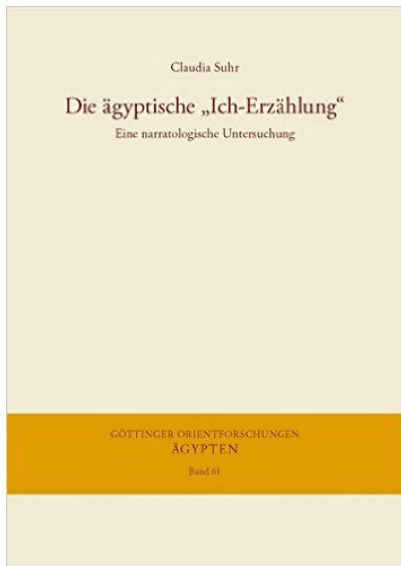


RBL 03/2020



Claudia Suhr

Die Ägyptische „Ich-Erzählung“: Eine Narratologische Untersuchung

Gottinger Orientforschungen: Ägypten 61

Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2016. Pp. vi + 188. Paper.
\$65.00. ISBN 9783447105712.

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Claudia Suhr's *Die ägyptische „Ich-Erzählung“: Eine narratologische Untersuchung* is the first full length treatment of ancient Egyptian literature that uses narratology as its theoretical approach. Suhr gives two reasons for her study. The first is the prevalence of first-person narration in Egyptian literature. Although a third-person omniscient perspective dominates, as is the case for most literature, many prominent Egyptian works employ a narrating figure who speaks as an "I" who is identical to a central protagonist in the story. It is reasonable to assume, states Suhr, that an Egyptian author faced the possibility of using the first-person and must have chosen that approach for a particular goal. The second reason is one of method: by applying narratology, Suhr wishes to demonstrate an alternative to what she describes as an "intuitive" approach to literature, one that marries learnedness in European literary history and a facility with close reading with a traditional historical and philological approach (in Egyptology, R. B. Parkinson is the preeminent example). As a desideratum, this resonates in the field of ancient Hebrew narrative, where it is often hard to follow the lead of virtuosi such as Robert Alter and Meir Sternberg.

The body of the book comprises two parts, after a brief introduction, where Suhr states her methods and goals, and followed by a conclusion. The first part, "Der theoretische Rahmen," is theoretical and only occasionally addresses matters of Egyptian literature. Here Suhr introduces narratology and focuses in particular on the phenomenon of

narration in the first-person. Suhr dwells on aspects that are useful for expounding upon first-person storytelling, which uniquely features a coincidence of narrator and protagonist, an “I” who tells a story (*erzählendes Ich*) about itself (*erzähltes Ich*), where every act of narration entails a decision of perspective and a possibility of evaluation. Prominent is the role of focalization, one of the most important contributions of narratology to literary studies that originated in the work of Gérard Genette.¹ The distinction between these two “I”s is the basis of what Suhr calls the inherent multidimensionality of first-person narration, which she believes to be uniquely able to treat the theme of alienation, not just on a thematic level but in a visceral way recognizable by the “I” who is the reader. Crucially, according to Suhr, none of this is possible with a third-person omniscient narrator, who is only momentarily able (through focalization) to simulate experiencing himself or herself.

In the second part, “Die Analyse der ägyptischen Texte,” Suhr demonstrates these ideas in a close reading of Egyptian texts. Suhr devotes four sections to four major works of Egyptian literature that are dominated by first-person narration. The first two are from the Middle Kingdom: Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor and Tale of Sinuhe. The second two date from the Third Intermediate Period: Report of Wenamun and Tale of Woe (Suhr refers to it by the name of its narrator/protagonist, Wermai). Additionally, a second set of texts serves as points of comparison and contrast: Teaching of Amenemhat I, Tale of the Doomed Prince, Tale of Two Brothers, and Romance of Setne Khaemwas and the Mummies.²

Suhr’s engaging readings are comprehensive for each text and are difficult to summarize, but she is most insightful with Sinuhe and Wenamun, both models of the artful and multifaceted approach that an author can take when mobilizing a first-person narrator. In both stories, the protagonist travels to Palestine and confronts what it means to be an Egyptian when abroad. Suhr reads Sinuhe (90–114) as a complex refraction of the traditional tomb autobiography through a panoply of perspectives. The heart of the story is when Sinuhe, having fled to Palestine and becoming fully integrated into tribal society there, is challenged to a duel by a local hero and emerges victorious. The scene is presented from an external perspective that is nevertheless not omniscient: the emotional attachment of the crowd watching the duel to Sinuhe is read by the narrator from their expressions. We also see Sinuhe from an external perspective as he returns to the court for the first time, unrecognizable by the daughters of the pharaoh who mistake him for an

1. See Mieke Bal, *Narratology: An Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 145–65.

2. Translations of all of these texts, except for Tale of Woe (which has not yet been anthologized in English collections), can be found in William Simpson et al., *The Literature of Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

“Asiatic.” At other times, Sinuhe vividly presents an interior perspective, such as when his life is threatened by harsh conditions as he flees Egypt. Even though the reader knows that Sinuhe eventually returns to Egypt (we are reading a pretend copy of the autobiography inscribed on his tomb!), the narrator convincingly presents himself as unsure of whether or not he will make it back.

In contrast to Sinuhe, Wenamun (114–28) presents a less multidimensional perspective. Suhr tracks several inconsistencies in the knowledge of the first-person narrator, most of which concern the way that Wenamun is cognizant of inner thoughts and dialogue of other characters in situations where he was absent as a protagonist (123–25). On the other hand, Suhr points out how artfully the narrator is able to convey Wenamun’s experience: for example, only when he answers a local official’s inquiry about his state of mind with the exclamation, “Don’t you see the migratory birds that have already made two descents into Egypt?” do we consider Wenamun’s emotional state. The narrator is not present in his own (past) thoughts here, though theoretically able to be, conveying instead his sense of homesickness without resorting to the intrinsically focalized description that we would normally associate with first-person narration in a situation such as this. While the narrator of Sinuhe strategically employs a mix of interior and exterior focalization to that end, Wenamun sticks mostly to an external view, relying on dialogue to overshadow its protagonist’s mistaken sense of inherent Egyptian superiority. This is dramatically realized in the dialogue between Wenamun and the Byblian prince Tjekerbaal: while the former expresses his belief that timber that was stolen from him is a tribute of the lordship of Amun (the god of Egyptian empire par excellence), the latter is merely concerned about his economic stakes in the cargo. For Suhr, these external and times inconsistent perspectives mirror the alienation that Wenamun experiences abroad.

Suhr’s work takes its place alongside, and frequently draws upon, several other important monographs on narrative literature in Egyptology in recent years. As a groundbreaking study of Egyptian literature and a worthwhile theoretical treatment of narrative, Suhr’s book can be highly recommended, with the proviso that, for a book that tries to strike a balance among disciplines, many will find it in need of more substance. This is probably felt the most from the perspective of Egyptology. While most if not all contemporary treatments of Egyptian literature are anchored firmly in questions of syntax, especially of the verbal system, Suhr’s book is almost completely untethered from this. Future studies of first-person narration that build on Suhr will need to consider how different narrative techniques, especially focalization, find expression in certain verb forms and syntagms. When reading through the theoretical treatment (which takes up almost half of the book), I found myself wondering how much of the framework Suhr was erecting would be employed in the second part of the book and whether or not it would be employed in a systematic way. Instead, Suhr treats each work in a rather disorganized way that sometimes

follows the plot of the story and other times takes a more analytic approach. Although some may find her corpus ill-defined, covering a large swathe of time and array of literary genres, the narratological goal of her study means that she is perfectly consistent in the texts she analyzes and the results in which she is interested: the expressive possibilities of first-person narration in Egyptian fiction. Thus her work is an important contribution and should be read carefully by any scholar who is interested in ancient narrative or in the individual texts that Suhr cogently analyzes.

The book can also be recommended to biblical scholars interested in the literary study of Deuteronomy, Ezekiel, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and other texts. The prominence of first-person narration in so-called rewritten Bible literature, for example in the testaments (based on nonfictional genres, in this case wills, similar to the Egyptian examples studied by Suhr), could use an approach like that of this book, which might be able to make connections between the preponderance of this *Gattung* and the situation of Second Temple authors who, like the authors of *Sinuhe* and *Wenamun*, were concerned with the idea of identity in a foreign context. In the spirit of Suhr's interest in showing a way forward for her discipline, it should be said in general that a rapprochement between Egyptologists and Biblicists who study narrative literature is much to be desired, given that both disciplines are caretakers of the world's oldest works of prose narrative fiction.