its reactionaries (Richard Rubenstein, Reinhold Niebuhr, Claude Lanzmann and others).

¹⁰ It is worth noting, however, that in his photo-essay depicting each verse of Ecclesiastes, R. Short offers a photo of an Auschwitz survivor displaying the tattooed numbers on his forearm to (I presume) depict an irony in the meaning of 3.18, "I said in my heart concerning human beings, 'God is purging them to show them that they themselves are animals'" (*A Time to Be Born—A Time to Die* [New York: Harper & Row, 1973], *ad loc.*).

¹¹ "Existentialism", in P. Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, III (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 149.

versions of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (the Akedah) are imaginatively devised and contemplated. In each one the emphasis is laid on a different aspect of that most extreme of experiences. In version III Abraham is racked with guilt by the notion that his willingness to sacrifice the best that God had given him was the most terrible sin he could imagine. In version IV it is Isaac who returns having "lost the faith", and who refuses to speak of the event for the remainder of his life.¹² In each it is the ramifications of the extremity of the ordeal that is drawn out and reflected upon.¹³ In the absurdist dramas of the 1950s and 60s (of Beckett and Camus in particular), the heroes find themselves in drastic and at times unrealistic situations, and it is the flair and drama employed that has brought criticism on existentialism for being too out of touch and not concerned with the "ordinary".¹⁴ As we shall see, however, its obsession with the extreme has made existentialism amenable to reflection on the Holocaust.

For the existentialist, extreme circumstances breed the realization of the absurd. The extremity itself is defined by that frustration of hope or desire in a circumstance that suggests its opposite. In other words, it is the divorce between

¹² Written under the pseudonym, Johannes de Silentio (*Fear and Trembling/Repetition* [ed. and trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983 (1843)], pp. 13-14).

¹³ Isabel Wollaston has recently argued that the Akedah has functioned historically as an archetype for the traditional Jewish response to catastrophe. Simply put, in her essay, "'Traditions of Remembrance': Post-Holocaust Interpretations of Genesis 22" (in J. Davies, G. Harvey and W.G.E. Watson [eds.], *Words Remembered, Texts Renewed* [JSOTSup, 195; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995], pp. 41-51), Wollaston draws some significant parallels between Holocaust reflections and the Akedah, showing how modern Jewish appropriations of the biblical story operate with two basic strategies: 1) the Holocaust is a "sacred parody" of the Akedah, and 2) the Holocaust is a "literal recall" of the story, a tale of "monumental faithfulness". It is interesting to note that the word "Holocaust" finds its roots in the Akedah. Isaac is offered as a *δλοκαρπωσιν* (Heb. אֶלֶף), from which comes the derivative *δλοκαυστον*—and the now frightening definition, a sacrifice wholly consumed by fire (my thanks to Leon Stein for pointing out the derivation to me in personal correspondence).

¹⁴ MacIntyre makes the following helpful statement in this regard: "It would be...illuminating to see existentialism as the fusion of a certain kind of dramatization of social experience with the desire to resolve certain unsolved philosophical problems" ("Existentialism", p. 153).

deed and consequence (see Excursus 1) that defines the extreme. When one experiences the failure of, for example, a set of rules in a supposedly closed and secure social system, that circumstance is extreme by virtue of one's consciousness of the illogical relationships within it. Hence the absurd drama does not consist merely of the world and its systems, which are absurd in themselves, but also of humanity's participation, made up of the confrontation between the "wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart"¹⁵ and the illogicity of the world; such a concatenation *creates* the absurd. The absurd itself is consciousness of that confrontation and defines, to a large degree, modern existentialism.

The struggle with or against death and fate is the broadest of the existentialist themes I will touch on. These two certainties loom above the horizon of the absurdist drama and must either be rallied against or bravely accepted. Although it is a theme that pulsates through literature—from Hamlet's soliloquy to Hemingway's Frederic and Catherine in *A Farewell to Arms*—for the existentialist it is an all-encompassing issue. For example, in Samuel Beckett's most celebrated play, *Waiting for Godot*, the whole process of waiting takes on a quality of Sheol-like proportions. Two "bums" named Estragon and Vladimir, the "protagonists" around whom the play revolves, partake in idle but clever banter throughout the first act (being occasionally interrupted by a curious wanderer named "Pozzo"), and return to do the same in the second. The dialogue is infused with nebulous references to death and fate. Principally, neither of our heroes can leave as they are waiting for Godot, and although they are unsure why they continue, they do so, in circular frustration. In the second act Vladimir commences, in the same place as the first act concluded, with a song:

A dog came in the kitchen

¹⁵ A. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (trans. J. O'Brien; New York: Vintage Books, 1991 [1942]), p. 21.

And stole a crust of bread
 Then cook up with a ladle
 And beat him till he was dead.

Then all the dogs came running
 And dug the dog a tomb—
 And wrote upon the tombstone
 For the eyes of dogs to come:

A dog came in the kitchen...¹⁶

Of course, the resolution to the dilemma of Vladimir's song differs depending on whom one reads, but the dilemma itself remains essentially the same: life in its futility is circular, and attempting to escape it, and death within it, is futile.

2. *The Existential Drama Made Real*

As never before, the Holocaust brought each of these themes into sharp and painful relief. As Stein states the case, "Existentialism in all its forms—from Friedrich Nietzsche to Jean Amery—became a pervasive, unifying theme in the reaction of Western culture to the Holocaust. Existential thinkers and writers struggled to create meaningful responses to an overwhelming event that had shattered traditional frameworks of meaning."¹⁷ This is because the Holocaust *embodied* existential themes in such a frighteningly real way that the critique of the "out of touch" drama of the existentialist could not be levied. Nietzschean myth had become flesh. Sartre's dictum, "existence precedes essence", became a response to the inhuman notion that (as in the manner that Nazis regarded Jews, Slavs and Gypsies) people were abstract objects whose essence was tragically pre-judged.¹⁸ Challenges to the way in which Western culture was able to divorce itself from the responsibility of its view of the human subject, particularly early on in the War, had to be made.

¹⁶ New York: Grove Press, 1954, pp. 37-38.

¹⁷ "Legacy of Existentialism", p. 1943.

¹⁸ Stein, "Legacy of Existentialism", p. 1943.

The theme of extreme situations is perhaps the most obvious that emerges from the Holocaust ordeal. The very idea of Holocaust, the extermination of a people based on who they are and not what they had done (that is, not fitting the classical notion of "criminal") can only be couched in extremist terms. It required the employment of literally thought-less categories of the person, and made, for the Jewish people, existence itself a crime. And then there are the inconceivable facts. For example, of the 400,000 victims of the Polish concentration camp, Chelmo (German = Kulnhof), 2 survived.¹⁹ Among the remains of the camp at Belsen today stand memorials which mark the deaths on those sites of, for example, 800, 1000 and even 5000 people. It is not possible to reflect upon the Holocaust without thinking in the most extreme of terms.

Of course, such facts do not really need rehearsing, but in the circumstances which they reflect, the existential dilemma was made real for every Jew. There is the story, for example, of Solomon Perel, who at the age of 13 changed his identity to escape from the camps. He "served" in the Hitler Youth and daily faced his crisis of identity alone, until he no longer knew who he was.²⁰ Even those who accepted their identity had to face the fact that their oppressors did not regard them as human. In the camps, those who used the word "body" or "victim" to describe the Jewish dead were beaten. Instead, they were forced to use the Nazi word of choice, *Figuren*.²¹ The incomparable suffering led many to feel as though their very selves had been hollowed out. In his novel, *Night*, Elie Wiesel describes such an experience. He reflects poignantly on his feelings after witnessing the burning of children not much younger than himself:

It was no longer possible to grasp anything. The instincts of self-preservation, of self-defense, of pride, had all deserted us...the child I

¹⁹ Their names are Mikhaël Podchlebnik and Simon Srebnik and they are featured in Claude Lanzmann's film, *Shoah*.

²⁰ As told in the film, *Europa, Europa*, based on Perel's autobiography.

²¹ As described by R. Glazar in Lanzmann's *Shoah*.

was had been consumed in the flames. There remained only a shape that looked like me.²²

The extremities of the experience of the Holocaust were a theft of hope, and in existential terms, a theft of the freedom to determine and preserve the self.

In the concentration camps, those who were intellectually sensitive found themselves tortured by the extremity of their experience and the unanswerable questions that it raised.²³ A recurrent theme of Holocaust literature and film is the inability to comprehend the inhumanity, and the pain involved in trying. Sensitive victims could say with Qoheleth, "With much wisdom (perception, awareness) comes much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase pain" (1.18). The most tortuous of those unanswerable questions was surely "Why?", and attempting to answer it amounted to the fullest confrontation with the absurd.

First, there are the bitter ironies which, especially in retrospect, reflect the absurd. Before the war, eighty percent of the Polish town of Oświęcim (which "became" Auschwitz) were Jewish. As is well known, Jews were often among the social elite of Germany—doctors, lawyers, scientists—and had won a high percentage of Germany's pre-war Nobel prizes. At the conclusion of part I of *Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann illustrates the absurdity of the mechanical and dehumanizing policies of the Nazis by reading a letter issued from the headquarters of the Reich at the height of the War. The letter specifies, in the most calculating terms and without a hint of irony, the changes needed for "gas vans" used to kill Jews. For example, since a lightbulb inside the vans was noted to usually have a calming effect, the letter recommended its use only at the beginning and end of journeys, so as to make loading and unloading easier.

²² *Night*, p. 46. He later reflects that he detested the feeling of disjunction between body and self which the intense physical suffering caused (pp. 91-92).

²³ See Stein, "Legacy of Existentialism", p. 1953.

Images of an industrial city flash on the screen, highlighting the victory of technology over the human. The absurd thus becomes frighteningly clear.

And there are ironies of experience. Polish citizens of Treblinka witnessed some of the wealthier Jews from France and Holland arriving by train to the concentration camp in first-class compartments, under the impression that they were arriving to work in new jobs. Women on such trains were often seen applying cosmetics in anticipation of impressing their new "employers".²⁴ A deadlier and truly absurd irony was observed by Elie Wiesel. His first confrontation with real suffering at Auschwitz led him to question his existence. When he realised that the world had remained silent while he witnessed appalling sights, he asked himself if it were really possible, and had to pinch himself to prove he was alive.²⁵ The silence of the world was not what he had expected. His basic trust in God (he was a devout student of the Talmud) and humanity had led him to expect an outcry. Its absence was absurd.

The examples are, of course, endless. But what was the intellectual response? Leon Stein masterfully shows how Camus and others responded to the Holocaust through writing novels such as *The Painted Bird* (Kosinski, 1965) and treatises such as *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Camus, 1942).²⁶ For Camus, the myth captured well the essence of the absurd. Sisyphus's apparent resignation to futile labour was a model for bravery in the face of the absurd. "Yet the Holocaust showed", says Stein, "that Camus's 'myth of Sisyphus' was real and deadly: 'In Auschwitz men and women carried gigantic rocks back and forth to no

²⁴ From Lanzmann's *Shoah*. Also in *Shoah*, and in a similar vein, historian Raul Hilberg relates stories of how the Nazis often stole the property of Jews in order to pay the travel costs they incurred for sending the same Jews to the death camps. Many of the Jews in effect paid for, as Lanzmann puts it, "the privilege of being gassed".

²⁵ *Night*, p. 41.

²⁶ Although likely not a direct response to the Holocaust, this work is proffered by Stein as an implied critique.

purpose.'²⁷

It was inevitable that the Holocaust experience caused many to reflect on their own fate, particularly the prospect of death. Because of the essential sameness of everyone's prospects, the question of fate transcended the individual and was made communal. Distinctions among people became blurred. As deportation began in his ghetto, Elie Wiesel recognized such an awareness within the community: "There were no longer any questions of wealth, of social distinction, and importance, only people all condemned to the same fate—still unknown."²⁸ Facing the unknown meant a denial of choice, and the denial of choice, both the individual's and the community's, heightened the struggle with fate. This was something which, as Thomas Keneally contends, Oskar Schindler came to realize. Keneally relates how Schindler purchased a burial place in a local churchyard for some Jews who were found dead in an abandoned rail car. When the parish priest told him that he could only offer plots reserved for suicides, Schindler reportedly answered that "these weren't suicides. These were the victims of a great murder."²⁹ For the Jews there was no liberty of choice.³⁰

²⁷ "Legacy of Existentialism", p. 1948. Stein is citing T. Des Pres, from his *The Survivor*.

²⁸ *Night*, p. 30.

²⁹ *Schindler's List* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1994 [orig. *Schindler's Ark*, 1982]), p. 387. Keneally relates elsewhere how witnessing the execution of the ghetto police ("the most faithful...as well as the most grudging") had convinced Schindler that the ability to "win over" life even through scheming or "obedience" had been completely obliterated (pp. 275-76).

³⁰ Of course, one must be wary of simplifying the notion of choice, of ascribing to Jews what Simone de Beauvoir has called an "atavism of resignation" or the nonsense that is "the mystery of the Jewish soul". Indeed, her comments are well worth noting here: Jews who were capable of an uprising at the Treblinka camp showed that "their helplessness in the face of their executioners was not the expression of some secret blemish...[but] was due to the circumstances" (in the Preface to Jean-François Steiner's *Treblinka* [London: Weidfeld and Nicolson, 1967 (1966)], pp. x, xiii). Further, Victor Frankl once wrote that there remained to the prisoner a "freedom to bear oneself 'This way, or that way', and there was a 'this or that'" (as cited in J. Hassan, "The Survivor as Living Witness", in *RTF*, I, pp. 1093-1104 [1095], from Frankl's *Group Therapeutic Experiences in Concentration Camps*). My point here, then, is not unlike that of de Beauvoir's: stolen (Jewish) choice was the fallen victim of absurd circumstance.

The awareness of fate laid so heavy on some that there was tremendous guilt for those who managed to escape. Inge Deutschkron, a Jew who lived in hiding in Berlin all through the War, felt that by surviving she had wrongly escaped fate itself.³¹ Richard Glazar, a Treblinka survivor, states the feelings of foreboding which he related to a friend while in the camp:

We're shipwrecked, but still alive,
and we can do so little
but watch out for every wave, ride it,
and brace ourselves for the next wave.
Ride the waves at all costs, nothing more. (from *Shoah*)

The metaphor seems sadly appropriate. Waves are predictable and continual, each one feeding the other in a relentless circle. There is a reminiscence of Qoheleth here: "All streams flow to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again" (Eccl. 1.7). Stein describes an instance of poetic consent to fate from Lanzmann's *Shoah*. It is the final scene in which

a resistance fighter returns to the Warsaw ghetto and finds himself utterly alone: "I said to myself, 'I'm the last Jew. I'll wait for morning and for the Germans'"...Here was pure *amor fati*, a love of fate, overwhelming in its serenity. Nietzsche would have envied him.³²

While not all may agree with Stein's reference to Nietzsche, the bold acceptance of fate is lucidly present and shows again existentialism's amenability to reflection on the Holocaust.

3. *The Disillusioned Rationalist and the Holocaust*

Not a little attention has been given to the idea that Qoheleth is a precursor of

³¹ As related in *Shoah*. J. Hassan comments that feelings of guilt were due partly to the sense of a loss of shared experience with other survivors, which in turn brought on feelings of isolation from the wider community of Jewish Holocaust survivors ("The Survivor as Living Witness", p. 1101).

³² "Legacy of Existentialism", p. 1953.

sorts to existentialism.³³ This is mainly because Qoheleth shares some distinctive qualities with the existentialists. Indeed, it seems it would not be untrue to fix on Qoheleth A. MacIntyre's designation of the existentialist, "disappointed rationalist".³⁴ Besides what I have already touched on above,³⁵ allow me to further outline some of those qualities.

In terms of the above themes, Qoheleth is indeed an extremist. Like the dramatists, he has a flair for expressing the absurd in dramatically extreme terms. For example, nothing could be more absurd for a Hebrew sage than to play, as Qoheleth did, with the persona of Solomon. Under Qoheleth's auspices, Solomon's guise took on mythic proportions and his failure to succeed in Solomon's world (that is, the reliable world of retribution, wisdom and folly—for who is a fool and who is a sage in Qoheleth's eyes?) is a sublime piece of absurdist drama. The Solomonic scenario is Qoheleth's most potent rejection of the easy notion of retribution. The rejection was ultimately rooted, as Kenneth James states, in Qoheleth's realist principles: "Qoheleth...recognizes the vanity of accepting the Hebrew theory of retribution, if by so doing the person becomes blind to the realities of pain and pointlessness which often form a part of a good person's life."³⁶ Qoheleth's world is polarized within two extremes: that of the King of wisdom, and that of the embittered sage who no longer knows even what

³³ So Kenneth W. James, "Ecclesiastes: Precursor of Existentialists", *Bto* 22 (1984), pp. 85-90; Peter, "In Defence of Existence"; Fox, *Qohelet*, esp. §0.2. Other writers have picked up on significant existential themes. The core thesis of Frank Crüsemann's article, "The Unchangeable World", for example, is the breakdown in Qoheleth's thought of the relationship between deed and consequence (further, see below). Brown ("Character Reconstructed: Ecclesiastes"), following Fox's lead, compares at length Qoheleth's thinking to Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus*. Also, F.W. Nichols compares Ecclesiastes to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* ("Samuel Beckett and Ecclesiastes: On the Borders of Belief", *Enc* 45 [1984], pp. 11-22). Nichols also mentions Vladimir's "A dog came in the kitchen" song in relation to Qoheleth.

³⁴ "Existentialism", p. 147.

³⁵ That is, that **הבלי** is best translated "absurd"; see the above examples and discussion in Excursus 1.

³⁶ "Ecclesiastes: Precursor of Existentialists", p. 86.

wisdom or existence is.

Furthermore, Qoheleth presents himself to us as an observer of extreme situations. A good example of this is 4.1-3:

And again I observed all of the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed—but there was no comforter for them. Yet from the hand of their oppressors there was power—but there was no comforter for them. And I considered the dead who had already died [better off] than the living who still live. But better than both of them is the one who has not yet been—who has not seen the evil activity that has been done under the sun.

Qoheleth here reflects the experience of the sensitive sufferer in the camps. Although his later narrative stance will override his pessimism, his sensitivity brings him to the hopeless conclusion that non-existence is to be preferred to this kind of existence (cf. 6.3). For the oppressed whom he observes, oppression is the theft of hope, of a reason to live, even exist—a conclusion that echoes much of Holocaust reflection.

As a result of his seemingly painful experience, Qoheleth advocated an avoidance of the extreme:

I observed everything in the days of my absurdity: There is a righteous man perishing in his righteousness and there is a wicked man whose life is prolonged by his wickedness. Do not be greatly righteous, nor become exceedingly wise. Why be dumbfounded? Do not be greatly wicked and do not be a fool. Why should you die in a time not your own? Better that you take hold of the one and from the other not withdraw your hand—yet the one who fears God escapes both of them. (7.15-18; cf. 1.8)

Qoheleth offers the examples of the end of both the righteous and the wicked as a generalization, a metaphor for "everything" he has observed in his absurd existence, and he refuses to be dumbfounded by them. One does not, after all, know what will happen. Excess in the realms of righteousness and wisdom can result in stupefaction (כַּוָּז, "to be shocked, appalled"—cf. Job 21.5). Excess in the realms of wickedness and folly may end in an unexpected death. Yet Qoheleth has witnessed those who escape the rules: the righteous who die by

their righteousness (אֲבָר בְּצִדְקוֹ) and the wicked who live long by their corruption (מֵאֲרִיךְ בְּרַעְתּוֹ). In his honest appraisal he can only hope to avoid the pain of perception. The thematic parallels to approaches to thinking about the Holocaust (there are no experiential parallels—Qoheleth is only observing) are doubtless striking.

The absurd is an organizing principle of Qoheleth's thought, a standard of observation and thinking about the world, and his honest confrontations with it are easily recognizable as thematic links to the absurd themes of the Holocaust. Qoheleth observed the world and yet he did not attempt to reconcile its phenomena within a cohesive system of thought.³⁷ He is here racked with despair from his observations (2.17-18; 4.1-2; *passim*), there generous in his joy from the same (5.18; 8.15; *passim*); here bleak (1.2, 13; *passim*), there sanguine (7.19; 9.7-8; *passim*). Elsewhere the reader catches a glimpse of a more balanced vision of life (3.1-8; 8.6; 9.1-3a). There is a host of plain contradictions in the book's internal logic as well.³⁸ Indeed, Qoheleth was, as Fox has pointed out,³⁹ much like Camus's hero of the absurd who refuses to surrender to the explanations of institutions (divine or otherwise), or of the everyday, and chooses to observe the contradictory phenomena of life without reserve.⁴⁰ Hence the root of his contradiction. Qoheleth's insistence on honest confrontation lies behind his

³⁷ It is worth noting that Qoheleth was not a lone voice in the Hebrew Bible in his observation of the absurd. In Lamentations, for example, is the continual recognition that there appears to be little reason for the suffering of Israel. The theme culminates in the final prayer that boldly finishes in an insecure tone, with the following question: "Why have you forgotten us completely? Why have you forsaken us these many days? Restore us to yourself, O LORD...renew our days of old—unless you have utterly rejected us, and are angry with us beyond measure" (5.20-22; NRSV—cf. 1.11-2.1; esp. 1.17, 21).

³⁸ For example, Qoheleth asserts both that all toil is הַבֵּל and yields nothing (2.11, 18; 6.7), but also that enjoyment of one's toil is the greatest possible occupation—a gift from God (2.24; 4.9; 5.19-20; 8.15).

³⁹ In the Introduction of *Qoheleth*, esp. pp. 13-16.

⁴⁰ Compare Camus's comments: "The leap in all its forms, rushing into the divine or eternal, surrendering to the illusions of the everyday or of the idea—all these screens hide the absurd. But there are civil servants without screens, and they are the ones of whom I mean to speak" (*Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 91).

blunt and often contradictory observations on everyday existence and, like an ancient Elie Wiesel, he recognized that such unfettered observations could prove a vexation in themselves (7.16-17). Qoheleth experienced life as Camus's hero—without screens.⁴¹

One of Qoheleth's prominent themes relates directly to the content of Holocaust reflection: the failure of words to express the absurd. Note the following comments compiled from interviews with Holocaust survivors by S.M. Bokolsky:

If the oceans were ink and the sky was paper, there would not be enough ink or paper to tell of one hour in Auschwitz.

You cannot say in an hour, or a day or a week what it was like in those years. It is not possible to tell you.

There is not enough tape, not enough paper, not enough time and not enough words to make you understand what we went through.

I cannot tell you—I cannot. There are no words to tell you.⁴²

Language fails to express the enormity and inherent absurdity of the event—of each experience of it. For Qoheleth as well, the failure of language is another contribution to the absurdity of his own experience:

All words are wearisome—
 One cannot express [it].
 An eye is not satisfied with seeing,
 and an ear is not filled from hearing. (1.8)

For with many dreams and absurdities [there are] many words—

⁴¹ Cf. esp. 2.15. Also, see 1.18; 7.3; 11.10. So Fox on this section: "Qohelet is teaching the avoidance of an extreme of wisdom (such as he himself acquired) because (we may deduce from the context) it makes one aware of inequities such as those described in 7:15, and this awareness will leave one shocked" (*Qohelet*, p. 234). In a more lyrical vein, Gordis described the sensitive aspect of Qoheleth's observations thus: "This cry of a sensitive spirit wounded by man's cruelty and ignorance, this distilled essence of an honest and courageous mind, striving to penetrate the secret of the universe, yet unwilling to soar on the wings of faith beyond the limits of the knowable, remains one of man's noblest offerings on the altar of truth" (*Koheleth*, p. 122).

⁴² "The Problem of Survivor Discourse", p. 1083.

But fear God. (5.7)

Since there are many words that increase absurdity, what profit is there for humanity? (6.11)

Who is like the sage? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? (8.1)

Actually, not even the sage knows (8.17). Since the word for "thing" (דָּבָר) at 8.1 can also mean "word" or "act" (as in "The *acts* of King X"), the judgment is wide-sweeping. The failure comes in attempting to make sense of what one observes: the *object* of one's perception and understanding. It is a general failure that Qoheleth links to God's concealment of the comprehension of his works (3.11-14; 11.5 and elsewhere). It is a refrain found in Holocaust reflection: There is no why, there is no expression and there is no understanding.

Qoheleth's fixation with death has long been recognized as an important theme,⁴³ one intrinsically linked to the fate of humanity. Qoheleth's attitude to death in itself was, however, not despairing. Qoheleth rejects death (not to be confused with Ecclesiastesan non-existence) as an alternative even to the vexation of existence (as in, for example, 6.7-9). Indeed, not "death in itself", says Frank Crüsemann, "but only an early and untimely death was regarded as reason for despair; in itself death made life shine more brightly".⁴⁴ This is spelled out clearly and poetically in 9.11-12 (cf. 9.1-3; 10.8-11):

And again I observed under the sun:
 The race is not to the swift,
 nor the battle to the mighty.
 Neither yet is there bread to the wise,
 nor yet riches to those who understand,
 nor yet favour to the knowledgable.
 For a time of calamity will befall all of them.
 Indeed, humanity does not know their time.
 Like fish that are caught in an evil net
 and birds caught in the snare,

⁴³ See Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, p. lviii; *idem*, "Recent Research on Proverbs and Qoheleth", *CR:BS* 1 (1993), pp. 133-34.

⁴⁴ "The Unchangeable World", p. 67.

So will human beings be snared by an evil time,
when it falls upon them suddenly.

Like the operative principle of the absurd (the race is not necessarily to the swift), the time and quality of death remains obscured to our understanding. There is no fear, only the acknowledgment that knowledge is thwarted (cf. 3.2, 19; 8.8). As Elie Wiesel recognized by more painful means, the future is frightfully unknown and the evil net may lie in wait, and choice is, as in Qoheleth's analogy of the hapless hunted animal, another victim of thievery.

Consciousness of human finitude and death is a theme which courses throughout Qoheleth's narrative. The following passage (8.6-9) can be taken as representative:

Indeed, for every matter there is a time and a procedure,
yet the misery of humanity prevails upon [humanity].
For they do not know what will be;
for who will tell them how it will be?
No one has authority over the wind to retain the wind
and no one has authority over the day of death.
And no one has discharge from war,
nor will evil deliver those who practice it.
All this I observed while giving my heart to all the activity that has been
done under the sun, at a time when one person has authority over another
to the other's harm.

The prospect of the unknown ("humanity"—Qoheleth included—"does not know what will be") is precisely what makes Qoheleth so aware of the fate which befalls everyone. Since he has realized that he is powerless in the face of death (that he has no authority over it, *וּאִין שְׁלֹטוֹן בְּיוֹם הַמּוֹת*, 8.8; cf. 9.5) he gives himself no choice but to be painfully cognizant. Yet what makes this aspect truly interesting is the final phrase of the passage (8.9b). Qoheleth alludes to a cause of his awareness: his implied social situation. This has all happened "at a time when one person has authority over another to the other's harm" (*עַתָּה אֲשֶׁר לֹא שְׁלֹטָה הָאָדָם בְּאָדָם לְרַע לוֹ*). Even as a fictive situation, the implication of the context is important. There seems to be no reason for the infliction of harm and

if we give Qoheleth the benefit of the doubt, he is powerless to stop it. Here is a consciousness of human impotence in the face of the unknown on a socio-political scale.

There are likely other qualities that Qoheleth shares with the existentialists,⁴⁵ and there certainly remain more links with Holocaust reflection to explore. Here are a few examples.

1. Both strains of reflection are set in contrast to an ideology of reduction and unthinking retribution (for Holocaust victims a frightfully real one, for Qoheleth a likely fictive one),⁴⁶ each "at a time" when the overturning (or virtual shattering) of traditional frameworks of meaning is occurring.

2. The *subject* (the experiencing self who makes decisions) is brought into sharp relief. In the case of Qoheleth it is always the formation of his own self that is in question—what will become of the sage who opts to search out everything under the sun?⁴⁷ In the case of the Holocaust, the theft of choice established the subject's centrality.

3. Qoheleth apparently rejected the nationalism of the Yahwists, and his observations reflect a community in exile. While there is no notion of

⁴⁵ For example, Kenneth James contends that Qoheleth shares with the existentialists "the commitment to existence as the primary condition for finding the meaning of life" ("Ecclesiastes: Precursor of Existentialists", p. 86).

⁴⁶ Of course, there has been no shortage of proposals for the historical milieu of Ecclesiastes, but we need not "know" it to discern the clashing of ideology implied in Qoheleth's notion of **הבבל** (the expected cosmology, which Qoheleth's experience opposes, can only exist as ideology—a presumably inherited one). It is also well demonstrated by his conflicting relationship with the frame narrator who seeks to restrict meaning while Qoheleth cannot contain it (God's works are unknowable, wisdom is a pursuit of wind). Furthermore, Qoheleth has "seen" a paradigm shift in power (5.7-9; 10.5-7) and inexplicable evils under the sun (4.1-3; 8.11-13), and such contributes to his sense of ideological unease in his narrative world.

⁴⁷ Beyond what I have already suggested above about Qoheleth's notion of the *subject* (Chapter 8), if G. Whitlock is correct, there may be some existential significance in the biblical meaning of **און**. Extrapolating from the Joshua texts, and in reference to existentialist theologian Paul Tillich, Whitlock suggests that people need **און** from God in order to muster the "courage to be", to exist—that is, to be human and not "merely a clod of earth" ("The Structure of Personality in Hebrew Psychology", p. 6).

nationalism, there is one of community. In his "two are better than one" sayings (4.9-12), for example, he endorses companionship in difficult circumstance.

Compare the following comment from Judith Hassan's study of the way in which Holocaust survivors coped: "In the concentration camp, individuals stood a far better chance of surviving if they were part of a pair or group."⁴⁸

4. One may note a possible derivation of the word שׂוֹאָה from biblical Hebrew. The noun shares the same root as שָׁוָא—a word which, like הַבֵּל, is used to qualify the futility of idols and of false or deceitful words. It is one of the few words which comes closest to the meaning of הַבֵּל.⁴⁹ The noun itself is found in the prophets and wisdom literature to mean a tempest or ruin, which in a bitter twist of irony for its modern use, constitutes divine wrath (e.g. Isa. 10.3; Psa. 35.8).

5. Important questions remain to be explored in terms of the place of God in the whole comparison. If for some Holocaust victims God was to be implicated, while for others God was to be trusted in the face of human evil (in an act of "monumental faithfulness"), how is Qoheleth's apparent acceptance of the absurd, in a world in which God is seen to participate, to be reconciled? Indeed, Qoheleth's virtual celebration of "the everyday", coupled with his bold joy in a deceitful world devoid of rationale, stands either as an insult or a resonating intertext to the memory of the Holocaust victim.

4. *Survival and Memory*

In a world which was once familiar, Holocaust victims were made to feel alienated. Camus offered a thoughtful rendering of the problem:

⁴⁸ "The Survivor as Living Witness", p. 1093. Hassan goes on to discuss the specific activities such as sharing food and the importance of "organizing" (pp. 1100-1101).

⁴⁹ Cf. Exod. 23.1; Ps. 24.4; Isa. 1.13; Jer. 2.30; 18.15. It is used *with* הַבֵּל at Ps. 31.7, where the psalmist describes those whom the LORD hates and who pay regard to vain idols (הַבֵּלִי-שׂוֹאָה).

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land...[and] there is a direct connection between this feeling and the longing for death.⁵⁰

For many that longing proved too strong, but the same longing drove some victims to grasp for reasons for living which understandably suggest desperation. For example, Keneally tells of a woman at her wits' end in Auschwitz who makes motions to throw herself against an electric fence. The reason her friend offers to stop her seems to us, as Keneally comments, "perversely sane": "If you do that, you'll never know what happened to you." Yet in this case it sufficed.⁵¹ How can human value be affirmed in such a situation? Maybe this particular woman sought, for a change, to conquer the unknown. She would have bitter-sweet victory over at least one absurd fate. She would choose to escape the hunter's trap.

Qoheleth's reason for living seems an odd twist to this woman's story. One must push ahead with life and live fully, in spite of the fact (if not for the very reason) that you do not know what lies ahead:

In the morning sow your seed
and in the evening do not let your hands be idle.
For you do not know whether this or that will be advantageous
or if both alike will be good.
Sweet is the light
and it is good for the eyes to see the sun.
Indeed, if one should live many years
let that person rejoice in all of them.
But let that person also remember the days of darkness,
for they will be many.
All that comes is absurd. (11.6-8)

Here is reason to live life as fully as possible. In a manner quite different to that

⁵⁰ *Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 6.

⁵¹ *Schindler's List*, pp. 348-49.

in Keneally's example, ignorance of the future is a motivation to continue living with all your capabilities, although many ominous days may lie in wait.⁵²

One way survival was managed in the camps was through the determination to remember and be remembered, so that the world would not forget the atrocity of the whole event. The determination was wide-spread, and one does not have to listen long to a Holocaust documentary, for example, to hear a reference to it. As Stein comments, "Along with many victims, Alexander Donat said that the drive to bear witness was a 'sacred mission that would give me the strength to endure everything'."⁵³

The importance of memory to Qoheleth can hardly be overstated. He frequently recognized the danger of losing the memory of past generations (and presumably the lessons thereby learned):

There is no remembrance of the sage or the fool forever; in the coming days everything will have already been forgotten. How the sage dies just like the fool! (2.16b)

This too I observed—[an example of] wisdom under the sun—and it seemed great to me: [There was] a small city with a few men in it, and a great king came to it and surrounded it, and built great siegeworks against it. And a poor wise man was found there who delivered the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered that poor man. (9.13-15)

Sometimes the recognition takes the form of a lament:

There is no remembrance of the people of old;
nor yet of the people to come—[those] who will be.
[There] will be no remembrance of [either of] them,
[along] with those who will be after. (1.11)

...the living know that they will die, but the dead do not know anything.
And there is no longer a recompense for them since the memory of them

⁵² Perhaps more akin to her story is Qoheleth's seemingly desperate sentiment, "Better a name than good oil [פִּיר שֵׁם מִשֶּׁמֶן טוֹב] and the day of death than the day of one's birth" (7.1; cf. 9.4). Death offered escape from the absurd world (a return to the eternal home—12.5; cf. 12.7) and the establishment of remembrance through a name. Both were better than the day of birth since, as Whybray points out, at birth the future is still "entirely unknown" (*Ecclesiastes*, p. 113).

⁵³ "Legacy of Existentialism", p. 1952.

has been forgotten. (9.5)

By implication Qoheleth recognized the importance of the act of remembrance. Indeed, he fits well a description of Camus's "true rebel": "the artist who fights for decency and memory in an absurd world".⁵⁴

5. Conclusion

I believe in the sun
though it is late
in rising

I believe in love
though it is absent

I believe in God
though he is
silent...

—Anonymous⁵⁵

Holocaust survivor Filip Müller said of his traumatic experiences in Auschwitz, "We felt abandoned by the world...[but] we came to know what life was. Where there is life there is hope...we hoped against hope...and survived."⁵⁶ With Qoheleth he could perhaps say, "Yet for one who is joined to all the living there is hope" (9.4a). As Qoheleth set up the bleak picture of the absurd divorce he left himself no option but despair (because he *observed* the divorce). Yet Qoheleth did, for some reason, have hope. Francis Nichols compares Qoheleth's obstinate hope to the soothing words of parents to their children in the night: "Everything will be alright." But how do they know?⁵⁷ Qoheleth has hope, and a confidence in the answer that God will give to the human heart in the midst of pain. For

⁵⁴ Stein, "Legacy of Existentialism", p. 1949.

⁵⁵ Translated from the French by H. Schiff, in *Holocaust Poetry* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 184. A note in this edition states, "Text from an unsigned inscription found on the wall of a cave in Cologne where Jews had been hiding."

⁵⁶ From Lanzmann's *Shoah*.

⁵⁷ "Samuel Beckett and Ecclesiastes", p. 20.

Qoheleth it is the joy expressed in 5.19-20 (and here is perhaps the most significant of Qoheleth's thoughts for Holocaust reflection) which will help victims of the absurd to "rarely remember the (painful) days of their lives"—to find healing not in the absence of recollection, but in the absence of the misery that it has long engendered—"for God will answer them in the joy of their heart".⁵⁸

⁵⁸ On this translation, see p. 193 n. 62.

Chapter 9

QOHELETH'S QUEST

Man is the shuttle, to whose winding quest
And passage through these looms
God ordered motion, but ordained no rest.

—Henry Vaughan (*Silex Scintillans*, "Man" [1650–55])

But where shall wisdom be found?
And where is the place of understanding?
Mortals do not know the way to it,
And it is not found in the land of the living.
The deep says, "It is not in me",
And the sea says, "It is not with me"...
It is hidden from the eyes of all living...
Abaddon and Death say,
"We have heard a rumour of it with our ears".

—Job 28.12-14, 21-22 (NRSV)

What we are dealing with in Ecclesiastes is a quest narrative such as one frequently finds in literature. It is not an aimless odyssey, for there is seemingly a definite goal at hand. It is not a trek, for there is no demanding physical journey (although, as we shall see, Qoheleth uses language that creates an impression of motion). It is not an intense search for a material object. Qoheleth is embarked on a *quest*. His is the act of seeking or pursuing a goal: an object of intrinsic but immaterial value. That act touches every corner of Qoheleth's narrative, and its intensity causes readers to recognize in Qoheleth a sincere commitment¹ (although they might not always agree about what, precisely, Qoheleth is searching for).

What makes this a narrative feature? Any presentation of quest must

¹ Take, for example, L. Ryken's comment that "the writer of Ecclesiastes is a great organizer and stylist committed to the intellectual quest for truth" (*Words of Delight*, p. 320).

involve a *proleptic* element of story. We have seen how prolepsis works to create an initial tension in Ecclesiastes—for Qoheleth begins with knowledge and the reader is left to fill-in the details as to how he attained it. We have also seen how the plot is propelled forward by the frame narrator's kernel event at 1.1-2. It creates the expectancy that Qoheleth's character will become rounded and full in the course of his narration. The plot concerns Qoheleth himself, for the outcome of his actions will only affect him. The whole notion of his quest, then, is related to the self, for it is the nature of his own self that Qoheleth tested and sought out, and part of what he *discovers* is just what he is "made of".²

Qoheleth's dramatic quest often creates strong reactions in readers. Perhaps it is because stories of explorers have a luminous quality. With great interest some read the exploits of explorers who dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to pushing boundaries which, to our own minds and to the canon of our culture's received ideas, are immovable barriers. Thinking analogically, Qoheleth's quest has its own reference points—its own boundaries and limitations which Qoheleth attempts to overcome. These are landmarks in a metaphysical terrain. And what is the purpose implied in his movement there? What are the recognizable features of that landscape of the heart and mind that Qoheleth travels in order to achieve his destination? What is it that readers seek to find in his exploits? Has he pushed beyond the constraints of some intellectual boundary that mirrors something more personal in our own intellectual experience? Has he found what he was looking for? Are his the remains, as Paul Haupt commented, "of a daring explorer, who has met with some terrible accident, leaving his

² Compare Fisch's comment: "What he [Qoheleth] mainly has to tell us of course in this extended discourse of the self is not the account of material achievements—we hear little of these after the sentences...from chapter 2—but the account of his mental voyaging, his self-discoveries in the region of 'Wisdom'" ("Qoheleth: A Hebrew Ironist", p. 158).

shattered form exposed to the encroachments of all sorts of foul vermin"?³ And what is that elusive object he pursues? The concern of this chapter is to draw up a guide to that not necessarily tangible terrain.

1. *Success, Failure and Many Questions*

"Where is the rule then, and what hope can we have of success or profit?"
—Pécuchet, Gustave Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*

There is a popular conception that Qoheleth sought out what H. Fisch calls the "aesthetic ideal",⁴ and that this search forms the overall structure and meaning of the book. In discussing the meaning of Ecclesiastes with friends who generally have no critical background in biblical studies I often find that Qoheleth is likewise seen as a maverick of sorts who was able to achieve fame and fortune and reject it all in a grand swipe of bitter cynicism—often in the guise of King Solomon. I like to think that the comments of my grandmother, Helen Ross, in a letter she wrote upon learning that I would be studying Ecclesiastes (and not much else!) for 4 years, are representative of a great deal of readers:

So, you're studying the beautiful Book of Ecclesiastes... But why so much time with one when there are 65 others that are beautiful too?... I have read and re-read it many times and I try to understand it as I believe it was meant to be understood... Solomon had the whole world at his feet, he drank deeply from the cup of life, monarchs came from every kingdom to marvel at his wisdom, wealth, temple, servants etc, he had 700 wives and 300 concubines (can you imagine?) but they did not satisfy his soul, for over and over he said "All is Vanity". (29 October, 1991)

The key to this reading is the notion of success and competing failure.

Qoheleth/Solomon did succeed at reaching one state of affairs and failed at another. I think the reading is well on the mark. The popular conception of Qoheleth's story as having won his personal success at the onset (i.e. as his

³ Cited in G.A. Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 27-28.

⁴ For Qoheleth, through תַּכְמֵהוּ, "The aesthetic ideal is beheld, pursued, achieved, and also rejected" ("Qohelet: A Hebrew Ironist", pp. 160-61).

initial proleptic stance from an older age) is one that is confirmed by the conclusions of the above review of the Solomonic guise: Qoheleth's proclamations are about a doomed enterprise. Rabbi Harold Kushner states the reading in another way:

In his book, he tells us the story of his life. He writes of his successes and his frustrations, of all the ways in which he tried to be successful and make something of his life, and of all the reasons why the question, What does it all mean in the long run? was never really answered... He is a man desperately afraid of dying before he has learned how to live.⁵

Kushner rightly grasps the smallest component of this overall scheme of success and failure: the question. What is it? Can it be answered? I will return to the notion of success and failure at the end of this chapter (again, the notion is on the mark, but will probably need some modification). For now, however, we can begin our own quest for Qoheleth's quest, and it makes good sense to start from the smallest unit, the question.

Any question, any pursuit of fact, data, knowledge or human feeling, is part (indeed, the kernel) of the myriad expressions we use to signify the experience of human searching. A (non-rhetorical) question itself is the leaving open of possibilities and the absence of closure. As discussed in Chapter 1, without the proleptic element there is no sense of mystery, of quest or of the *questioning* character who is the characteristic of the book as a whole. In fact, prolepsis is about such absence of closure—the story is incomplete, unfinished.

Out of 222 verses in Ecclesiastes, 26 (11.7%) are or contain questions. All but two of these are seemingly addressed to the reader (2.2; 4.8). Instead of being directly questioned, like the audience of a doubting soliloquy we are frequently invited to seek to answer the questions *with* Qoheleth. And whether the

⁵ *When All you've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough* (Sydney: Pan Books, 1987), pp. 37-38. Compare Ryken's comment: "[Qoheleth's] quest is...a journey of the mind and soul. It is the most crucial of all quests—the quest to find satisfaction in life" (*Words of Delight*, p. 321).

question is stated indirectly or not there is always the possibility that the reader alone is being addressed.

Qoheleth's style of questioning at first glance seems to involve the opposite strategy of prolepsis; that is, while it is partly to let questions remain without any obvious answer, most of his questions are in fact rhetorical and therefore seemingly closed. In a rhetorical question, however, the answer is only apparent—there is an uncertain tone. The question is a test, as if to say, "This is what is only apparent on the outside, but come test this theorem to see if things are actually as they appear." And here is where the openness of the questions lie: in the potentiality of Qoheleth's final attitude. That is, in the end, his attitude towards the implied statements of his rhetorical questions will determine their ultimate function in the book. The opening rhetorical question thus functions as a benchmark for all that follows.

One of Qoheleth's most basic enquiries is into the value of toil, and such is the concern of his first question (1.3): "What profit has humanity in all their toil at which they toil under the sun?" Since no answer is given either Qoheleth genuinely does not know it or he relies on the absence of a readerly expectation for an answer. Of course we do not expect answers from rhetorical questions, yet in this we assume a living context between speaker and audience. If we create and sustain that assumption then the suggestion here is that there is and will be no profit.⁶ A more direct answer comes later, as the result of Qoheleth's own experience:

⁶ Compare Murphy: "[the rhetorical question in Ecclesiastes] often tends, as here [1.3], to suggest a negation...there is no profit in one's hard lot" (*Ecclesiastes*, p. 7); and Whybray: "[1.3 is] a rhetorical question to which the expected answer is 'None!'" (*Ecclesiastes*, p. 36). This is particularly significant for Whybray since he does not regard what follows (1.4-11, the poem on nature's circuitry) as necessarily continuing the theme of the futility of toil as expressed in 1.3 (see *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 39-40; *idem*, "Ecclesiastes 1.5-7 and the Wonders of Nature", *JSOT* 41 [1988], pp. 105-112). That is, it would work better for Whybray's argument if the answer to Qoheleth's question was not so clearly implied.

And I considered all the deeds my hands had done and the toil in which I had toiled to do it. And behold, everything was absurd and a pursuit of wind, *and there is no profit under the heavens.* (2.11)

The theme of profit and advantage (*√יטר*) occurs many times. Ogden refers to the query as Qoheleth's "programmatic question", which is constantly referred to.⁷ The question is not only general (What profit is there under the sun/heavens?), but specific: What profit is there from owning many goods? (5.11; cf. 5.16), from knowing wisdom and etiquette? (6.8) or from many words? (6.11). Yet his query is not conducted throughout the whole book (as Ogden would have it) but is limited to the first six chapters.

There arises, then, an implication from the following "silence". The shift in questions is from What? to Who? Who knows the interpretation of a thing? (8.1); Who will tell humanity what will "come after them"? (6.12; 7.24; 8.1; 10.14); Who can make straight what God has made crooked? (7.13; cf. 1.15). The question in 6.12, as A.G. Wright has shown,⁸ works as a thematic link between the two halves of the book:

For who knows what is good for humanity while they live the few days of their absurd lives which they pass as a shadow? And who will tell humanity what will be after them under the sun?

It begins with the question of profit and at the same time introduces the Who? motif. The symmetry is not perfect (cf. the "Who?" questions at 2.19; 3.21-22), but the balance weighs in favour of there being a structural strategy at work.

Also in favour of the strategy is the fact that in the latter half of the book, Qoheleth, after having reached a state of authentic ignorance, turns his attention

⁷ *Qoheleth* (Readings; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), p. 29.

⁸ Wright persuasively argues that for a number of reasons there is a clear structural marker between chs. 1-6 and 7-12. He argues that the continuity arrives from the theme of Qoheleth's evaluation of experience in 1.12-6.9, having to do primarily with the question, What profit is there...? ("The Riddle of the Sphinx", pp. 320-24) and that the second portion of Qoheleth's discourse (6.10-11.6), has to do with humanity's (Qoheleth included) inability to discover (*ibid.*, pp. 324-25). The position of questions alone confirms Wright's thesis (Wright discusses them in part).

to instructing the reader/audience directly, and his concern is more with the formation of the individual than with broader intellectual questions—a concern to which the "Who" questions are well suited. But what matters most here is that the types of questions and their positions inform us as to the tone and inception of Qoheleth's quest, and that at this level of questioning, the smallest unit of human searching, the quest is purely intellectual. But how is the quest carried out? What linguistic clues are present to help us unpack the *means* by which Qoheleth searches?

2. "And Move with the Moving Ships": Qoheleth's Physical Language

I shall sleep, and move with the moving ships,
Change as the winds change, veer in the tide.

—Algernon Charles Swinburne ("The Triumph of Time", 1866)

In the ironical play of consciousness the mind [of Qoheleth] is constantly in motion, trying different possibilities as it circles and seeks conclusions.

—Harold Fisch⁹

Although Qoheleth's quest is largely an intellectual one, there is a language element which suggests that we understand the quest, at least in part, as a physical journey, one which leaves the participant(s) exhausted and in dire need of rest. In this respect the language that suggests (or is closely related to—more on this below) movement/motion acts as a sign or signifier, providing a physical way of thinking about the quest. After listing the words that make up this language in Qoheleth's narrative (I exclude from consideration any occurrences in the frame narrator's text) I will discuss them in some detail. They are, in order of descending frequency:

הלך
בוא
רעיון/רעות

"go, walk" (30×)
"come in, arrive" (15×)
"pursue, chase" (10×)

⁹ "Qohelet: A Hebrew Ironist", p. 173.

שוב	"return" (10×)
סביב/סבב	"encompass, surround" (8×)
יצא	"go out, flee" (5×)
דרך	"path, road" (4×)
תור	"reconnoitre" (3×)
פנה	"return" (2×)
רחוק/רחק	"distance, far off/away" (3×)
עמק	"deep" (2×)
שלח	"send, let loose" (1×)

The first question to deal with, is, How do these words relate to the concept of movement? In most cases this seems obvious. The translations offered here (with the exception of פנה¹⁰) are the words' well-established primary English renderings. All of them have a connection of some kind to walking or running, some to journeying. The following are often used directly to describe such movement: הלך, בוא, שוב, סבב, יצא, תור, פנה and שלח. Others have a less direct connection: דרך (what is travelled on), רחק and עמק (terms of geographical distance).¹¹ Some of these words, however, can have a figurative or metaphorical sense (e.g. הלך = "living, conduct"; דרך = "manner, way"). In fact, in Ecclesiastes *all* of the listed words are usually used figuratively—for example, "And the dust *returns* (שוב) to the earth" (12.7), or "Just as [that man] *came from* (out of, יצא) his mother's womb naked he shall *return* (שוב), *going* (הלך) as he *came* (בוא)" (5.15a), and so on. This raises a theoretical problem in the way that I am using them to make my argument. That is, it could be said that the figurative uses may somehow nullify the primary meanings suggested.

"The eyes of the wise are in their head, but the fool walks (הלך) in darkness" (2.14a) offers an interesting case in point. Theoretically it could make

¹⁰ The primary meaning is "(turn to) consider", but see, e.g., Josh. 22.4 and 1 Kgs 10.13, for some physical connotations.

¹¹ See Fox and Porten, "Unsought Discoveries", p. 37. At this point in their article the point is made that Qoheleth uses verbs of motion and a comparison is made to stories of seeking out physical objects in order to illuminate the question of what Qoheleth sought. The discussion is interesting but has no bearing on the kinds of implications I will draw from the use of motion-words.

for a borderline case in that it appeals to the literal sense of walking in order to be understood figuratively. But it is a metaphor. Technically, the tenor is the fool to whom is applied the vehicle of walking in darkness (movement). I categorize this as figurative. The walking is figurative; we accept that here it means living, conduct and so on. But is the literal sense lost completely? Can it be separated from the newly created meaning? Indeed, why is "walking" the chosen vehicle? Metaphors are two things becoming something new. They are the combination of two or more ideas/concepts to create a new idea. Walking and darkness, together with "the fool", make up the rather negative picture of one who stumbles; who gropes to find something to hold but fails; who is unable to advance in life because of the lack of wit and wisdom to do so. In other words, in the working idea of the impediment of progressive movement the vehicle has retained something of its primary meaning. All of the listed words in one way or another will therefore contribute to the overall impression of motion, but some (whether figurative or literal) will be more informative than others. And this is where the real nettle lies: What is their relationship to Qoheleth's quest?

The words of the list that Qoheleth uses to express the quest directly are הלך (2.1), שׁוּב (4.1, 7; 9.11), סָבַב (2.20; 7.25), תּוֹר (1.13; 2.3; 7.25) and פָּנָה (2.11, 12). In all but two of these instances (the infinitive of תּוֹר at 1.13 and 7.25), the verbs function as opening remarks either to other verbs that describe precisely how Qoheleth will search, or directly to the content of his discoveries. They set the tone and commence the motion of the quest:

I said in my heart, "Come (לְכָה־נָה), I will test you with mirth..." (2.1)

I set out (תָּרַח־י) in my heart to cheer my flesh with wine... (2.3)

And I considered (turned to consider?, פָּנִיתִי) all the deeds my hands had done and the toil in which I had toiled to do it... (2.11)

And I turned (פָּנִיתִי) to observe wisdom, and madness and folly... (2.12)

All as if to say, "I go", "I turn", "I move", "I commence", "I continue the quest", "I journey on towards the goal":

And I turned (סבוחי) to despair my heart concerning all the toil at which I toiled under the sun... (2.20)

And I turned (שבת) and observed all of the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed... (4.1)

And I turned (שבת) and observed an absurdity under the sun... (4.7)

I turned (סבוחי), I and my heart, to understand and to search out (לחור) and to seek wisdom and the sum of things... (7.25)

I turned (שבת) and observed under the sun:
The race is not to the swift,
nor the battle to the mighty... (9.11)

As if to say, "I set out, yet I return to where I began and am unable to complete my journey; my heart has come back on itself again and again and again..."

Qoheleth is travelling.

Those motion words that are not directly connected to the quest are used in wisdom sayings, vignettes or poems. However, even some of these are indirectly related in that they may be seen to mirror, even extrapolate, the quest's central themes. The best example among these is 5.13-17. I have set out the passage chiastically (and shown Hebrew and italicized theme-words) in order to show some thematic parallels.

- A There is a grievous *ill* I observed under the sun: riches were *stored up* by their owner to his own *harm*.
- B But those riches were destroyed in a bad venture. And he had a son, and there was *nothing* for his hand.
- C Just as [that man] came from (יָצָא) his mother's womb naked he shall return (שָׁב), going (הֵלֵךְ) as he came (בָּא).

- D And he will not take anything from his toil that he carries (הלך) in his hand.
- CC This too is a grievous ill: Precisely as he came (בוא), so shall he go (הלך);
- BB and *what profit* has he from toiling for the wind?
- AA Indeed, he *consumes* all his days in darkness, and great *vexation*, and *sickness* and resentment.

This passage is set within a larger investigation into the value of riches (5.10–6.9). However, it is clearly marked apart from what surrounds it¹² in that it has the same subject throughout who is first introduced here (this man) and who does not appear before or after; in that this section begins with Qoheleth's typical introductory phrase for observations, "There is a grievous ill..."; and in that the following section begins something new with its הנה ("Behold..."). After some general remarks (5.10-12), Qoheleth then focuses on a test-case of what happens when someone is controlled by what they search for and desire.

From A to B Qoheleth sets up the problem of the discussion: to him it is grievous and even sickening (חולה) that someone has consumed goods to their own harm (לרעתו; cf. לרע לו at 8.9 and my comments on this in Excursus 2.3). In B he describes how this person then lost those goods (one would think that this might make Qoheleth happy?). There is a resonance between A–B and BB–AA. Key words of harm and illness are mentioned, and the prelude to Qoheleth's question at BB, "What profit?" can he have from his pointless toil, is given at B: there was nothing for his hand.

In the centre of this account comes the working image of motion: that man has come and will return, going as he came, and just as he came he will go

¹² I approach this differently to Fredericks who argues that this passage works chiasmatically in the whole of 5.10–6.9, making, for example, the coming and going here (5.15) parallel to the coming and going of 6.4; both of which fit into the larger elaborate chiasmus (*Coping with Transience*, pp. 71-74).

(C and CC). When he attempts to carry anything away he will fail (D). Like Qoheleth, this man has suffered vexation and illness from experiencing the absurd. Like Qoheleth, this man cannot help but end where he began. Qoheleth is caught in a circular motion in his quest; he can only repeatedly return to it. And what will Qoheleth be able to take with him? (What can this man take from his life?) What profit? Where does this man go? (Do not all go to the same place?—3.20; 6.6—Sheol? [cf. 9.10]) Where will Qoheleth go? The questions raised about this man for the reader can easily be applied to Qoheleth and his quest. So easily, in fact, that it begs the question of whether or not there is a strategy at hand of mirroring Qoheleth's experience in vignettes such as these (cf. 4.7-8, 13-16; 6.1-5; 9.13-16).

Other indirectly related (motion) texts offer mirrors to Qoheleth's own experience. I have slightly modified the following texts to reflect this factor:

Much like myself, someone is not satisfied (לא־השבע) from the good things of their life, and even the stillborn child is better off, "for in absurdity it came (בוא) and in darkness it shall go (הלך), and in darkness its name is covered" (6.3-4). Perhaps I too was better off in darkness, than in the circle of my quest, where I never would have seen (lived in) the light or known (understood) it (6.5); for this is the source of my vexation (1.18).

"Walk (הלך) in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes" (11.9b), and enjoy what you can, for you must "know for certain that concerning all of these things God will bring (בוא) you into judgment" (11.9c). For in the end you will be returned to your beginnings.

"Better the sight of the eyes (מראה עינים) than the wandering of the soul (מהלך־נפש). This too is absurdity and a pursuit of wind" (6.9). Better even the vexation that comes from seeing the world as it is than the wandering (quest) of my soul for nourishment and rest. How long will my own soul wander?

There is an interesting twist to Qoheleth's use of הלך: its contrasting use in Proverbs. First it should be noted that at 30 occurrences in Ecclesiastes this word *should* be listed number 8 in Loretz's favourite-word list (רעה, "evil", also

appears 30 times).¹³ It is in every sense a "key" word. Its distribution is spread evenly, occurring in every chapter, and it is often the operative image in texts widely noted to be significant, such as those cited above. We have seen the uses Qoheleth has for it: futile wandering, "inviting" himself (cynically?) to test his own heart, the absurd departure from a world from which you take nothing, and conduct that, to some extent, resembles reckless abandon. Now its primary use in Proverbs, as here, is figurative and not literal. But there is a telling difference. One who walks in Proverbs must walk in integrity (הולך בַּחֵם) and securely (יֵלֵךְ בַּטּוֹחַ, 10.9; cf. 3.23; 19.1). Those who in Proverbs walk in uprightness (הולך יֶשֶׁר) fear the LORD (14.2; cf. 2.20; 15.21). Better is the poor man who walks in integrity (הולך בַּחֵם) than the rich whose ways (דַּרְכָּיִם) are perverted (28.6; cf. 10.9; 20.7; 28.18). Indeed, wisdom herself sets the wheel in motion by walking in the ways of righteousness and the paths of justice (8.20). And Solomon warns his son not to run with those who entice him to travel in the paths of the unrighteous (1.10-18). For wisdom will call out in the streets to lead him back to the perambulation of the upright (1.20-22). Walking in Proverbs is a moral activity, and when it arrives at Qoheleth's story it takes a deconstructive turn (for the worse?). The only path Qoheleth walks on is either to death, sheol, the unknown or that of his own heart.

Does Qoheleth, however, walk and not grow weary? If one journeys constantly (and repeatedly back to the same place) one needs rest. It comes as no surprise to learn, therefore, that Qoheleth holds rest in the highest esteem. Of course, rest features prominently in narratives that revolve around a quest (for example, one has the impression from reading Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* that when Christian stops for rest in the form of food, wine and comradeship along his long journey, the moment is narratively highlighted and is meant to remain in the

¹³ As cited in Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, p. xxix.

memory a long while). Qoheleth makes it abundantly clear that rest is a good thing and that he, along with others under the torment of toil, longs to know it.

Note the place of rest in one of the texts discussed above (6.4-5):

For in absurdity it came and in darkness it shall go, and in darkness its name is covered. [And] although it has not seen the sun or understood it, *it finds rest rather than he.*

And further note these examples:

What is there for a man in all his toil, and the striving of his heart that toils under the sun? For all his days are painful and his work a vexation. Even at night his heart does not rest. This too is absurdity. (2.22-23)

Better a handful with rest than two handfuls with toil and a pursuit of wind. (4.6)

Sweet is the sleep of the worker whether he eats little or much. But the surfeit of the rich man does not allow him to sleep.

Qoheleth also makes clear that he was in dire need of rest himself due to the taxing nature of the quest:

When I set my heart to understand wisdom, and to observe the business that is done on the earth—although by day or by night my eyes¹⁴ seeing no sleep—I observed all the activity of God... (8.16-17)

That motion and rest feature so prominently suggests that the quest is to be understood on a physical as well as intellectual level. Such language also offers clues to the narrative aspect of the quest. It enables us to think about Qoheleth's intellectual motion in very suggestive and visual terms. Indeed, some readers might find the universal quality of physical language, even when used figuratively, easier to come to terms with than abstract intellectual language. The overall impression of movement should make us stop; that is, give us, Qoheleth's readers, pause for thought.

¹⁴ For the emendation to first person see Fox, *Qoheleth*, p. 255. Even if this is in the third person (as RSV etc.) the point remains in that Qoheleth includes himself in his statements about humanity.

3. *The Quest and its Actors: Qoheleth's Search and the Actantial Model*

What I want to discover is the truth of things themselves. What I doubt is, in fact, that things are actually as they seem.

—Paul Ricoeur¹⁵

The marriage of wisdom with the notion of searching is not unique to Qoheleth in the biblical literature (e.g. Job 28; Prov. 8; Sir. 51.13-22 etc.). For example, the author of the Wisdom of Solomon, D. Winston suggests, displays a "single-minded...concentrated pursuit after wisdom".¹⁶ Winston sketches out the way in which that author was set on his own spiritual odyssey. Like the author of Proverbs, the author of Wisdom sought wisdom herself, and not necessarily things that are closely related to "human" knowledge; that is, things deduced from empirical observation, know-how, book-knowledge and the categories of knowledge that come from collecting data (as with Solomon in 1 Kgs 4.32-33). In some biblical texts, however, such an implicit criticism of the tireless quest was simply not enough. In what reads like a corrective intended for Qoheleth, Ben Sira asserts,

Do not seek for what is too hard for you,
 And do not investigate what is beyond your strength;
 Think of the commandments that have been given you,
 For you have no need of the things that are hidden.
 Do not waste your labor on what is superfluous to your work,
 For things beyond human understanding have been shown you.
 For many have been led astray by their imagination,
 And a wicked fancy has made their minds slip.
 (Sir. 3.21-24; cf. 18.5-8; Wis. 9.13-18)¹⁷

But it seems Qoheleth did not heed any such warning (this one came too late for

¹⁵ Paraphrasing Descartes, in *Oneself as Another*, p. 6

¹⁶ "The Sage as Mystic in the Wisdom of Solomon", in *SIAN*, p. 383. He comments later: "[the author of Wis.] appears to be undaunted in his total commitment to the pursuit of the philosophy and science of his age with all its challenges" (p. 389).

¹⁷ Adapted from Goodspeed's translation, *The Apocrypha*, p. 229. I am indebted to Winston's article for drawing attention to the significance of this passage and that of the contrasting references ("The Sage as Mystic", p. 388).

him in any case!). He conducted his test unashamedly and with a burning intensity, but what did he look for? Could he say with the author of the Pseudo-Platonic *Epinomis*, "For I have sought *this wisdom* high and low [*anō kai katō*] and so far as it has been revealed to me I will try to render it plain to you"¹⁸ What was it that Qoheleth sought for (far off and deep)? Was it wisdom? Was it "the good life", as L. Ryken maintains?¹⁹ Or was it the object of his thematic questions; that is, to know what is good for humanity the few days of their absurd existence?²⁰ Or did Qoheleth "exhaust all avenues of investigation to *understand... 'what God is doing under the sun'*"²¹ Or was it some subtle combination of all of these?

In Chapter 1 I discussed Qoheleth's first announcement of the quest (1.13) but did not investigate (שׂרר?) what he was searching for. To discover (מציא?) what Qoheleth sought, what he used to find it and what ultimately enabled him to get it or kept him from getting it, I will enlist the help of the actantial model developed by Greimas and Todorov (based largely on the work of Propp) which is meant to account for the basic structure of any narrative. Although the model has been criticized for failing to represent the relationships of complex stories,²² it is more than adequate for Qoheleth's simple tale.

The actants of the model, and what they do, are as follows:

Subject The actant that desires/wishes for something.

¹⁸ As Cited in Winston, "The Sage as Mystic", p. 385 (italics mine).

¹⁹ *Literary Guide*, pp. 251-52.

²⁰ See Fisch, "Qohelet: A Hebrew Ironist", p. 163, who contrasts this theme to Mic. 6.8: "He has showed you O man (אדם) what is good; and what does the LORD require (שׂרר) of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk (הלך) humbly with your God?" Fisch concludes that Qoheleth finds himself incapable of sharing in the love and intimacy with his creator that Micah implies, but settles for a few rainy days instead.

²¹ A.R. Ceresko, "The Function of *Antanaclosis* (מִשׁ' 'to find' //מִשׁ' 'to reach, overtake, grasp') in Hebrew Poetry, Especially in the Book of Qoheleth", *CBQ* 44 (1982), p. 569 (italics Ceresko's).

²² See, for example, Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, pp. 112-13.

<i>Object</i>	The thing that the Subject desires. ²³
<i>Power</i> ²⁴	What <i>enables</i> the Subject to obtain the Object (and ultimately determines if the Subject is successful).
<i>Receiver</i>	The actant that ultimately receives the Object (usually the Subject).
<i>Helper</i>	What offers often incidental help in obtaining the Object.
<i>Opponent</i>	What incidentally opposes the Subject in its search for the Object.

A simple example will help to illustrate the model. In the sentence, "Dennis wants to date Rose but she is reluctant to say yes", the Subject is clearly Dennis and the Object is a date with Rose. Since Rose is indecisive she is the Power; that is, she ultimately allows or enables the Subject's success. The receiver in this case is the Subject (unless there were another competing subject [what Bal calls an anti-Subject] who obtained "a date with Rose"). The Helper could be many things: Dennis's employment prospects, good looks, charm and so on. Likewise, the Opponent could consist of the opposites of these things. Helpers and Opponents can be groups of people or things combined into a force, such as society, an army and so on.

As Bal points out, the model functions on the premise that Subjects of stories undertake "thinking and action...directed towards an aim", and are intent on either attaining something agreeable or avoiding something disagreeable.²⁵ And this is what best describes the relationship between the Subject and Object, suggests Bal: the verb "to wish" (and/or "to desire"). This is what I will assume of Qoheleth: that his thinking and activities are directed towards an aim.

In Ecclesiastes we have the advantage of the autobiographical form, the

²³ Objects can be just about anything: a state of existence, a piece of gold and so on. Bal distinguishes among objects those of intention which may include "wisdom, love, happiness, a place in heaven, a bed to die in..." (*Narratology*, p. 27). Bal's discussion of the model is simply one of the best available, and so it is to her that I will primarily refer.

²⁴ Following Bal (*Narratology*, pp. 28-29) who prefers this to the usual term, "Sender", since this element can be passive (such as money) *or* active (such as a person's will).

²⁵ *Narratology*, p. 26.

predominance of which easily locates the Subject, Qoheleth. The Object, however, is not so easily located.

We may presume from ch. 2 and elsewhere that Qoheleth at one time *desired* many things and experiences (cf. 5.10; 6.7). But intellectually, Qoheleth applied his mind (sought) in order to understand specifically wisdom and folly (1.17; 7.23,²⁶ 25; 8.16-17a; 9.1), pleasure (2.1, 3), what has been before him (7.23-24; cf. 1.9; 3.15; 6.10) and all the activity that has been done under the sun (1.13; 8.9, 16-17a; 9.1; cf. 2.11; 3.11b; 10.14b). He also *observed* (רָאָה) wisdom in order to understand it (2.12a; 8.9; 9.1; cf. 7.15-18, 25) and sought to see (רָאָה) what was good for people to do during their short stay under the heavens (2.3; cf. 5.18; 6.12; 8.15). All of these things are to do with the quality of his own understanding (עֵי is a favourite word). His express goal was to *better understand*.²⁷

Qoheleth himself best sums up the whole Object of his thinking and investigating in an intriguingly simple way when he offers an aside in the midst of a quite specific investigation (7.26-29) about a woman:

See, this I have found, said Qoheleth ([*adding*] *one to one to find the sum* [אָחַת לְאָחַת לְמִצְאָה חֶשְׁבוֹן], *which my soul has continually sought* [עוֹרֵר־בְּקִשָּׁה] *but which I have not found*): One man among a thousand... (7.27-28)

It is a culminative comment. It is the best image Qoheleth can find to express what his soul has continually sought in its calculating, adding and configuring of wisdom and the world: the sum, a satisfactory and digestible answer. It is significant that Qoheleth uses a simple mathematical problem as the image of his search. He is basically stating that he sought an answer to his calculations and

²⁶ Taking the "all this" there to refer to his reflections on wisdom, folly, righteousness and so on that precedes this verse (7.15-22). See my comments above, p. 206 n. 84.

²⁷ It is worth remembering at this point how sorely the frame narrator misunderstood Qoheleth in his summation, "Qoheleth sought to find words of delight..." (12.10a).

observations that would put things into place and make things understandable and graspable. The answer should be as simple as "2", and such would allow him to understand the world in simple dichotomies: wisdom/folly, long life/death, and so on.²⁸ But 2 is, alas, not as simple as it appears. To the Greeks it was a source of mystery.

The early Greeks were uncertain as to whether 2 was a number at all, observing that it has, as it were, a beginning and an end but no middle. More mathematically, they pointed out that $2 + 2 = 2 \times 2$, or indeed that any number multiplied by 2 is equal to the same number added to itself. Since they expected multiplication to do more than mere addition, they considered two an exceptional case.²⁹

As in the speculation of the Greeks, what Qoheleth called the sum was perhaps only a sum in appearance. He could not find it since, despite its simplistic appearance, its quality remained illusive. In fact, Qoheleth uses the same word, חֶשְׁבֹן, just a few verses later (v. 29) to refer to the opposite of humanity's simple beginning which was upright and uncomplicated: the concurrent human search for deception, "devices" (LXX, λογισμοί; see p. 89 n. 10). Instead of offering closure, the idea of 2 might have opened more possibilities than expected. The Object that his soul had continually sought was an understanding that was of an initially naïve quality. This Object was reflexive—to better understand his own experience of the world and hence his own self—but wisdom is tied in with the enterprise, and the nature of wisdom is a problem here.

This leads us to the question of the Helper. Qoheleth used (at least attempted to use) wisdom to his advantage in his search (1.13; 2.3, 9; 7.23). He consistently held wisdom in high regard (7.11-12, 19; 8.2; 9.13-10.1). The wise profit (2.13) and see the world more clearly than fools (2.14). Qoheleth worked

²⁸ This is the foundation of Qoheleth's realization that true knowledge/perception is in fact neither graspable nor knowable, as I sketched out at Chapter 5.3.

²⁹ D. Wells, *The Penguin Dictionary of Curious and Interesting Numbers* (London: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 41.

at becoming wise (2.19) and became wise in order to test wisdom's value (2.15; cf. 7.23). But this is where wisdom the Helper fails him; even with it to guide him while he searches he is not able to find the Object of understanding. Indeed, he does not understand why wisdom makes no ultimate difference to one's existence/life, for the wise and the foolish have the same fate regardless. The problem comes into sharp focus at 2.13-14:

I observed that there is more profit from wisdom than from folly, as
[there is] more profit from light than darkness.
The eyes of the wise are in their head,
but the fool walks in darkness.
But I realized that one fate befalls both of them.

Given the description of material profit in 2.4-10, and the fact that he has just stated, "And I considered all the deeds my hands had done and the toil in which I had toiled to do it" (2.11), Qoheleth is here likely recognizing the value of wisdom "generally speaking". That is, generally speaking, wisdom does help one gain material goods in a much more effective way than folly (1.16; 2.9), just as light generally helps one to see more clearly and to make effective progress in life (see my comments on this passage in section 2, above). This makes the equivalent fates of the sage and the fool all the more acute and all the more obscure to Qoheleth's understanding. What seems to affect their fate much more than wisdom is what God will choose to do (see below), and that is beyond his understanding as well. Wisdom, in fact, deceives him; wisdom turns from being Helper to becoming Opponent, even to the point of causing him vexation (1.18; cf. 2.15, 19; 7.23). It functions like a false lead in a detective novel. Perhaps because of what it brought him (power, fame, wealth) he initially believed that it implicitly promised him the desire of his heart, understanding.

Besides failed wisdom it may be that there are no other real Opponents. There are factors such as toil, weariness, pain and hate, which frustrate Qoheleth to no end (see esp. 2.17-23), but these are not so much Qoheleth's opponent as

they are built into the structure of the world as Qoheleth sees it. And this brings us to the question of the Power: What (or indeed who) ultimately decides whether Qoheleth will succeed in understanding all that has happened to him in the realms of wisdom and folly?

As in the above example of Dennis and Rose, we know the Power by knowing the reasons for the failure or success of the Subject. Dennis will be successful if Rose says yes. Qoheleth will be successful if something will allow or disallow him to obtain his goal. While it was wisdom that initially helped him, we must not confuse the Power with the Helper. What ultimately determines Qoheleth's success is the accessibility of understanding itself (that is, of being in a position *clearly* to understand wisdom, conduct, the activity of God etc.).

Qoheleth did succeed in placing himself in a position to test and evaluate the prospects of his becoming wise. He did "become great", he did amass treasures, he did know folly and madness first hand. And then he considered it all and found that it was **הבל**. That is, when he pushed further to understand he came up against an insurmountable barrier. This is especially evident in texts where Qoheleth attempts to obtain the Object but finds himself denied by the *fact* that everything is absurd: 1.13-14; 2.11, 15-16, 22-23; cf. 4.4, 8; 6.2; 7.23-24. In each of these instances the Power is the existing structure of deed and consequence, the way things are. This insurmountable fact is hinted at from 1.2 and as such suggests that we are reading a tragedy. Things are such that *it is not possible* to ascertain the how and why of their nature (1.9-10, 15 [cf. 7.13]; 9.11-12).³⁰ So far I have described the passive nature of the Power, but what of

³⁰ This has been recognized by others as a key feature of Qoheleth's thought. Stephen Schloesser has put a fine twist on this notion. He argues that Qoheleth turned the traditional notion of wisdom as graspable and of sages themselves as having unsearchable minds (epitomized by Prov. 25.2-3) on its head to mean the opposite: For while it was the glory of kings to search things (words?) out (presumably with the help of God who knew the way), with Qoheleth it was the nature of things (and words?) themselves which was unsearchable, and the minds of kings (i.e. Solomon) themselves subjected to failure

the active? Who or what is responsible for this immovable structuration?

There can be no question that it is God who lies behind the Power. Simply put, God is the enabler of human experience; the fate of everyone is in his power. Now fate is part of the Object in that it is the end/use/purpose of, for example, wisdom and toil (activity) that Qoheleth wants to understand: in the end, where does it take you and leave you? It is in this sense that God is the Power since Qoheleth cannot understand just how God influences what happens on the earth. "Just as you do not understand the way of the life-breath in the formation of bones in the womb, so too you do not understand the activity of God *who does everything*" (11.5), whose influence is everywhere and who determines the end of us all. Qoheleth even goes on to implicate God in his design of the world as by nature inscrutable (3.11; 7.13; 8.17; cf. 9.10). Bewilderingly, God has made the world such *in order that* people will fail to understand it: "God has set eternity in their hearts *so that* [מבלי אשר; cf. Jer. 2.15] humanity cannot discover the activity that God has done from beginning to end" (3.11b; cf. 6.12; 7.14; 8.17; 9.12; 10.14).³¹ God's role in establishing the way things are is essentially negative: "it is an evil business God has given to human beings to be busy with" (1.13b; cf. 6.1; 8.6). Yet God has also made it this way so that people will fear his presence (3.14; cf. 8.12-13) and (as we shall later see) he also *empowers* people to enjoy life. This duality further reflects the success of the Power in keeping the Subject from the Object, understanding.

Taken altogether, the actants can be represented as follows:

("A King is Held Captive in her Tresses", pp. 205-28, esp. pp. 210-11). He further comments that the Proverbial search for the meaning of words is precisely "the classical search which third-century philosophy in general [like Qoheleth?] abandoned out of 'weariness'" (p. 223 n. 21).

³¹ Humanity's experience mirrors Qoheleth's quest in that they too are unable to discover what God has done and their own fate. Indeed, humanity in this case may well come close to Bal's notion of a competing anti-Subject. And yet Qoheleth belongs to humanity and therefore the Subject and anti-Subject will both fail in their quest.

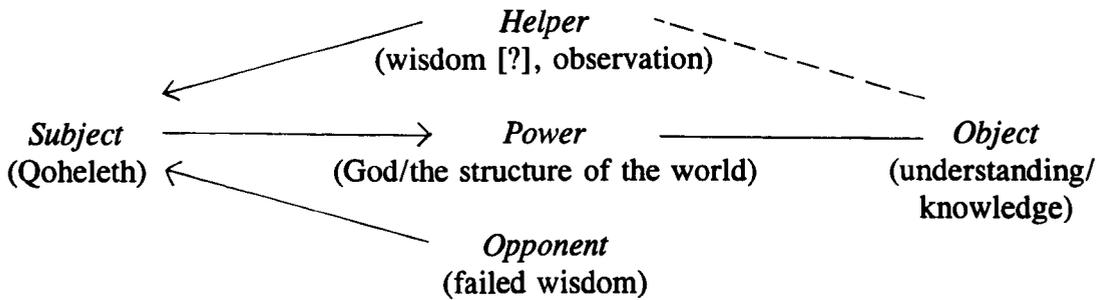


figure 6.

Qoheleth presents actantial analysis with a not uncommon situation in that the Subject and Object are confounded.³² This confounding, however, confirms the relevance of another of Qoheleth's narrative strategies to the quest: autobiography. As we have seen, Qoheleth is introspective. The autobiographical form shows that he is anxious to see his own identity somehow established in a world where everything else is in flux. The discussion of W.K.C. Guthrie about the conclusion of Heraclitus, "I searched out myself", sheds an interesting light on the matter:

The verb has two main meanings: (1) to look for... (2) to question, inquire of somebody, find out... Thus by the two [Greek] words of fr. 101 Heraclitus meant, I suggest... "I turned my thoughts within and sought to discover my real self...to discover the real meaning of my self-hood; for I knew that if I understood my self I would have understood the *logos* which is the real constitution of everything else as well."³³

And by this, continues J. Olney, Heraclitus "anticipated the entire history of autobiographical literature". "You could not discover the limits of the self", said Heraclitus (frag. 45), "even by travelling along every path: so deep a *logos* does it have."³⁴ Was such the subtext of Qoheleth's search? By travelling (שוב, הלך) along every path (דרכ, סביב etc.) was Qoheleth attempting to

³² There also occurs the ironic confounding of Object and Power: the Object of Qoheleth's attempt at understanding is largely (the activity of) the Power itself, God.

³³ As cited in Olney, *Metaphors of the Self*, p. 7.

³⁴ *Metaphors of the Self*, p. 7 (the translation is Olney's own adaptation from standard translations).

know the limits of his own self?³⁵ Like Heraclitus, however, Qoheleth was not able to discover those limits since their *logos* (reason/end/ use/purpose) had been set too deeply. Qoheleth described that position as **הבל** and traced its *logos* to the inscrutable Power, God.

4. *Gustave Flaubert's Bouvard et Pécuchet: A Comparison*

NATURE: How beautiful Nature is! Say this everytime you are in the country.

—Flaubert, "The Dictionary of Received Ideas"

Qoheleth's tale has been compared to other stories before.³⁶ One of the most interesting comparisons I have come across is from a Literature Ph.D. thesis by Deborah Pierce, a third of which is about Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*.³⁷ Flaubert's novel depicts the experiences of two copyists living in Paris who become inseparable friends, one of whom inherits a substantial fortune. In love with the idea of an idyllic country life, they set out to live "off the land" on a farm in the town of Chavignolles, Normandy, in 1841. The novel follows their attempts at learning to achieve wealth and success through the aid of knowledge, particularly, if not solely, from books. When they cannot understand the way the world is working, they turn to books of every kind under the sun. Such was the story's encyclopedic range that Flaubert is said to have consulted over 1500

³⁵ Fisch agrees that this is the subtext of Qoheleth's search ("Qohelet: A Hebrew Ironist", pp. 158-59).

³⁶ See, for example, L. Kreitzer, who compares particularly the themes of birth/death and life/loss in Ecclesiastes to Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, in chapter 5, "A Farewell to Arms: 'A Time to Give Birth and a Time to Die'", in *idem, The Old Testament in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (TBS, 24; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994). Also, see my introductory remarks at Chapter 1.3.

³⁷ D.L.T. Pierce, chapter 3, "Bouvard et Pécuchet: The Gatherers of Wisdom", in *idem, "Echoes of the Past in Flaubert's 'L'Education Sentimentale', 'Bouvard et Pécuchet' and 'Salambo'"* (Ph.D. Dissertation; Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1992).

volumes in its writing, taking "assiduous" notes on each, even causing his eyesight to go bad.³⁸ Flaubert spent 16–18 years writing the novel in the late 1860s and 70s up until his death in 1880, but never completed it, leaving us instead with an enticing plan, written in point form, of the final, incomplete tenth chapter.³⁹ While it is unlikely that Flaubert drew directly from Ecclesiastes for his inspiration, he was aware of the book, stating⁴⁰ in the novel that

our two worthy men, after all their disappointments, felt the need to be simple, to love something, to find peace of mind. They tried Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, Jeremiah. But the Bible frightened them with its prophets roaring like lions, the thunder crashing in the clouds, all the weeping in Gehenna, and its God scattering empires as the wind scatters clouds.⁴¹

(It is difficult to say whether such a likening of these works was a satirical remark on Bouvard and Pécuchet's shallow rejection of things they disliked or a reflection of Flaubert's own [lack of?] understanding of them.)

Pierce devotes much of her discussion of the novel to a comparison with Ecclesiastes. She begins the comparison with the following remarks:

...upon examining the two works it can be concluded that the import of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* is comprehended in a verse from *Ecclesiastes* which Flaubert might well have used as an epigraph: "And I applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under the heavens; it is an unhappy business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with [1.13]."⁴²

One soon discovers that the Object of their quest, of that application of mind that Bouvard and Pécuchet share with Qoheleth, is to better know how to live; to

³⁸ So Pierce, "Echoes of the Past", pp. 101, 104. See the "Introduction" by A.J. Krailsheimer, in *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (trans. A.J. Krailsheimer; London: Penguin Books, 1976 [1881]), p. 9.

³⁹ A second volume which was to consist of large collections of quotes which reflected concurrent uncritical "received ideas" (which Flaubert despised) was to follow; there is a translated (at times hilarious) version of this available: "The Dictionary of Received Ideas", in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, pp. 291-330.

⁴⁰ For convenience I will speak of "Flaubert" and the narrator of the story interchangeably.

⁴¹ *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, p. 223.

⁴² Pierce, "Echoes of the Past", p. 77 (italics Pierce's).

understand how things work; and to know what, exactly, is beautiful. The Object, as with Qoheleth, is understanding. As Pierce states, "Flaubert sets his protagonists...to skim the surface of the world's knowledge...they search for a truth, an unmediated knowledge that will allow them to answer life's questions."⁴³ Embedded in that search is a need for security. After learning of some convincing arguments against the faith of his new-found spiritualism, we learn of Pécuchet that, "His need for truth became a raging thirst... 'Oh! Doubt! Doubt! I should rather have nothing at all.'"⁴⁴ Desire often overcomes the pair, leading them to pursue their Object with unbridled fervour and display ambitions to control their environment and to gain answers (as Qoheleth perhaps naïvely began) that would explain things simply.⁴⁵

Although they do not specifically enlist the help of, for example, wisdom or the powers of observation, Bouvard and Pécuchet rely constantly on their own grasp of the situation, their own grasp of what they have read, their own memory of some principle that they read about—and they are inevitably let down. They cannot grasp the nettle because they fail to understand the significance and true meaning of what they read. Even when they understand one author they are confounded by the fact that another disagrees (such was probably part of Flaubert's stratagem in undermining the value of "received ideas"). Although they are left in the dark as to the reasons for their failure, readers are left in no doubt. They are ignorant, even stupid. Typical is the description of their initial

⁴³ "Echoes of the Past", pp. 78, 80. Pierce also terms this aspect in both stories a "flirtation with the limitless" (p. 85). Compare the narrator's comment at the time when the two of them decide to give up the study of history: "But they had acquired a taste for history, a need for truth in itself" (*Bouvard et Pécuchet*, p. 121).

⁴⁴ *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, p. 210-11.

⁴⁵ There are many examples of this. In fact, most of the chapters conclude with a failure on one subject and a burning desire to conquer the next. As for their desire for control, take, for example, Flaubert's description of their grandiose thoughts on discovering magic: "What takes centuries could be developed in a moment, any miracle would be practicable and the universe would be at our disposal" (*Bouvard et Pécuchet*, p. 197).

wonder at the possibilities of all that could be learned: "As they admired some old piece of furniture they felt sorry that they had not lived in the period that it was used, though they knew absolutely nothing about the period in question... Works whose titles they could not understand seemed to contain some mystery."⁴⁶ Even without their knowing it, true knowledge keeps at a distance and keeps things mysterious. There is a sense, therefore, in which their perceived Helper, knowledge, turns into (unperceived?) Opponent.

Underlying their search is the admittance that they cannot understand what they seek. It is an admittance concealed in the guise of questions, such as the following from Pécuchet: "Where is the rule then, and what hope can we have of success or profit?"⁴⁷ Like Qoheleth's, their questions are sadly rhetorical. And here lies the Power: the inaccessibility of understanding. Most importantly, they cannot understand the divorce between deed and consequence which they continually experience. They follow the rules but they are in turn deceived:

When they were capable of utterance, they asked themselves the cause of so many misfortunes... It was all beyond their comprehension, except that they had nearly died [after a fiasco in their chemistry "lab"]...

And, still early on in the story, they critically misjudge the cause:

...Pécuchet concluded with these words: 'Perhaps it is because we don't know any chemistry!'⁴⁸

But as they continue their search they start to formulate a cause. They eventually abandon chemistry, linking their failure to the "crookedness" of the created order: "Creation is put together in such an elusive and transitory fashion; we should do better to take up something else!"⁴⁹ Later on, and more critically,

⁴⁶ *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, pp. 28-29. Compare the following passage: "If they did not know where they stood with ceramics and Celticism it was because they were ignorant of history, especially the history of France" (p. 118).

⁴⁷ *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, p. 56.

⁴⁸ *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, pp. 67-68.

⁴⁹ *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, p. 99.

they make a link which I believe constitutes a key passage for the overall plan of the book. Discussing myths, their conversation runs as follows:

"How can you admit", Bouvard objected, "that fables are truer than the truths of historians?" Pécuchet tried to explain myths, and lost himself in the *Scienza Nuova*. "Are you trying to deny the plan of Providence?" [asked Pécuchet] "I don't know it", said Bouvard.⁵⁰

And here lies the source of the Power which refuses them the attainment of the Object: God has made creation and "the plan of Providence" inscrutable.

Qoheleth's story shares many qualities with Flaubert's, and some of the suggested reasons behind Flaubert's overall cynical outlook may make us wonder about the impetus behind Qoheleth's outlook. For example, it is commonly held that *Bouvard et Pécuchet* is a stinging satire on the concurrent tendency to take the published word as gospel truth. It is thought that the satire was aimed in particular at the concurrent idealistic project of Diderot to create an inexhaustible and authoritative compendium of knowledge, *L'Encyclopédie*.⁵¹ This raises the question of whether Qoheleth's story may have had some social satire in it. Perhaps since Qoheleth's character is set in fantastic circumstance, and the things he says are often hyperbolic, this is not too far-stretched an idea. Perhaps Qoheleth is himself a ruse of sorts to make a stinging satire out of those who "seek for what is too hard" (Sir. 3.21). I am, however, not sure that I believe this (it depends on circumstances that are unknown; with Flaubert we have many advantages in, for example, knowing who the author is). But in that we may account for Bouvard and Pécuchet's folly by such a theory we may be open to see an element of satire in Qoheleth's. In fact, the implied circumstance may not even be necessary in that the older Qoheleth provides the necessary sobriety that the image of the cynical Flaubert provides for the satirical theory of his novel's composition. Indeed, as there is sympathy from Flaubert for his fumbling

⁵⁰ *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, p. 123.

⁵¹ Pierce, "Echoes of the Past", p. 81.

protagonists, there is sympathy from Qoheleth for his misapprehending younger self. It is the balance of sympathy against indifference (and mockery), however, that raises another question.

Bouvard and Pécuchet's failures are plainly stated. They attempt to grow orchards and the trees end up dead for being poorly placed. They attempt to make preserves and the fruit rots for improper sealing. Usually their failure is due to a lack of implied common sense,⁵² but at all times they are up against insurmountable odds and there is nothing to help them. As a result they become islands to themselves and reject the community around them and attempts at friendship. Failure, for Bouvard and Pécuchet, leads to despair. Flaubert in his depiction of failure offers little sympathy for the two stumbling protagonists. Indeed, they are often regarded as a source of humour at their own expense. Sarcasm abounds. Flaubert describes their blowing up the chemistry lab as "a noise like a shell bursting" and how afterwards a servant "found a spatula in the yard".⁵³ We learn that during their attempt in their "lab" to concoct the ultimate cream for baking, "Pécuchet mumbled calculations, motionless in his long blouse, a sort of child's smock with sleeves; and they considered themselves to be very serious men, doing a useful job."⁵⁴ Also, there is an implied condemnation from Flaubert in that Bouvard and Pécuchet are usually depicted as learning only in a cursory manner, and in a way to suggest that had they restricted their learning to one area and realized their limitations (as opposed to flirting with the limitless) they would have known success. It would be unfair, however, as A.J. Krailsheimer rightly suggests, to think that Flaubert simply

⁵² Flaubert even depicts them attempting to understand the idea of "common sense" and then making a mess of it (*Bouvard et Pécuchet*, pp. 208-209).

⁵³ *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, p. 67. Perhaps the most amusing episode is that of Bouvard attempting to manipulate his body heat by wriggling his pelvis about in the bathtub for three hours, on the notion that "Some scientists maintain that animal heat is developed by muscular contractions..." (pp. 74-76 [75]).

⁵⁴ *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, p. 66.

used these characters as "mere butts for [his] sarcasm and satire".⁵⁵ Flaubert often shows sympathy with their plight in striking fashion. He describes their emotions with a seemingly empathetic passion. When the local doctor mocks their attempts at medicine, we read that he "deeply wounded them".⁵⁶ When Bouvard imagines a loving child, realizing that he will never have one, we read that "the good fellow wept".⁵⁷ When they are devastated by the destruction of their crops by fire we read that "Bouvard cried softly as he looked at the fire. His eyes disappeared beneath the swollen lids and his whole face seemed as if it were puffed out with grief."⁵⁸ There is even at times, in the characters' unmasking of the contradictions of books that they read, an implied respect for their however limited critical capacities.

And here lies a curious likeness to Ecclesiastes. The older Qoheleth often implies condemnation of the younger. That is, by instructing the reader to enjoy life and not be vexed by the pain of observation, he castigates his former self. There may even be hints of mockery in the farce-like descriptions of his Solomonic experience ("I got myself male and female singers, and the delights of the sons of humanity: concubines and concubines!", 2.8b). At the same *time* (for he speaks only from one "later" narrative stance), however, he often identifies positively with the folly of the younger. That is, in lamenting he pities; in describing with poetry the grief that comes from the weight of absurdity he draws us to pity those who experience it with such hardship and endurance, as he once did. There are even hints, in his advice to the young and in his final poem especially, of melancholic longing, as if he somehow missed the vigour and adventure of youth. Such a balance raises questions (with whom do we sympathize? and why?) and our conception of it determines to an extent what we

⁵⁵ "Introduction", *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, p. 15.

⁵⁶ *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, p. 73.

⁵⁷ *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, p. 270.

⁵⁸ *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, p. 51.

will take the overall meaning of the book to be.

There are other likenesses among the two works that are worth noting. 1) "Both *Ecclesiastes* and *Bouvard et Pécuchet*", states Pierce, "return the protagonists, after a series of repetitious searches, to their starting point."⁵⁹

There is a cyclical and perhaps pointless facet to the odyssey of Bouvard and Pécuchet in that there is no real progression in their quest, only "fixity and death".⁶⁰ Also, they both literally return to their beginning. In the notes for the plan of the projected final chapter they return to Paris and again become copyists. Flaubert's last words in these point by point notes are, "They go to work."

2) Like Qoheleth, searching led to frustration, even illness. Again and again the protagonists return to start their insatiable quest from nothing, having lost and been (sometimes physically) hurt in the process. "He was disturbed by doubts", we learn of Pécuchet, "... He wanted to reconcile doctrines with works, critics with poets, grasp the essence of the Beautiful; and these questions exercised him so much that his liver was upset. As a result he got jaundice."⁶¹

3) Flaubert's (anti?) heroes, in the occasional moment of graceful clarity, saw the divorce between deed and consequence clearly and painfully. When they contemplated suicide, they "tried to imagine [death] in the form of intense darkness...anything was better than this monotonous, absurd, hopeless existence."⁶² After realizing that folly truly disturbed them, they thought about, among other things, "the things people said in their village...[and] they felt as if the heaviness of the entire earth were weighing down on them".⁶³

Obviously, there are a great number of texts that deal with universal

⁵⁹ Pierce, "Echoes of the Past", p. 81.

⁶⁰ Pierce, "Echoes of the Past", p. 83.

⁶¹ *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, p. 145.

⁶² *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, p. 219.

⁶³ *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, p. 217. Krailsheimer suggests that this text is key to understanding the "overall plan" of the book ("Introduction", p. 13).

themes such as those I have touched on in this comparison, and the selection of texts for comparison is arguably arbitrary. Comparison, however, like laughter, enables us to hold objects to another light in order to see them in relation to something else, something which may be culturally closer to us. It has offered, in this case, a distinctly modern gauge by which to measure Qoheleth's story against itself (and has also thereby demonstrated the timelessness of Qoheleth's story—not presuming, however, that such a demonstration were necessary). And perhaps it has been beneficial to look at another book whose "ambiguities can never be resolved because they are part of the irony inseparable from any praise of folly".⁶⁴

5. *Redemption and Remembrance*

[An] attempt at remembering...is at the same time searching for a hidden treasure, for a last delivering word, redeeming in the final appeal a destiny that doubted its own value...[the autobiographer] brings [reconciliation] about in the very act of reassembling the scattered elements of a destiny that seems...to have been worth the trouble of living.

—G. Gusdorf⁶⁵

We live in memory and by memory, and our spiritual life is at bottom simply the effort of our memory to persist, to transform itself into hope...into our future

—Miguel de Unamuno⁶⁶

I have already mentioned the fact that Qoheleth gradually moves from quest to expression—from ignorance to search, to knowledge, to the dictum that knowledge is absurd. There is another subtle shift. Most of the texts that directly express the quest occur in the first seven chapters. In the latter part of the book, however, Qoheleth speaks less of the story of his youth and more of his

⁶⁴ Krailsheimer, "Introduction", *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, p. 16.

⁶⁵ "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography", p. 39.

⁶⁶ As cited in Kerby, *Narrative and the Self*, p. 21.

"present" concern. He addresses the reader with a certainty that betrays the style of questioning that I sketched out above, and that certainty has mostly to do with the fact that he admits his failures and his inability to know—he is certain that he is ignorant. In fact, he is adamant about his ignorance. For he *understood* (עָרַךְ) that he failed to understand wisdom and folly (1.17; *passim*). (At least in this regard he is, like a good postmodernist, content without closure.) That hard-won ignorance forms the basis of his strategy in the latter half of the book: the imparting of advice to the addressee.

Qoheleth's advice does not simply arrive out of the blue, however. He explicitly links it to his narrated experience. At 7.13, for example, he asks the reader to "consider the work of God", and to conclude with him that what God has made crooked cannot be made straight. The sequential reader will remember that in 1.13-15 Qoheleth did precisely the same. He observed and considered what God had given humanity to be busy with as well as all the deeds that are done under the sun, and then concluded that "What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted" (1.15). He continues by giving the reader a *reason* to consider his own conclusions: "I observed everything in the days of my absurdity [in the days of my youth?]" (7.15a). That is, this advice is based on the extreme circumstances of his youth when he observed all of the travesties and absurdities of "justice" (7.15b; cf. 3.16-17).⁶⁷ In fact, all of his later words of advice are by necessity refined in the fire of the memorable experiences of his youth. Overall, the shift is from radical experience to knowledge (although not of a kind that he initially sought).

The importance of advice and Qoheleth's attempt to crystallize it are reflected in the gradual change in narratorial voice—from the density of first-

⁶⁷ Even when advice is given on its own it is linked to experience. Passages such as 8.3-5 have Qoheleth's Solomonic experience as their foundation. And 8.16; 9.1; 10.5 are clear examples of Qoheleth establishing an experiential basis for the observations and advice that follow.

person (ch. 2) to the density of second-person narration (ch. 11). The following graph shows this striking shift in relation to the first-person form.⁶⁸

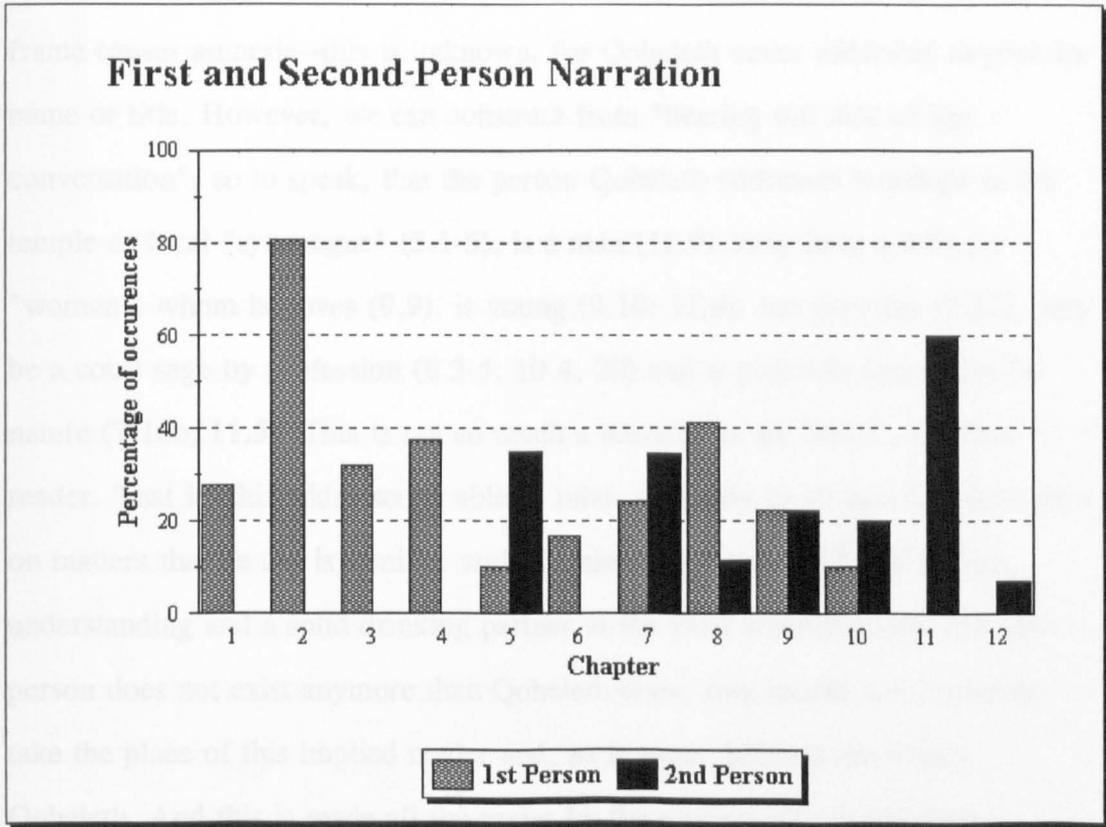


figure 7.

The graph demonstrates well the shift from experience to advice and an overall strategy in which the reader becomes more and more a part of the narrated text, for readers can and do include themselves in the audience that Qoheleth addresses. Allow me to elaborate this point.

⁶⁸ In various instances the second person is indicated by the pronominal suffix (ך), imperative verb forms (e.g. שלח at 11.1), indirect speech (e.g. אשר תאמר at 12.1 which governs the remainder of that poem). In the graph I have omitted the second-person verb תעשה at 8.4 which is indirect speech at a level removed from Qoheleth's narration ("Who may say to him [the king], 'What are you doing [תעשה]?'") and also the two instances of second-person as addressed to "the land" at 10.16-17. For the formula used for calculating the graph, see p. 35 n. 72.

The narratee is the character who is addressed in the "space" of the text itself. At the outer level of the frame this is the frame narrator's son. At the inner level of Qoheleth's narration—in which readers are more involved, since the frame causes amnesia—this is unknown, for Qoheleth never addresses anyone by name or title. However, we can construct from "hearing one side of the conversation", so to speak, that the person Qoheleth addresses worships at the temple or local "synagogue" (5.1-5), is a man (11.9), may have a wife (or "woman") whom he loves (9.9), is young (9.10; 11.9), has servants (7.21), may be a court sage by profession (8.3-5; 10.4, 20) and is probably inquisitive by nature (7.16b; 11.5). This is not so much a narratee as an "ideal", implied reader. That is, this addressee is able to relate perfectly to all that Qoheleth says on matters that he too is familiar with. In him Qoheleth would find solace, understanding and a solid drinking partner at the local watering hole. But this person does not exist anymore than Qoheleth does. Any reader can, however, take the place of this implied reader and, as it were, befriend the lonely Qoheleth. And this is made all the easier by the element of second-person narration, which, although the narratee has the above qualities, still does not provide a name. A name would have meant a barrier in this regard and its absence suggests that Qoheleth desired a wide audience to identify as much as possible with this narrated construct.

There is another element that enables this reading activity. As W.P. Brown states, "underlying Qoheleth's reflections is an explicit awareness that the formation of personal character is a primary goal of wisdom".⁶⁹ This includes the formation not only of his own character (which is dealt with by the story proper of the quest) but also, and primarily, the character of the narratee to whom is addressed his advice. Here is where readers can participate, as it were,

⁶⁹ Forthcoming study on characterization in the wisdom literature.

in the narrative world, for they are free to suspend disbelief and sense this concern for character formation (which is in Qoheleth's case very appealing since it ultimately concerns, as we shall see, living with/in joy), and in turn test the conditions that Qoheleth lays down for it.

The shift in voice further underscores Qoheleth's "then" and "now" narrative stances established by first-person narration. But bringing the relationship between these stances into sharper focus also raises questions. Whereas we are able to comprehend much of the "then" narration of his youth—his circumstance, his desires, his failures and so on—we know little if anything about the time of his narration, the "now". He is, in whatever sense, no longer a king and he is older. But what are the influences on Qoheleth as he speaks in the "now" dimension? What did he (or "does he", as a character) *feel* as he narrated? One can speculate that the stance is largely influenced by the act of remembering, for the implied experience involved in re-telling his memories is necessarily emotional. Memories are by nature emotive and evoke emotions ranging from shame to euphoria. Indeed, if memories did not evoke some kind of feeling they would perhaps not be memories at all, for they would not be capable of being recollected. They would not be marked with an emotional tag by which they could be drawn from the subconscious mind.

But Qoheleth's "now" emotions are not shown to readers. He relates his past, so to speak, expressionlessly. Yet when Qoheleth states that "I hated life" (2.17-18), is he only referring to his younger disposition? How do we deal with this as a story? Does he still hate life *while* he recounts his tale? When he states that he "turned to despair" his heart (2.20), is he only referring to his lamentable past? Or does he "still" despair? I do not think that he does. For, as I stated above, the narrated story redeems Qoheleth's earlier pessimism and despair by virtue of its being set in the past. This is the transforming power of autobiography. And by this we are brought back to the competing themes of

success and failure discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Without a doubt Qoheleth has failed in the act of his quest, but his success lies in the telling of his story. Further, by resolving himself to the fact that part of the wisdom of his old age was that he had learned the criteria of the deeper meaning he sought, he redeems the failure of his youth. Since the "now" can only emerge from the "brooding consciousness" of the "then", the "now" is necessarily refined by the fire of the "then". If readers lose their grasp of this narrative structure they become in danger of getting lost in the "then" of Qoheleth's most pessimistic reflection. Indeed, when Qoheleth breaks out with joy it is almost exclusively when he narrates in a "now" to the "reader" (see below).

One emphasis of Qoheleth's "now" advice is on the practical behaviour of the "reader", and this effects changes in regard to the actors and elements of the actantial model as it applies to his quest. The new Subject is the ideal/implicit reader (with which real readers might identify) in that, in Qoheleth's story, it has the role of seeking understanding and respectively failing (humanity *and* Qoheleth fail), but also of seeking God's enablement for a joyful life. The new Object of the new Subject, instead of *understanding*, which brings only grief, is practical living and enjoyment of life. Wisdom can now be a true Helper, without deceit. Whereas wisdom failed Qoheleth in the purpose for which he applied it, it will function adequately for the reader's purpose. This is not in the deeper sense of "becoming wise" but in the practical sense of effectively "getting by". In fact, Qoheleth has nothing bad to say about such wisdom, generally speaking (see above, p. 255). This helps us to make sense of those passages where Qoheleth praises wisdom and its effects, for on the whole they are addressed to the reader, the new Subject. The Opponent will only be its opposite, folly.

As early as 3.22 Qoheleth prepares the way for this shift in the actantial model: "So I observed that there is nothing better than that humanity should rejoice in their deeds. Indeed, that is their portion; for who will bring them to

see what will be after them?" No one can bring them to see or understand the future—their fate—even as it unfolds, but at least they have another, more feasible Object: their portion of joy. Further, they ("humanity", addressee and reader) should not attempt to "become truly wise" (7.16; cf. 2.15; 7.23-24), for that was Qoheleth's Object and he failed to obtain it. Although they fail in Qoheleth's model (they cannot discover) they may at least rejoice in their deeds and thereby succeed at another level.

It is important to note (in relation to the "new" model) that Qoheleth's advice is neither naïve nor uncritical. That is, Qoheleth does not set the reader up for failure in the ways that he failed. The advice that he offers is no more a "sure thing" than his own enterprise. Indeed, he cites the practical outcome of wisdom for the addressee (11.3) *alongside* the absurd experience of it (11.4-5). He also states that wisdom is generally an advantage (7.11-12, 19; 9.16-10.1), but that fate will not be influenced or changed by it or by anything else under the sun (9.2, 11-12; 10.8-11; *passim*). This is precisely why the wise have no ultimate advantage over fools (6.8). Furthermore, in texts where Qoheleth suggests that God will empower people to enjoy what they have (esp. 2.25-26; 5.18-19; 6.2), joy is not imparted conditionally but is solely a gift of God, the recipient of which is determined by the giver (and there is "nothing better" than when this gift of God is given; 2.24; 3.12-13; cf. 3.22). It is in these texts that the Power of the new model is established. Whether people can enjoy all of the riches and goods God gives them depends on whether or not he chooses further to empower them to do so. At 2.25 Qoheleth asks, "Who can eat/enjoy (יאכל) apart from him?"⁷⁰ For it is only to those with whom he is pleased that he gives wisdom (but what kind?), knowledge and joy. But to the sinner God gives more toil, and

⁷⁰ That is, God, following the majority of commentaries and LXX in the emendation of MT's ממוני to ממונו. The previous verse quite blatantly sets the context for such a reading by stating that there is "nothing better" than to eat, drink and take pleasure in toil, for "this is from the hand of God" (כי מיד האלהים היא).

the fruit of that toil to the one who pleases God (2.26). (Note that for Qoheleth, a sinner [part. of חַטָּא] is not necessarily one who offends God but is one with whom God is displeased for whatever reason⁷¹—the integrity of God's choice as the Power thereby remains intact.) Qoheleth does not appear to approve of this situation, for he goes on to say in the same verse that this was absurd and a pursuit of wind, but his doctrine (or rather, formulation as the result of empirical observation) is clear. It becomes even more clear in the small but weighty discrepancy observed between 5.19 and 6.2. In both verses there is a common figure: a man to whom God has given riches, wealth and (in 6.2) honour. But in 5.19 God enables that man to enjoy it (הַשְּׁלִיט לֵאכֹל מִמֶּנּוּ) whereas in 6.2 God does not enable that man to enjoy it (וְלֹא־שְׁלִיטְנוּ הָאֱלֹהִים לֵאכֹל מִמֶּנּוּ). Instead, a stranger enjoys it—not a sage or a fool, not a righteous person or a sinner, but a stranger (נֹכְרִי). No reason is given for the difference in God's choice (although note that Qoheleth clearly disapproves of the latter case which is an evil [6.1], while the former case is good [5.18]). As in Qoheleth's model, the reason for the will of the Power is vexatiously inscrutable.

Other "joy" texts, however, put the responsibility for joy squarely on the "reader":

Go! Eat your bread with joy,
 and drink your wine with a glad heart;
 For God has already approved your deeds.
 At all times let your garments be white,
 and let oil not be lacking on your head.
 Enjoy life with a woman whom you love, all the days of your absurd life
 that he has given you under the sun—all your absurd days; for this is your
 portion in life, and in the toil at which you toil.

⁷¹ Qoheleth uses the participle in two senses. The other sense is found at 7.10 where Qoheleth states that there is no one righteous who does good and does not sin (cf. 8.12). With such a moral sense it is not possible to place the sinner and the one who pleases God as opposites since the latter does not exist. The sense found in 2.26 is also found in 7.26 where the "sinner" is again contrasted to the one who pleases God. In the end the fate of the moral sinner and the one who "does good" (albeit imperfectly) are ultimately the same: death (9.1; cf. 2.16).

All that your hand finds to do, do with your strength; for there is no activity, or reasoning, or knowledge, or wisdom in Sheol where you are going. (9.7-10)

God has perhaps ultimately provided the ability to work and to enjoy (he is still the beginning and end of the individual's self and identity), but he is, as it were, one step removed. This is a human plane of activity, for *God has already approved your deeds*—the command is already given. And in the end God will judge you, as the rabbis I believe rightly understood, not concerning what you have discovered or attained, not concerning what enablement he has bestowed on you to enjoy life, but concerning the *doing* of these things:

Rejoice, O young man, in your youth.
 And let your heart gladden you in the days of your youth.
 And walk in the ways of your heart,
 and in the sight of your eyes.
 And know for certain that *concerning all of these things*
 God will bring you into judgment. (11.9)

Here the joy is human but the imperative is divine. There is a clear divide between what the reader/recipient of Qoheleth's advice is *able* to do and *enabled* to do. It is not that God should be forgotten,⁷² or that enjoyment means amoral behaviour, but that God has given a heart that is already capable of rejoicing and that the activities of everyday life (eating, drinking, dressing, lovemaking) are all able to be infused with joy.

There are, then, two distinct strains of joy texts. In one God chooses (as the Power) to enable or not to enable enjoyment. In the other, joy is accessible through the help of wisdom in daily life and the responsibility for that joy is the reader's. Taken altogether the actants of the new model can be represented as follows:

⁷² Indeed, quite the opposite is the case. Note that fearing God is key to Qoheleth's advice (3.14; 5.7; 7.18; 8.12-13) and that the most important injunction of all is to *remember* your creator (see below).

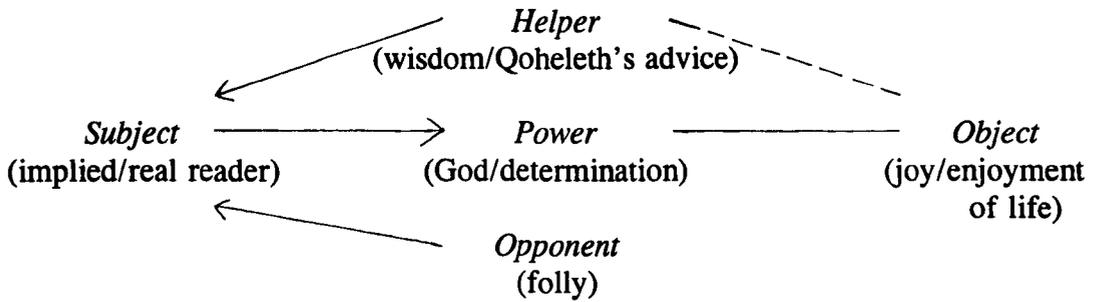


figure 8.

Qoheleth told the story of the failure to obtain his chosen Object, and in this respect the quest was, from the beginning, over. But from that juncture of failure Qoheleth relates what he has learned and points the reader to an obtainable Object. This is great autobiography in that by conveying the wisdom of a deeply-lived life the folly of youth is redeemed. Although readers are still caught in his absurd predicament, day-to-day enjoyment and satisfaction is within their own grasp. Qoheleth's quest is therefore by no means the end of the story, for his prevailing concern is to show readers of his story how to live with the absurd.

There is another kind of redemption present in Qoheleth's story, and it applies not only to his earlier narrated experience but also to the absurd condition in which he and the reader find themselves—that redemption is the act of remembering. Qoheleth makes clear that remembering is important (see Excursus 2.4), and in the act of telling his story he has remembered what is presumably important to him. To re-member is to re-construct (Qoheleth has reconstructed a story-world from his experiences), and it is in this sense that Qoheleth redeems his—and the reader's—experience of the absurd; that is, by simply telling his story. For every story (particularly one which, like Qoheleth's, involves the strategy of recollection) is a making new and a creation of meaning when perhaps there was none to begin with. As Kierkegaard recognized, the whole process of recollecting redeems events that are absurd, cyclical or even meaningless, and creates meaning:

When the Greeks said that all knowing is recollecting, they said that all existence, which is, has been; when one says that life is a repetition, one says: actuality, which has been, now comes into existence. If one does not have the category of recollection or of repetition, all life dissolves into an empty, meaningless noise.⁷³

By recollecting, Qoheleth "made" his otherwise disjointed experience meaningful as a narrative, thereby transcending the cyclical and the absurd (which constitute the failed outcome of his quest).

Making new in this way also means making something different from what it once was while maintaining continuity with the past. "Each time we relate a story", suggests Judith Fishman, "it is both old and new: there are the events that we draw from our lives that we construct into a text and there is the new—our angle of vision, our selection, our memory...our interpretation, our age, the moment of writing."⁷⁴ This brings us back to the sense of self in Qoheleth's story. The act of memory is intimately connected to self and identity since what we remember is uniquely our own, and through it we relate the way we see the world and interpret those events of our lives that are worthy of remembrance. This contributes to the fictional quality of Qoheleth's story in that his is a reconstruction, for recollection is not the past "as it actually happened", but *as* we remember it. Narrated recollection cannot help but imaginatively refigure, interpret and imbue significance to the experience it recollects and to the "now" experience of the narrator. Indeed, as the philosopher and poet George Santayana realized, more than our empirical faculty, recollection involves the imagination.

When I remember I do not look at my past experience, any more than when I think of a friend's misfortunes I look at his thoughts. I imagine them: or rather I imagine something of my own manufacture, as if I were writing a novel and I attribute this intuited experience to myself in the past, or to the other person.⁷⁵

⁷³ *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, p. 149.

⁷⁴ "Enclosures: The Narrative within Autobiography", p. 29.

⁷⁵ Cited in Kerby, *Narrative and the Self*, p. 30.

Writing fiction and remembering are of the same cloth. Qoheleth's remembering is uniquely his own and as an act of remembrance and imagination, like any good story, easily engages our imaginations.

Of course, Qoheleth's most poignant ode to the act of remembering is his final "set-piece" (Fisch's word), the poem of 12.1-7. I will not rehearse the history of its interpretation or discuss what it might refer to (there is plenty of this in the commentaries), for that would detract from the purpose at hand, which is to allow Qoheleth's sense of poetic urgency and the importance of memory here to be felt. I therefore offer my own translation of a passage that, for what it is worth, is among my most treasured anywhere.

Remember your creator in the days of your youth;
 Before the days of misery come and the years draw nigh,
 when you will say, "I have no delight in them";
 Before the darkening of the sun and the light,
 and the moon and the stars;
 And the clouds return after the rain;
 In the day when the keepers of the house tremble,
 and the men of strength are bent over;
 And the women at the mill cease since they are few,
 and the ladies who gaze through the windows are darkened;
 And doors in the street are closed,
 and the sound of the mill is low;
 And the voice of the bird wanes,
 and all the daughters of song are brought low;
 When some fear heights,
 and terrors are in the road;
 And the almond tree blossoms,
 and the locust is heavy laden,
 and the caperberry buds;
 While humanity goes to their eternal home,
 and the mourners encompass the street;
 Before the silver cord is snapped,
 and the golden bowl is crushed;
 And a pitcher is broken at the spring,
 and the wheel is crushed in the pit;
 And the dust returns to the earth as it was,
 and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

More than anything else this is poetry and demands reading as such. Ellul states

the case well when he writes that

everyone reads this passage like an enigma from which we must find the allegorical meaning of each term... I think the poem is too vast for this, and too "polysemous"... It is *first of all* a poem! In other words, it is not at all a problem to solve... First of all we must let the beauty of the text grip us, as we listen to it in silence, like music. We should let the poem strike our emotions first, and allow our sensitivity and imagination to speak before we try to analyze and "understand" it.⁷⁶

With this in mind I will relate my own reading.

I am reminded of images that grow dim, whether in the memory or before my eyes; of dreams and ideals that were once cherished and strong but have now diminished. I am reminded of the line of a folk song, "Don't our dreams die hard in the ashes of destiny?"⁷⁷ By this I am reminded that everything fades to death. Indeed, as Qoheleth's reader I am reminded that everything eventually darkens, ceases, trembles, fears, closes and wanes in its own time. And yet I am lifted by other images: a bird sings, the seasonal fertility of spring continues (the locust is heavy laden) despite the ceasing of all that is under the sun. The closing images remind me of the break-down of an established society: the silver and golden furnishings eventually wear out, and the machinery by which we live (the pitcher, the wheel in the pit, all technology for living) becomes broken and will eventually be replaced, along with any meaning that that technology once held for its users. Finally, I am reminded of the end of everyone, and in the return to God I am left with hope. I am lifted for a moment from all the trappings of the absurd, perhaps above what is "under the sun" in Qoheleth's eyes, and yet I am brought back to the reality of Qoheleth's experience in a moment when I read, "'Absurdity of absurdities', said Qoheleth. 'Everything is absurd'" (12.8). That is my "felt" reading.

⁷⁶ *Reason for Being*, p. 285.

⁷⁷ Mark Heard, "Another Good Lie", from the album, *Dry Bones Dance* (Ideola Music, 1991).

Ellul goes on to convey his own sensitive reading which is worth citing, at least in part:

As I read this poem...it calls to mind all declines, all breaches, closures, and endings. Not just the decline of an individual nearing death, not just human destiny, but everything: the end of any work which is no longer done, which disappears because no one is present to do it anymore...the end of a village or community...the end of a love replaced by fear; the end of an art, its works shattered, unless they die in our museums... It is the song of the End.⁷⁸

H. Fisch's sensitive reading is also worth citing:

But there is something beyond death and vanity [in 12.1-7]. What counts is the life that is given us, the remembering, the testimony. Undercutting and contradicting the grave poetry of dying is the purposeful rhythm of living... Before the days come when the sun, the light, the moon and the stars are darkened, we are to do our remembering, to remember beginnings and endings, to count our days. If we do well...we shall perhaps be remembered in our turn, even after we are returned to dust and the golden bowl is shattered and all its fragile beauty, its fascination, its charm, its near-perfection have been seen as vanity.⁷⁹

Fisch captures well the element of redemption in Qoheleth's closing words.

Qoheleth has left behind the intellectual battle, the attempt to address our intellect, and has crafted words of beauty to remind us of the fragility of living and dying. Here is a redemption stunning in its depth and grace, brimming with the wonder of youth (for it places the reader "in" the opposite of old age and of a world that is only ceasing), yet the sadness of Qoheleth's "now" is present. The refrain, "before" the ceasing of everything, is the dominant idea and he cannot reverse the vexation of his own life, but he redeems for himself his experience of the loss of youth and the futility of his attempts to gain true understanding. Yet the understanding he demonstrates here is, as his final word, incomparably better, for it will not bring the curse of **הבל**. And here lies his final redemption. By empathetically and elegantly prompting readers to remember (and re-membering

⁷⁸ *Reason for Being*, pp. 285-86.

⁷⁹ "Qohelet: A Hebrew Ironist", p. 178.

itself is a form of redemption) their creator in the face of the end of everything (and this reminder unfolds after the import of living joyfully is related in 11.9), he enables "those who will hear" to live with the absurdity of dying.

CONCLUSION

Better the end of a thing than its beginning.
—Qoheleth (Eccl. 7.8)

In my own reading of secondary literature I have been struck by the disparity inherent in the co-existence of a general narrative understanding (as represented in the quotes in Chapter 1.1, for example) and the aversion to the application of narrative criticism for the purpose of analysis. Although scholars of Ecclesiastes like to imagine that Qoheleth's "brooding consciousness" is at its centre, clearly it is the emphasis on what Qoheleth said, and not how he said it, or for what reasons he said it in that way, that has been the predominant focus of Qoheleth-studies. Why the dysfunctional enterprise?

Perhaps the aversion to narrative approaches to Ecclesiastes lies in the relative mistrust of narratives as a contendable academic form of expression. As Judith Summerfield writes concerning American higher education,

I suggest...that we loosen what Jimmy Britton calls "the stranglehold that the expository essay has maintained over writing in American higher education". He notes, as well, that "if today's winds of change are any indication at all, narrative will be a candidate for a leading role among those forms of discourse that will replace the expository essay".¹

That aversion quite possibly fortifies the reluctance to see in the works we study a narrative form, a reluctance to adopt a way of reading. In the case of Ecclesiastes, such a perspective has perhaps also been obscured by the clouds kicked up by those armies of redactors whom we, maybe too easily, imagine to have assaulted and maligned some *Urtext* of Qoheleth's tale.

I have attempted to redress this interpretive imbalance by reading Ecclesiastes using the tools that narrative criticism has to offer. I have not

¹ "Framing Narratives", p. 238.

categorically argued that Ecclesiastes can *only* be understood as narrative. Rather, this study has been an experiment in what happens when Ecclesiastes is investigated with confidence in its narrative quality. I have taken an idea and applied it to determine its consequences, and in the process I have necessarily said some things which will appear to be extreme (especially since the narrative approach implies a rejection of other approaches as it involves seeing the text "one way", as a story). This in turn has left some questions open. While I have showed, for example, that Ecclesiastes can be read as narrative I must admit that the definition of narrative is constantly being expanded and is largely culturally defined. That is, we call Bergman's *Through a Glass Darkly* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* stories, even though they do not operate with functional events in a time sequence of some kind (and if they do it is barely perceptible). But reading something as a narrative is a readerly decision. Readers can read Ecclesiastes as an unconnected collection of wisdom sayings, or they can just as easily read it with an awareness of its narrative quality and of the features of its story-line.

Such a reading carries implications which can be compared to those raised by Solomonic readings. Readers after Martin Luther were "freed" to discuss critically authorship and the multi-layered attributes stemming from textual traditions. This in turn created all kinds of theoretical possibilities, some of which, in the manner of the documentary hypothesis, became virtually doctrinal. As we have seen, the narrative method also creates distinct interpretive possibilities and makes good, as it were, the implied commitment to a narrative approach latent in so much of modern Qoheleth-studies. One is a construct of authorship that readers read with (Solomon as author), while the other is a construct of text that asks, What is its genre? What are its overall strategies of communication? In what way and on what levels does a story take place?

Another "open question" is whether this approach has dealt satisfactorily

with non-narrative material in Ecclesiastes. I have not considered in-depth either the poetry sections or the blocks of wisdom sayings. We have seen, however, how portions of each of these have informed particularly narrative strategies (e.g. 4.1-3; 7.23-29; 12.1-7). But there are two other considerations in my favour. The first is that the poems can be seen as mirror-texts for the whole of Qoheleth's experience. The time poem (3.1-8), for example, has been seen by F. Zimmermann to reflect Qoheleth's life experience—as a microcosm of the larger story.² Also, all of the "non-narrative" material is in a narrative setting (see figures 1 and 4) and there are no "markers" to suggest that they should be considered to be outside of the story proper. The narrative integrity (of voice, person, stance and so on) throughout the whole is firmly intact; indeed, it evidences stylistic strategies. Finally, Qoheleth's advice (much of which appears in the blocks of wisdom-sayings in chs. 7 and 10), refined in the fire of his "earlier" experience, is spoken in the second person and functions largely to redeem the story/life of the protagonist, Qoheleth.

In closing I would like to explain how I came to apply the narrative approach to Ecclesiastes. After one of my readings I conjectured that Ecclesiastes was a story. I was struck by the vitality of character that held the strings of observation together, the elements of time played on my mind and a good story emerged clearly from what was a sometimes murky reading experience. In fact, it felt *more* than a conjecture—it was as if I had understood the book on a whole new level. Therefore, this whole study arises and pays homage to a reading experience. This brings me to the role of the imagination in reading that I discussed in Chapter 9.5 and that I would like to describe briefly here.

In my reading experience I can easily imagine Qoheleth telling his story, and can visualize a setting: a one-man play. For this is one context in which we

² See *Inner World*, pp. 44-49. Zimmermann argues that the narrativity of the poem reflects Qoheleth's "life-script".

may be told a story and allow the teller of the story to detract into maxims which convey the story's essence or "point(s)". Such a setting also aids in the important realization that Qoheleth's story emanates from a person: that is, the narrative character that is more cohesive than what we have usually allowed for. When we read Proverbs we imagine the voice of wisdom, or perhaps for the more "educated" the voice of many redactors is heard (for some it may be the voice of God), but when we read Qoheleth it is the uni-voice of the cynic. Or is it the joyful optimist? Or is it the unique Hebrew intellectual? Whoever it is, it is Qoheleth the individual and it is his story that we hear. Of course, the frame narrator is the (Victorian?) stage itself, and Qoheleth sits in a rocking chair in a drafty room with a fireplace and *many* books on his shelves. Behind him flash the scenes of his youth while he tells his story: vineyards, kingdoms, oppressions of peoples, images of toiling, searching and of intermittent rest. Sometimes he gets up from his chair to speak directly to the audience, relating what is most important to take away, to remember, to know and to rejoice in. And this is where the real contribution of a narrative approach lies: the elucidation of that central figure who searches for relief from his absurd condition.

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