

CHRISTOPH HEILIG

Just a Matter of Perspective?

Focalization in Early Christian Narratives

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
zum Neuen Testament
567*

Mohr Siebeck

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*For Moisés Mayordomo,
in gratitude and admiration*

Preface

Finishing my dissertation on stories in Paul's letters in Zurich – which had given me the opportunity to familiarize myself with narratology in its full breadth – left me with the desire both to dig deeper, concentrating on one specific narratological category, and to cast the net wider, extending my analysis beyond Paul's letters.

After a short period in Germany, during which our first son, Philemon, was born, my funding ran out, and I was looking quite desperately for a job, not having been successful with the grant proposals I had written. Just weeks before I would have ended up on welfare, Prof. Moisés Mayordomo offered me a two-year interim position as his assistant in Basel. I traveled there from Ulm, where my family and I were living, and signed the contract. One week later, the borders closed. It was March 2020, and we were suddenly in the midst of the pandemic. I am very grateful to Moisés Mayordomo for giving me that job, because it allowed me to stay in academia during the complicated time that followed.

But this is not the main reason why I dedicate this book to him. The main reason is that he has supported me in every imaginable way ever since, and I am sure that I would not have finished this habilitation without his wisdom and encouragement. In many challenging situations, Moisés Mayordomo has modeled for me what it means to be a researcher and teacher of the New Testament. I deeply admire his erudition and his dedication – not just to pondering the meaning of these texts but to doing so in a way that truly does justice to their claim on our lives. His patience and kindness have left a deep mark on me, and I hope to grow into the kind of character that can extend the same to others.

This work took its time. It was completed in early 2024 and later accepted as my Habilitationsschrift by the Faculty of Theology at the University of Basel. I am deeply grateful to the faculty, which made the path to becoming a Privatdozent a pleasure, and I am proud to remain associated with it in this capacity. I am humbled that the faculty subsequently awarded this manuscript the De-wetteanum, its prize for the best academic work of the year.

Thanks to the Research Fund of the University of Basel for Excellent Junior Researchers, I was able to continue my work on this topic, specifically on chapter 6. Then, in late 2022 – once again with the prospect of unemployment looming large – I was fortunate enough to receive a large grant from the Elite Network of Bavaria, which has funded not just my own research on narrative

perspective but an entire group devoted to this subject. We are based at the University of Munich, where we belong to the Faculty of Protestant Theology and are associated with the International Doctoral Program Philology. I am greatly indebted to Prof. Loren Stuckenbruck, then dean of the faculty, and Prof. Beate Kellner, then director of the International Doctoral Program, for their support during the application phase. Florian Schreck and his team were also instrumental in that success. It is only through this grant that I have been able to continue this line of inquiry, and the resources the Elite Network provides are phenomenal, including coverage of the open-access costs, which makes this volume freely accessible to everyone.

In 2021, our second son, Eneas, was born. That children grow up fast is, of course, a cliché; what it actually feels like to watch it happen is much harder to put into words. Seeing a scholarly project inch forward at the same time does not make things any easier, especially since the work it demands, whatever the pace, still means spending less time with the family. In this respect, too, Moisés Mayordomo always and without question showed me what the right priorities were. That I managed to honor them at least some of the time is thanks to my wife, Theresa, who carried our family through these years. Without her strength, patience, and love, neither this book nor much else would have been possible.

Heartfelt thanks go to Prof. Jörg Frey, my Doktorvater, who accepted this book into the WUNT series, and to the whole team at Mohr Siebeck for making the publication process so enjoyable. I also thank Prof. Christina Hoegen-Rohls, who provided a most stimulating second review for my habilitation examination; at her suggestion, I added a longer section on John. Prof. Elizabeth Shively's feedback showed me that I had to be much clearer at many points. In the final round of revisions in 2026, I moreover made extensive use of large language models (especially Claude Opus 4.8 and GPT-5.6) – for improving my English, for checking references and formatting, and as tireless dialogue partners on matters of Greek philology and narratological terminology. Any remaining mistakes are thus, more than ever, my own.

More generally, I am grateful to the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities for supporting my research on AI and the humanities. Since my election to its Young Academy in 2025, I have profited greatly from the interdisciplinary exchange there, which has shaped my thinking about where not only our field but scholarship as a whole is heading.

Will this be my last book (of this kind)? This is a question I have asked myself regularly while preparing the manuscript for publication, with agentic AI becoming more and more recognizable as a factor that we will have to deal with, one that will most certainly challenge our self-understanding as scholars and revolutionize our research outputs. In any case, I hope that you – and I hope it is a human “you” there at the end of the reception process, however you might

come into contact with these words – will benefit from the discussions of early Christian texts that I offer. May they stimulate your imagination and open up new perspectives on these important stories.

Munich, July 2026

Christoph Heilig

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Chapter 1

Narratology: Who Sees?

Readers might come to this book with very different expectations. A small minority of scholars are already deeply involved in narratological discussions of the New Testament. They will primarily be interested in seeing how exactly I understand the concept of “focalization” and how precisely I apply it to early Christian narratives.

I expect, however, that the vast majority of readers will, on the one hand, have a sense of how central narratives are to the New Testament and related literature but, on the other hand, will have had little exposure to the term “focalization” at all – or, if they did in fact encounter it in the exegetical literature, I strongly suspect that they came away from those analyses both very confused about what the notion even entails and convinced that the exegetical benefit is rather small – in other words, that learning more about this feature of the text is not really useful for interpretation; that it does not, ultimately, enrich our understanding of the text, does not illuminate *what it means*.

I hear you and I feel you. So far, the concept of focalization has been neglected almost entirely in the exegetical literature. And those who have ventured into the territory of the narratological literature that deals with this concept have rarely managed to provide understandable, or even merely coherent, accounts – simply because the narratological discourse *is* itself convoluted. One cannot expect a PhD student commenting on a biblical text, who already has to take into account a vast arsenal of theoretical and methodological considerations, to master that body of literature on top of everything else.

However, having studied focalization for years, I have come to the following very basic conclusion: not only are narratives indeed fundamental to understanding early Christian literature, but the narratological concept of focalization is itself of the utmost importance for grasping a crucial dimension of what these texts mean. Explaining what I mean by “focalization” is the purpose of this chapter – and while I do need to stake out my position vis-à-vis certain camps within the narratological discourse itself, I try to keep that interaction to an absolute minimum, in order to focus on offering you a sketch of my own approach on its own terms; explaining how exactly current linguistic thinking helps us identify and describe this feature of the text is the task of chapter 2;

and applying this framework to a variety of texts from different genres, with a view to demonstrating the heuristic fruitfulness of the approach, is what the rest of the book sets out to do.

1.1 Genette's Proposal

The topic of narrative perspective was brought to the forefront by the seminal work of Genette (1980). After discussing classical questions concerning the temporal structure of narratives (order, duration, and frequency), he distinguishes between two aspects that he calls "mood" and "voice." The latter category (Genette 1980, chap. 5) centers on the identity of the narrator, the one who *speaks* in the narrative. Before turning to that topic, however, he addresses the category of "mood" – a terminological choice that at first glance might seem odd but that follows naturally from the grammatical category of tense, which is of course closely tied to the temporal dimension of narratives.

Genette (1980, 161) opens this chapter by noting that, since the function of narrative is simply to "report" – and "not to give an order, express a wish, state a condition, etc." – "only the indicative" seems to qualify at all as a possible mood for storytelling. However, because mood, as a grammatical category, allows for a "more or less" in the telling of certain things – for either committing fully to an assertion or merely indicating that something might have happened – Genette finds the label suitable for capturing an important dimension of narration: namely that "one can tell *more* or tell *less* what one tells, and can tell it *according to one point of view or another*" (Genette 1980, 162; italics in the original). There are thus various "degrees" of the narrative information transmitted in the act of narration, and – using spatial metaphors – the two basic ways of regulating the flow of narrative information are "distance" and "perspective." While the former has to do with the amount of detail that a narrative provides, as if the events could be observed in a more or less direct manner, the latter also filters the information conveyed, this time by adopting the "capacities of knowledge of one or another participant in the story" (Genette 1980, 162).

It is in particular the second spatial metaphor, perspective, that, in Genette's view, necessitates a differentiation between the categories of voice and mood. According to him, it is precisely here that the scholarship preceding him had suffered "from a regrettable confusion between what I call here *mood* and *voice*, a confusion between the question *who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?* and the very different question *who is the narrator?*" (Genette 1980, 186). He then boils this juxtaposition down to the concise and extremely influential dichotomy of the two questions "Who speaks?" and "Who sees?"

What has made this basic distinction so influential is that Genette (1980, 186–88) effectively shows how earlier accounts of different “points of view” had failed to disentangle the dimension that genuinely concerns perspective from the separate question of the narrator’s identity. For example (Genette 1980, 186–87; against Brooks and Warren 1943, 589), both Watson, who narrates the story of Sherlock Holmes, and Agatha Christie, who narrates the story of Hercule Poirot, do so from the “outside,” as observers of the events that unfold. That the former is a character within the story while the latter is not – being, rather, the author – does not change the nature of the perspective itself; it bears solely on the identity of the narrator (more specifically, on their relationship to the narrated world). Despite ongoing debates about the precise contours of focalization, this basic differentiation has endured as a touchstone of narratological discourse.¹

Setting aside these considerations that answer the question “Who speaks?,” Genette (1980, 188–89) arrives at three different ways in which narrative information can be regulated with respect to the parameter of perspective. To break with the scholarship that had ignored this “obvious but almost universally disregarded distinction” (Genette 1980, 186), he introduces a new term for this phenomenon: “focalization.”² According to him (Genette 1980, 189), this term has the additional benefit of avoiding overly *visual* connotations – a danger he sees equally in options such as “vision” or “field.”

What is central, according to Genette, is the relationship between what the narrator says and the *knowledge* of the character(s). The narrator can either say *more* than any of the characters knows, in which case Genette speaks of a “non-focalized” narrative or a narrative with “zero focalization.” What the narrator states can also be equivalent to the scope of knowledge of a specific narrative character. It is in this latter case that we can truly say that the narrative has a point of view – or several points of view. After all, this “internal focalization” can be fixed, variable, or (in the case of repetitive narration of the same events) multiple (Genette 1980, 189–90). This subjective portrayal of events stands in

¹ See, e.g., Rimmon-Kenan (2002, 73–74), who in the second edition of her introduction to narratology still follows Genette almost verbatim. Similarly, note that even Bal (2021, 138), one of the scholars who have reworked Genette’s concept most fundamentally, in her most recent introduction to the concept of focalization, echoes precisely this terminological distinction: “In using the term focalization, I wish to dissociate myself from a number of current terms in this area. The most current one is point of view or (narrative) perspective. Terms such as narrative situation, narrative viewpoint, narrative manner are also employed. More or less elaborate typologies of narrative points of view have been developed. All these typologies are, however, unclear on one point. They do not make a distinction between, on the one hand, the vision through which the elements are presented and, on the other, the identity of the voice that is verbalizing that vision. To put it more simply: they do not make a distinction between those who see and those who speak. Yet this distinction is crucial for our understanding and appreciation of narrative.”

² In the French original (Genette 1972), it is “focalisation.”

contrast to the third option, a more objective account, in which the narrator says less than the knowledge of the characters would allow him to say. In this case, Genette (1980, 190) speaks of “external focalization,” since the mental life of the characters remains inaccessible to us.

1.2 Subsequent Discussions

Both Genette’s general approach to demarcating the category of narrative perspective/focalization³ (in terms of the regulation of information) and his tripartite subdivision into zero focalization, internal focalization, and external focalization have been scrutinized by subsequent scholars.⁴

The most influential challenge was formulated by Mieke Bal, who in her introduction to narratology⁵ starts with the following assertion (Bal 2017, 132): “Whenever events are presented, it is from within a certain vision.” Even attempts to offer an “objective” account ultimately amount to nothing more than limiting the narration to what can be witnessed – and thus to what is perceived by someone. And since perception is “a psychosomatic process that is strongly dependent on the position of the perceiving body” (Bal 2017, 132), the notion of a nonfocalized narrative becomes entirely obsolete. There is *always* a relation between the elements that are presented and the vision through which they are presented – and hence, “focalization” (Bal 2017, 133).

What Bal’s basic claim amounts to is that every narrative exhibits some degree of the phenomenon Genette designated as “internal focalization.” Beyond this disagreement about the pervasiveness of *internal* focalization, Bal’s definition (2017, 136) of this subtype actually comes close to Genette’s conception: we can speak of internal focalization “[w]hen focalization lies with one character that participates in the fabula as an actor.” In such instances, the character in question serves as the “focalizer,” that is, “the subject of focalization ... the point from which the elements are viewed” (Bal 2017, 135).

However, the way Bal uses this backdrop to delineate *external* focalization has caused an unfortunate terminological confusion in the literature.⁶ She defines it

³ I will use both terms interchangeably. I do not find Bal’s (2021, 139) objection convincing. It is not true that we lack a derived verb from “perspective”: the notion of “perspectivization” is common in linguistics. For the character through whose perspective we witness the events, I grant that we lack a fitting term and usually fall back on “focalizer” – though there is nothing objectionable about “perspectivizer” in principle either.

⁴ A concise and balanced overview is given by Jahn (2007).

⁵ For her original critique, see Bal (1983). Genette (1988, chap. 12) offers a rather harsh response to Bal, essentially arguing that she is grappling with problems of her own making by “introduc[ing] ideas (*focalizer*, *focalized*) I never thought of using because they are incompatible with my conception of the matter.”

⁶ Jahn (2005, 176) speaks of “intractable ambiguities” with which non-specialist readers are faced.

by locating the focalizer – the one who perceives – “outside” the story, as an “anonymous agent” (Bal 2017, 136). This notion diverges significantly from the way Genette (1980) had motivated the terminology of “external focalization” (cf. Jahn 2005, 176). For Genette, after all, the defining adjective had to do not with the identity of the one who sees but with *what* is seen – namely, only things visible from the outside: “the hero performs in front of us without our ever being allowed to know his thoughts or feelings” (Genette 1980, 190).

Bal (2017, 137) takes up this very question of what is in view by introducing the notion of the “focalized object.” Since focalization is, on her account, ubiquitous, everything portrayed in a narrative is ultimately a focalized object – that is, something focalized either by a character-bound focalizer (internal focalization) or by a non-character-bound focalizer (external focalization). In other words, this distinction has to do with the *subject* of focalization (cf. Bal 1983, 248). By contrast, what guides Genette’s account of external focalization, in Bal’s view (2017, 140), has to do with the *object* of focalization – which is why she distinguishes between perceptible and imperceptible focalized objects (such as thoughts).⁷

1.3 A Constraint Approach to Focalization

Many (cf., e.g., Niederhoff 2013a) have faulted Genette for this rather confusing state of affairs, arguing that he himself had carried over some aspects of earlier point-of-view scholarship that were not, in the end, compatible with his reframing of the issue in terms of regulating information.⁸ In what follows, however, we will retain the basic distinction between the three types of focalization that Genette proposed. To begin with, there is a *prima facie* case to be made for such a procedure, simply because Genette’s presentation still “dominates current narratological discussion” (Stühling and Köppe 2016, 191). More importantly,

⁷ Cf. also Rimmon-Kenan (2002, 78) on the distinction between seeing “either from without or from within.”

⁸ Niederhoff’s own solution is to keep both notions, “point of view” and “focalization,” and to differentiate between them as two distinct ways of regulating information, both said to be connected to perception, but *in different ways*. According to Niederhoff (2001, 8), “point of view” and “perspective” are basically the same, and the whole idea is rooted in the “standpoint” in space and time from which an event is viewed or presented. This can be compared to the placement of a camera, which limits the slice of reality that can be photographed. However, one and the same placement can still yield very different images, depending on the adjustment of the *focus* – which for Niederhoff (2001, 9) is the most natural point of contact for bringing the term “focalization” into the conversation. While the majority of narratologists seem to be unhappy with the idea of reintroducing the old category of perspective as distinct from the new notion of focalization (Jahn 2005, 175–76), Niederhoff deserves credit for drawing attention to the fact that simply speaking of “perception” does indeed call for a nuanced investigation into how the selection of narrated events and their specific portrayal both relate to a broader notion of narrative perspective.

though, I think that Genette's basic approach can be defended and is ultimately superior to the reframing offered by Bal.

This is not to say that there is no place for the emphases of Bal and her followers – who, in the exegetical literature, insofar as it concerns itself with narrative perspective at all, are in the clear majority (having been influenced by Bal-inspired works on other ancient Greek texts).⁹ In my view, they intuitively grasped something that cognitive linguistics likewise emphasizes (see chapter 2): namely, that narration (and language use in general) is always “viewpointed.” Defining “internal focalization” as being “inside the represented events” (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 76) thus reflects the cognitive-linguistic insight that a speaker can indeed choose among various so-called “vantage points” within the narrated world in order to construe in different ways the situations being told.

However, precisely because this is a phenomenon characteristic of language in general, narratology – being the study of specifically *narrative* texts – does not provide an appropriate set of tools for analyzing it. Moreover, narratologists in the tradition of Genette are right to point out that they are working with a much more *substantial* notion of narrative perspective. Once one turns to the appropriate domain for discussing such phenomena – cognitive linguistics – it becomes clear that many of the “viewpointed” aspects of language are in fact not at all relevant for identifying what Genette had in view when introducing focalization (see chapter 2). I think that the adaptations by biblical scholars in particular demonstrate the limitations of Bal's approach, in that their (admittedly simplified)¹⁰ applications of her notion of focalization often amount to nothing more than the identification of the various acts of perception that take place in a narrative, with the exegete on the lookout for introductory key terms such as εἶδεν (“she/he saw”), etc.¹¹ It seems to me that part of the reason focalization has not gained much traction in biblical exegesis may well lie in such analyses, which must seem rather unimpressive to those who approach with an open mind the question of whether narratology has heuristic value for interpretation (see, in particular, the references to the secondary literature in chapter 7).¹²

⁹ We will come to this shortly.

¹⁰ More elaborate analyses along the lines of Bal's thinking, by contrast, sometimes pose a problem of their own: they are simply unintelligible. I take some comfort in the fact that Nelles (1990, 374–75) seems to be as confused as I often find myself. He writes that “this jargon is incomprehensible” and that “these descriptions do not more precisely focus the text but actually distort it, and that the categories are used inconsistently.”

¹¹ It seems to me that Bal (2021, 138) continues to invite such simplistic applications when she claims that focalization has to do with “the technique of a text in which something is seen, and that vision is narrated.”

¹² Pace de Jong (2001; 2004), the situation in classics is more nuanced, since there has also been some rather forceful pushback against Bal's notion of focalization, in particular by Rood (1998).

I thus presuppose for the remainder of this work that, *if* the weaknesses of Genette's account could be rectified, it would be advisable to develop a notion of focalization in continuity with his original proposal (cf. also Jahn 2005, 176, on pragmatic arguments in favor of Genette as opposed to Bal).¹³ And indeed, as I will show in what follows, the problems mentioned so far can be dealt with rather easily if we accept Genette's basic assumption that focalization has to do with the "restriction" (1980, 192) of information but reject his more specific attempt (still followed by, e.g., Martínez and Scheffel 2019, 68) to tie this notion to the relationship between what the narrator says, on the one hand, and what a character *knows*, on the other.

After all, it is precisely this latter idea that creates the most obvious problems for Genette's taxonomy. One of them is "embarrassingly simple yet utterly devastating" (Stühling and Köppe 2016, 196): on the "knowledge approach" to focalization, *externally* focalized passages are, by definition, automatically also internally focalized:

Recall that it is sufficient for a text to be externally focalized that the narrator says less than a specific character knows; and that it is sufficient for a text to be internally focalized that the narrator does not say more than a specific character knows. But surely, if the narrator says less than a certain character knows then the narrator does not say more than this character knows. Therefore, if the sufficient condition for external focalization is fulfilled the sufficient condition for internal focalization is fulfilled as well. Accordingly, if the Knowledge Approach is correct, then every externally focalized passage of text is internally focalized as well.

However, limiting the transmission of information to what a character knows is only one way of cashing out the intuition that what the reader gets to know somehow "depends" on a specific character. The key is to specify what exactly it is, in external focalization, that the reader does not learn – namely, "what is going on in the character's mind" (Stühling and Köppe 2016, 197).

(a) *External* focalization can thus be defined in terms of the content of what is narrated, as follows: a text passage is externally focalized if and only if it deals

¹³ He also points out that "Bal's account often enables insightful analysis which is unavailable from within the Genettean framework," pointing to Hemingway's "The Killers" as a text that "is plain external focalization in Genette's model, whereas in the framework of Bal's terms it is 'internal focalization of purely perceptible objects.'" However, just because the label is shorter does not mean that Genette's framework – or, more specifically, its revision as represented here – does not allow for a nuanced classification of such a text. Genette (1980, 190) does cite "The Killers" as an example of external focalization, but he also adds the important caveat (191) that focalization patterns can be mixed within a text and that "[e]xternal focalization with respect to one character could sometimes just as well be defined as internal focalization through another." And I would argue that in "The Killers" we do get some markers of internal focalization, mostly pointing to Nick as the focalizer. One example would be the statement "it sounded silly when he said it," which seems to reflect Nick's own realization. Ole Andreson's reaction, by contrast, is rendered externally ("Ole Andreson said nothing.") – which is exactly what one would expect if the passage is internally focalized through Nick.

with characters and contains *no direct information about their mental lives*.¹⁴ To be sure, there can be debate about whether certain intentions are obvious deductions from external behavior or not (as in “The man lifted his arm”; cf. Köppe and Kindt 2022, 149). In principle, however, this negative criterion is valid. And it allows external focalization to have a heuristic value of its own. For it seems to cohere well with the fact that storytelling often restricts itself to “perceptible focalized objects” (to use Bal’s terminology) precisely because doing so carries very specific pragmatic implications, such as a documentary effect, a “camera eye view,” or a concealment of the plot (Köppe and Kindt 2022, 151).¹⁵

Now, what unites external and internal focalization is that both can be explained in terms of *constraints* on the information that the reader receives. In the case of external focalization, we learn nothing about the mental lives of the characters involved. In the case of internal focalization, the restriction is similarly imposed by a character’s mental life in the broadest sense (their beliefs, assumptions, wishes, hopes, fears): a passage is (b) *internally* focalized if and only if what is narrated is presented from the perspective of a character,¹⁶ which means that “the reader is only given information about what a specific character believes, pretends to believe, thinks, hopes, fears, and so on” (Stühling and Köppe 2016, 198). If a passage mentions something that transcends the perspective of a character (whether in terms of their epistemic horizon or otherwise), we must say that it is at least not *consistently* internally focalized.

Note that while internal and external focalization can thus *both* be defined in terms of content¹⁷ (namely with respect to two different constraints), they are *not* symmetrical if analyzed through the lens of Bal’s “focalized objects.” While an externally focalized passage will not talk about “imperceptible focalized objects,” the reverse does not hold: talk about the inner, mental life of a narrative

¹⁴ Köppe and Kindt (2022, 149): “Eine Textpassage ist genau dann extern fokalisiert, wenn sie von Figuren handelt und keine direkten Informationen über deren Mentales enthält.”

¹⁵ It is, for example, difficult to tell a convincing story about a murder with the murderer as focalizer without having this character reveal that they are the one who killed the victim. Sustaining suspense while at the same time offering a credible model of that character’s mental life (why does it never occur to them to think about their crime?) is thus a considerable challenge.

¹⁶ Köppe and Kindt (2022, 142): “Eine Textpassage ist genau dann intern fokalisiert, wenn das Erzählte aus der Perspektive einer Figur präsentiert wird.”

¹⁷ In other words, it is not true, as Bal (1983, 248) influentially claimed as the basis for her entire revision of Genette’s system, that Genette’s account of internal focalization needs to be defined in relation to a subject of focalization, with only external focalization being definable with respect to an object of focalization. It is thus understandable that Genette (1988, 73) rejected the terminology of “focalizers” as “agents,” reserving the label “focalization” as an attribute of the text and as an action noun for the narrator/author. However, although I do agree with Genette’s general defense against Bal, I think it is entirely acceptable to use the term “focalizer” for the narrative character whom the narrator chooses when deciding whose perspective will shape the portrayal of events.

character – talk, that is, about “imperceptible focalized objects” – does not automatically imply that we are dealing with internal focalization.¹⁸ After all, “[t]he description of something from the perspective of a character is not to be confused with the description of the perspective of this character.”¹⁹ On the contrary, in a passage that portrays events through the perspective of a certain character, we will normally not be told explicitly what they “think” or “want.”²⁰ Rather, this perspective will come through *indirectly* in how the events are narrated. Internal focalization may thus be present in cases where we find comments *about* a character’s mental life, but this is not a necessary precondition, because we treat *both* direct statements about what is going on in a mind and the limitation of narration to that mental horizon as “direct information concerning the mental life” of a character. What makes a passage internally focalized, then, are not *comments about* a character’s perspective but narration that is *shaped by* it (cf. now also Bruhns and Köppe 2024).

Compare the following three examples as illustrations:²¹

- (1) “Peter lifted his eyes to the heavens, where clouds drifted southward, toward Rome. For years, he had extolled to his wife the idea of working there one day.”
- (2) “Peter watched the drifting clouds. Inside him grew the hope of traveling to Rome one day, for he was convinced that he could work better there.”
- (3) “A bird cawed. He lifted his eyes. The clouds were drifting southward. Would he perhaps travel to Rome one day? Eternal Rome, with its buildings and history, would provide a magnificent backdrop for his studies.”

Example (1) seems to be externally focalized. We merely have to decide whether it is a plausible inference from what is visible from the outside that Peter indeed “lifted” his eyes (rather than, say, that his eyes were rolling upward because of a seizure). That we learn about his “idea” is not a problem, since it amounts only to an *indirect* glimpse of his mental life. Consistent with this classification, the text gives no indication that this miniature story is told from anybody’s particular perspective.²²

¹⁸ Note that this way of interpreting Genette’s dichotomy of internal and external focalization, as two different kinds of constraints, stands in stark contrast to the way Finnnern (2010) and Rügge-meier (2017) explicate the notion of perspective. More on that below.

¹⁹ Köppe and Kindt (2022, 143): “Drittens schließlich ist zu beachten, dass eine Beschreibung von etwas aus der Perspektive einer Figur heraus nicht zu verwechseln ist mit der Beschreibung der Perspektive dieser Figur.”

²⁰ This is, of course, a striking difference from Bal’s proposal, where phrases such as “he thought” automatically imply internal focalization. By contrast, in the framework adopted here, one might even argue that the addition of such a phrase renders an internally focalized text nonfocalized, since the explicit mention of the thought process goes beyond the thoughts of the character himself. For different options for dealing with this problem, cf. Stüh-ring and Köppe 2016, 205.

²¹ The last two are based on Köppe and Kindt (2022, 143).

²² From the perspective of cognitive linguistics (see chapter 2), we can still identify a “vantage point,” namely in front of Peter and close enough to get a sufficiently granular picture of

Turning to example (2), we can immediately see that it goes beyond a pattern of external focalization, since we learn about a “hope” that is explicitly described as “inside” him and as “growing” in that invisible sphere. His conviction, too, is simply stated directly, not as something he has told someone. The text is thus clearly not externally focalized. But is it internally focalized? Biblical scholars working with Bal’s notion of focalization would, almost without exception, affirm that it is. After all, we are explicitly told that Peter “watched” the drifting clouds. Within the framework we are pursuing here, however, the focus is on the extent to which the portrayal of the events aligns with a character’s perspective. Would Peter himself even have characterized the clouds as “drifting”? It is at least possible. If there were quotation marks around “work,” we might more easily attribute this perspective to a specific (implied) character – say, Peter’s boss, who might have doubts about the productivity of his employee in that setting.

In example (3), which is also clearly not externally focalized, it is much easier to identify Peter’s own perspective. In contrast to the previous example, this one makes clear that the drifting of the clouds is something the character notices only once he gazes up at the sky. (Against that backdrop, example (2) seems more compatible with the perspective of someone with a panoramic view of the scene – perhaps Peter’s wife, standing nearby.) We get insights into his thoughts by way of indirect speech (the question he asks himself), and there is an evaluation of Rome that is presumably how he himself sees the city. All in all, the evidence is much stronger for classifying example (3) as internally focalized than for example (2) – which may, in fact, simply *lack* both external and internal focalization.

And this third option brings us to the final kind of focalization Genette mentioned, (c) *zero* focalization. It differs from the other two in that it is not a phenomenon of perspectivized presentation at all²³ – rather, this label covers all those texts that are *not* marked by a clearly recognizable perspective, that is, by either external or internal focalization (Köppe and Kindt 2022, 151). In other words, if it is not apparent that statements about the mental life of characters are deliberately omitted, and if, at the same time, the presentation of events does not seem to be colored by the perspective of any one character, then there is

his face. But this does not mean that in the narrative world of this short text we need to imagine a narrative character standing at this spatial location and facing in this direction. Of course, within a larger text these sentences might be understood as part of a broader pattern of internal focalization through the perspective of such an accompanying character!

²³ The term should not be understood to mean that such passages are wholly devoid of perspective in the broad sense in which all language use involves construal that contains perspective as one parameter (cf. chapter 2). Rather, zero focalization denotes the absence of a textually attributable constraint imposed by a specific character’s perspective in a situation where we are also given direct statements about mental lives, which means that no constraint is in place that would exclude mention of such features.