Hermann Hesse, the writer, had a cook, a cultivated lady who was a refugee from Vienna. She sometimes also read aloud to him as Hesse had poor eyesight. Once she read the chapter about Tamar and Judah from Thomas Mann’s *Joseph und seine Brüder*. She reported that afterwards Hesse made the slightly enigmatic remark: “Manchmal sieht man doch, daß die Dichter nicht ganz überflüssig sind” (“Sometimes it is evident that the writers are not entirely superfluous”).

Hesse’s claim is a rather modest one, but others have been more bold. Some have argued that authors of fiction who rewrite and supplement biblical stories can play an important part in the interpretation of the original texts and make significant contributions to a better understanding of their meaning and message. Modern fiction is, however, not normally listed among the exegetical tools of biblical scholars, and I must confess that I had not, until fairly recently, reflected much on novelists as interpreters of Genesis or any other biblical book. But a doctoral dissertation which was presented in January 2007 in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Uppsala made me aware of the subject, and I have since discovered that the young scholar at Uppsala is not the only one to pay attention to this question. There is, for instance, an interesting and instructive book by Terry R. Wright, *The Genesis of Fiction: Modern Novelists as Biblical Interpreters*, published in 2007 (obviously my title for this paper is inspired by Wright’s subtitle).

All the works discussed by Professor Wright are “novels which take stories from the Book of Genesis as their starting point”, reworking them and “attempting to make sense of them in the twentieth

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But this is done in very different ways; several types of retelling can be discerned. Some narrators retain both the historical setting and the main course of events of the original story and confine themselves to embellishing and expanding it. A famous example of this kind of retelling is of course the work that Hermann Hesse was listening to: Thomas Mann’s *Joseph und seine Brüder*, which expands the 20 or so biblical pages into a mammoth work running to 1355 pages in the single-volume edition. Other writers, while keeping the original characters and the biblical setting, use them above all to express their own personal views, sometimes as a protest against the biblical version, as in Mark Twain’s ironical “Autobiography of Eve” and other similar works of his. Here the protagonists still bear their biblical names: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, and so on, though these individuals are sometimes strikingly different from their scriptural models. A further step away from the original is taken in stories which are transferred to modern surroundings – or at least contain so many anachronisms that we feel the characters are our contemporaries, even if they are called Noah and Shem and Ham, as in Jeanette Winterson’s comic parody of the Flood story, *Boating for Beginners*. Still further away from the outward form of the biblical tale and from the kind of retelling represented by Thomas Mann is John Steinbeck’s well-known novel *East of Eden*. It is about settlers in the Salinas Valley in Northern California in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, but the title discloses its basis in Genesis 4, as do also passages in which some of the characters discuss different translations of verse 7 of the biblical chapter. Professor Wright argues, not without reason, that the novel provides “both a commentary upon Genesis 4 and a supplementary narrative based upon it”.

Compared with these different retellings of episodes in Genesis, the Swedish epic which is analysed in the Uppsala thesis mentioned a moment ago represents yet another type. The story, as in Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*, takes place in the late nineteenth century and in an environment that is manifestly different from the biblical setting. But whereas the American novel may still be described as a kind of retelling of at least the essence of a narrative from Genesis, the relation to the Bible is here much more fragmentary. The Swedish epic, though

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