PART I

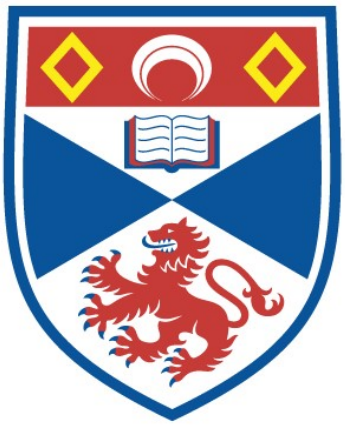
DARK SAYING: A STUDY OF THE JOBIAN DILEMMA IN RELATION TO CONTEMPORARY *ARS POETICA*

PART II

BEDROCK: POEMS

Rachael Boast

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews



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Part I

Dark Saying: A Study of the Jobian Dilemma in Relation to Contemporary *Ars Poetica*

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Bedrock: Poems

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A Thesis Presented for the Degree of
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Abstract

Part I of this thesis has been written with a view to exploring the relevance a text over 2500 years old has for contemporary *ars poetica*. From a detailed study of 'The Book of Job' I highlight three main tropes, 'cognitive dissonance', '*tĕšuwah*', and 'dark saying', and demonstrate how these might inform the working methods of the contemporary poet. In the introduction I define these tropes in their theological and historical context. Chapter one provides a detailed examination of 'Job', its antecedents and its influence on literature. In chapters two and three I examine in detail techniques of Classical Hebrew poetry employed in 'Job' and argue for a confluence between literary technique and Jobian cosmology.

Stylistically, the rest of the thesis is a critical meditation on how the main tropes of 'Job' can be mapped onto contemporary *ars poetica*. In chapter four I initiate an exploration into varying responses to cognitive dissonance, suggesting how the false comforters and Job represent different approaches to, and stages of, poetic composition. A critique of an essay by David Daiches is followed by a detailed study of Seamus Heaney.

In chapter five I map the trope of *tĕšuwah* onto contemporary *ars poetica* with reference to the poetry of Pilinszky, Popa, and to the poems and critical work of Ted Hughes. The chapter concludes with a brief exploration into the common ground shared between the terms *tĕšuwah* and *versus* as a means of highlighting the importance of proper maturation of the work.

Chapter six consists of a discussion of how the kind of 'dark saying' found in 'Job' 38-41 impacts on an understanding of poetic language and its capacity to accelerate our comprehension of reality. I support this notion with excerpts from Joseph Brodsky and a close reading of Montale's 'L'anguilla'.

Chapter seven further develops the notion of poetry as a means of propulsion beyond the familiar, the predictable or the clichéd, by examining the function of metaphor and what I term 'quick thinking', and by referring to two recently published poems by John Burnside and Don Paterson.

In chapter eight I draw out the overall motif implied by a close reading of 'Job', that of the weathering of an ordeal, and map this onto *ars poetica*, looking at two aspects of labour, which I identify as 'endurance' and 'letting go', crucial for the proper maturation of a poem or body of poems.

The concluding chapter develops the theme of the temple first discussed in chapter one. I argue for a connection between Job as a temple initiate, who has the capacity to atone for the false comforters, and poetry as a form of 'at-one-ment'. This notion is supported by reference to Geoffrey Hill and Rilke.

Part II of the thesis consists of a selection of my own poems, titled 'Bedrock'.

Declarations

I, Rachael Boast, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 43,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

I was admitted as a research student in September 2006 and as a candidate for the degree of PhD in September 2007; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2006 and 2009.

date ……. signature of candidate …….……...

I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University of St Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for that degree.

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To Andrew Brown

et

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Contents

Part I

Dark Saying: A Study of the Jobian Dilemma in Relation to Contemporary *Ars Poetica*

INTRODUCTION

THE JOBIAN DILEMMA

We enter into the Book of Job as into a classic folk-tale. What follows after the initial prose section is a verse drama that leaves us very suddenly in the dark. The process the protagonist undergoes does not make for easy reading; the text is lengthy, packed with cross-references, emotionally stirring and very difficult to interpret.

There has not as yet been a study mapping the Jobian process onto the practice of poetic composition. Most studies are, as one would expect, theological, although a few lean towards the literary, most notably, Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, which includes a chapter on 'Job', and Northrop Frye's essay, 'Blake's Reading of the Book of Job'. If musical composition can be described as study then I would add to these exceptions Vaughan Williams' *Job – A Masque for Dancing*. Given the book's reputation as a literary masterpiece, containing the finest poetry in the entire Hebrew Bible, it is surprising that no one has endeavoured to relate 'Job' to *ars poetica*, and this lack of precedents meant that I too have been very much in the dark. In a sense, this is a familiar experience: poets have to feel their way into a poem and trust its dark logic will guide them to its completion.

I will begin with a discussion of what I have identified as three main tropes, tropes that serve as a means of marking out some of the ground in what otherwise would be a rather overwhelming landscape.

Cognitive Dissonance

Most commentaries agree that 'The Book of Job' (איוב) is likely to have been written in the post-exilic, Second Temple period of Judaism. The dates ascribed to the Jewish Exile, the *Disapora*, are 597-538 BC. The date ascribed to the capture of Jerusalem by the Chaldeans is 597 BC. These epochal events saw a massive eruption of a problem that can be termed 'cognitive dissonance'. In psychology this would fall under the general heading 'cognitive bias' and denotes the perception of incompatibility between two cognitions. The resulting tension compels the mind, which prejudices a sense of order over chaos, to modify existing beliefs and thereby assuage contradiction. This term was first proposed by Leon Festinger in 1956 after writing, with Riecken and Schachter, *When Prophesy Fails.* [1] Cognitive dissonance, then, is the problem we face when reality itself is incongruent with our desired view of it.

There was no explanation for the exile so long as the view held by the Hebrew people continued to be that of Yahweh's guaranteed protection of them, a view upon which Hebrew history had been built. Just as crisis propels one towards modification, so, through profound despair, the Israelites were called upon to rework their worldview to encompass the total purpose of God, as opposed to simply focusing on events of the present. Of the 'total purpose of God', Peter R. Ackroyd says,

> The response to [the exile] must be the response of acceptance, but this involves not merely a repentant attitude … because the disaster is not simply judgement, not simply a condemnation of the past but also a stage within the working out of a larger purpose. [2]

[1] Festinger, Riecken and Schachter, *When Prophesy Fails* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).
[2] Peter R. Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1968), p.234. See especially chapter 13, 'The Significance of the Exile and Restoration'.

This comment implicitly acknowledges how, as has often been remarked upon, the exilic and post-exilic ages were highly creative times; disaster, failure and crisis in some sense served to clear the ground and precipitate a process of profound re-examination and re-evaluation. [3]

Another important historical fact to be aware of is that the character of Job represents the national experience. (Although Job was not an Israelite, but was 'from the land of Uz', the book belongs to the Hebrew literary tradition.) The telling of a personal crisis in Hebrew literature was usually analogous to a crisis on the collective level. In the Ancient Near East the boundary between individual and collective was more fluid than it is in other cultures and epochs. Not only do we see this in Psalms, where the singer might sing on behalf of the people, and in Jonah, but also in The Book of Lamentations where the figure of Jeremiah becomes the nation of Israel. Norman K. Gottwald notes of Lamentations that,

> …as the mixture of literary types has suggested, the author is quite beyond the distinction between the individual and the group and is simply giving the profoundest kind of expression to the long-recognised Hebrew category of corporate personality. Jeremiah is the individual sufferer without equal, but by virtue of his representative position as the great prophet who pleaded with and preached to his people, he is also Israel. [4]

This is further confirmed from a different angle by Paul Ricoeur when he says,

> The counsels of wisdom ignore the frontiers where any legislation appropriate to a single people stops. It is not by chance that more than one sage in the biblical tradition was not Jewish. Wisdom intends every person in and through the few. [5]

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[3] See Ackroyd, pp.7-12.
[4] Norman K. Gottwald, *Studies in The Book of Lamentations* (London: SCM, 1954), pp.39-40.
[5] Paul Ricoeur, 'Towards a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation', in *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol.70 (Harvard: Harvard University, 1977), p.11.

In the context of the verse drama which makes up the substantial portion of 'Job', Job's dilemma is one of how to resolve the dissonance between two incompatible cognitions: the experience of suffering and the fact of his innocence. Traditionally, according to the Deuteronomic code, suffering was viewed as punishment for sin. Job's undeserved suffering, and attendant lamentation, comes in the form of a loss of material livelihood, personal bereavement, and physical affliction. The extent of his suffering is poignantly expressed, firstly in the detail of the seven days and seven nights wherein Job and the friends sit in silence (2:13), and then in the lament poem that follows:

> After this opened Job his mouth, and cursed his day.
> And Job spake and said,
> Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived.
> Let that day be darkness; let not God regard it from above, neither let the light shine upon it.
> Let darkness and the shadow of death stain it; let a cloud dwell upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it.
> As for that night, let darkness seize upon it; let it not be joined unto the days of the year, let it not come unto the number of the months.
> Lo, let that night be solitary, let no joyful voice come therein.
> Let them curse it that curse the day, who are ready to raise up their mourning.
> Let the stars of the twilight thereof be dark; let it look for light, but have none; neither let it see the dawning of the day;
> Because it shut up not the doors of my mother's womb, nor hid sorrow from mine eyes.
> Why died I not from the womb? why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly?
> Why did the knees prevent me? or why the breasts that I should suck?
> For now should I have lain still and been quiet, I should have slept: then had I been at rest,
> With kings and counsellors of the earth, which built desolate places for themselves;
> Or with princes that had gold, who filled their houses with silver:
> Or as an hidden untimely birth I had not been; as infants which never saw light.
> There the wicked cease from troubling; and there the weary be at rest.
> There the prisoners rest together; they hear not the voice of the oppressor.
> The small and great are there; and the servant is free from his master.

> Wherefore is light given to him that is in misery, and life unto the bitter in soul;
> Which long for death, but it cometh not; and dig for it more than for hid treasures;
> Which rejoice exceedingly, and are glad, when they can find the grave?
> Why is light given to a man whose way is hid, and whom God hath hedged in?
> For my sighing cometh before I eat, and my roarings are poured out like the waters.
> For the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me, and that which I was afraid of is come unto me.
> I was not in safety, neither had I rest, neither was I quiet; yet trouble came. (3:1-26) [6]

His is the dilemma of a man who finds himself in crisis, at a crossroads, on a cusp. He is uncertain, in pain, unsupported and longs for annihilation; he has turned away from the security of the theological consensus, is let down by his friends, and, although he knows his own truth, cannot make sense of the misfortunes that have torn his life apart. He is in an impossible place. It is a dilemma, to employ biblical language, of how to move from a state of 'exile' to one of 'restoration'. Job, as corporate personality, represents the exiled mind's condition.

In theological terms, cognitive dissonance is not resolved by returning to the worship of older Canaanite deities, nor by choosing the Babylonian Gods as a replacement for the one who has supposedly deserted them; its resolution is not syncretistic. Rather, it is dependant on choosing to pursue the point of crisis created by dissonance; to view disaster as means of clearing the ground in order to effect a changed relationship with Yahweh. [7] Ackroyd reminds us that it is an ancient idea that a deity may judge and bring disaster upon those who worship him. [8] In the exilic and post-exilic periods the message of many prophets was that this did not issue from a divine whim, but

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[6] 'The Book of Job', *The King James Bible* (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons Ltd). All subsequent quotations from 'Job' throughout this thesis are from the same source and will not be footnoted.
[7] Ackroyd confirms 'Israel's syncretistic tendencies' in *Exile and Restoration*, p.41.
[8] Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration*, p.43.

from an intention to set in motion a process that would allow for a renewed relationship between Yahweh and his people. As Ackroyd says, 'the message is one of acceptance and of the realisation, as in the psalms of lamentation, that it is the moment of apparent failure that God is in reality at work'. [9]

The authorial intention in 'Job' is likewise characterised by a call to renewal, as David Wolfers notes when he says that 'The purpose of the author in writing the Book of Job was, I believe, to re-draw the nature of the relationship between the people of Israel and their God …'. [10] And one way by which the author approaches this is, as Wolfers says, to

> upset [the] Covenantal interpretations of the truths about the Universe essentially because events … and the mundane facts of personal lives had demonstrated their invalidity. Therefore the very survival of the Hebrew God, and by unavoidable corollary, the Israelite nation, was in jeopardy. A new and even more realistic foundation for the faith had become an urgent necessity. [11]

This is to suggest that the author's intention is, in terms of his culture, a protective one, one that seeks to effect the healing of crisis by composing a book which is not only a witness to suffering, but which plays out that suffering, dramatically, in order to present a way forwards towards a resolution.

In 'Job' the problem of cognitive dissonance is resolved not by accounting for disaster by seeing it simply as a punishment for sin or lack of faith; it is not resolved by human standards of justice; it is resolved by accepting that the arena of creation is too vast for us to understand the reasons for that which happens within it. The author would appear to be suggesting that what is required is a change in scope away from the limited worldview of the individual and towards a fuller comprehension of a universal reality.

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[9] Ibid., p.128.
[10] David Wolfers, *Deep Things Out of Darkness* (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), p.15
[11] Ibid, pp.16-17.

This change in scope is a movement away from standard exposition towards worship, in the truest sense of the word. In Ricoeur's terminology, it is a movement from 'religion' towards 'faith'. [12]

The *Těšuvah*

Job refuses to accept the account of his condition offered by his friends, each of which represent some aspect of received wisdom. Instead he does the unprecedented thing of summoning Yahweh to account for Himself. It is through his encounter with Yahweh, the 'Voice from the Whirlwind', that Job experiences the *těšuvah,* which is the only resolution to the problem of cognitive dissonance: a reappraisal of the cosmic design and of the place of the individual within it.

Michael V. Fox draws attention to the word *těšuvah* (שׁוב) in his contribution to *Semeia 19* where he suggests that this Hebrew word denotes an 'about-face'. [13] In this sense, its meaning is tantamount to the turning-about of Job's life as a result of an initiation into the mysteries of cosmological design. Thus, denoting a radical change in consciousness, it has the same meaning as *metanoia*, a term one would associate with 'repentance' and ensuing change of life. Literally, *těšuvah* means 'turn' or 'return' and is usually used in a physical sense. In 'Job' (and in the post-exilic period), the word is used for the first time in an abstract sense to mean 'return', as in, to 'answer'. Therefore it refers to Job's 'returns' against his friends. [14] It could be said that the development of the use of this word reflects the epochal events of the period in which its use shifts, which is to

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[12] Paul Ricoeur, 'The Demythization of Accusation', in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1994), p. 351.
[13] Michael V. Fox, 'Job 38 and God's Rhetoric', in John Dominic Crossan, ed., *Semeia 19* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1981), p.57. The Hebrew I have given is the root for the word. For the noun, see Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 4 (Leiden, Boston, Koln: Brill, 1999), p.1800.
[14] See 'Job' 21:34, and, 34:36.

say a great deal about how language and literature can play a part in fundamentally changing an outlook, theological or otherwise.

What Fox highlights is a metaphorical use for the word which, given the themes of the text, is highly likely to have been intentional on behalf of the author. We may also note that in the rabbinical period the word carried the meaning of, 'to repent'. Again this ties in with a turning-away from ignorance and towards wisdom. In terms of Fox's understanding, it is clear that Job's 'about-face' occurs in conjunction with the dramatic entrance of the voice from the whirlwind at the commencement of chapter 38, and thus at the end of the cycle of speeches and answers played out by the friends and Job. This about-face is confirmed in 42:5 when Job says: 'I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee'.

The *tĕšuwah* is an about-face away from falsity and towards integrity. This contrast is a contrast between the friends and Job, and between two incompatible cognitions: reality as we wish it to be, and reality as it is. 'Job' is saturated in irony, as Norman C. Habel emphasises when he says,

> At least two modes of irony seem to operate in this work as a whole – the dramatic and the verbal. Irony reflects the author's consciousness of the disparity between pretence and reality, between the ideal and the actual, between the role of the *alazōn*, the fool or pretender, and the *eirōn*, the person of integrity who exposes the *alazōn*. Irony plays with incongruities, the gap between the knowledge of the audience and that of the performers, the incongruity between word and action, or the mismatch between what is fitting and what happens. We understand dramatic irony to be concerned with the events of the plot from the omniscient vantage point of the audience. Verbal irony deals with the way various speakers attempt to play the role of *eirōn* and expose a preceding speaker by using terms, images, or expressions with nuances of meaning which trip that speaker on his or her own words. The exposé, however, may backfire and reveal the would-be *eirōn* to be an *alazōn* instead. [15]

[15] Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job* (London: SCM, 1985), pp.51-52.

Dark Saying

The term 'dark saying' can be found in many books of the Hebrew Bible, including two of the Psalms, 49 and 78. In Psalm 49 the Psalmist declares:

> My mouth shall speak of wisdom; and the meditation of my heart shall be of understanding.
> I will incline mine ear to the parable: I will open my dark saying upon the harp.

Dark saying refers to any linguistic medium through which God was thought to reveal himself and the mysteries of the created order, whether through riddles, enigmas, parables, proverbs, etc. Skill in understanding them constituted wisdom. [16] I would suggest that the employment of language to conceal esoteric levels of meaning is a ubiquitous phenomenon. The use of ciphers and acrostics in Alchemical discourse – whether in the English of Thomas Norton, or in the Arabic of Jabir – is also a form of dark saying. In *The Temple*, George Herbert employs similar devices for a closely related purpose. Norton, a fifteenth century Bristolian alchemist, used them extensively in his poem, *The Ordinall of Alchimy*. The following section provides a list of figures who Norton considers wrote in dark sayings:

> All *Masters* that write of this Soleme werke
> They made their Bokes to many Men full derke,
> In Poyses, Parables, and in Metaphors also,
> Which to Shollers causeth peine and woe:
> For in their practise whan they would it assay,
> They leese their costs, as men see aldaye.
> *Hermes*, *Rasis*, *Geber*, and *Avicen*,
> *Merlin*, *Hortolan*, *Democrit*, and *Morien*,
> *Bacon*, and *Raimond*, with others many moe

[16] See also, Daniel, 2:21-22, 5:12, 8:23, Proverbs 1:6.

> Wrote under covert, and *Aristotle* also
> For what hereof they wrote with their penn,
> Their cloudy Clauses dulled many Men:
> Fro *Layman*, Fro *Clearks*, and so fro every Man
> They hid this *Art* that no Man finde it cann. [17]

This passage suggests that it is necessary to the preservation of the 'Subtill Science of holy Alkimy' that anyone wishing to pursue it must make the appropriate efforts and undergo rigorous training. [18] There is no sense in which the secretiveness associated with Alchemy was gratuitous, rather it was employed to put off the half-hearted and the weak willed, not least for the sake of their own safety. For Norton, as for many Alchemists, knowledge was a gift revealed from God, 'which never was founde by Labour of Mann,/But it by Teaching, or Revelacion begann'. [19]

Returning to 'Job', the notion of 'dark saying' is appropriate to a consideration of 'Job' not least because of the depths of meaning that the book contains. More specifically, the voice from the whirlwind, I would argue, presents us with a litany of dark saying. As I have made clear, Job's *tĕšuwah* is brought about by this voice, entering into the poetic architecture of the text at the start of chapter 38. This is the critical point in the drama, indeed, it is itself a *tĕšuwah* in terms of the dramatic process of the text. Chapters 3 to 37 consist of a literary structure built from cycles of speeches/answers and of Job's responses to these speeches/answers. A full analysis of this structure is not my purpose here, except to say that (taking Elihu's contribution as a latter addition) a structure of 3x3 can also be seen in, for example, the *Kyrie Eleison*, being the first part of the setting of the Mass which is the only instance of Greek that survives in the Latin liturgy. The *Kyrie* was formalised as part of the penitential rite of the Mass and translates as 'Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy', repeated three times. I might also add here that, as a dramatic

[17] Thomas Norton, *The Ordinall of Alchimy* (London: Edward Arnold and Co., 1928), p.8.
[18] Ibid., p.7.
[19] Ibid., p.13.

narrative built around a legalistic cycle of defence and argument, the author of 'Job' has imported Greek structures into the text. This specific device is one of many ancient oral and literary devices and incants justice: 3x3 = 9, 9 being the number symbolising justice, one of the predominant concerns in 'Job'.

The voice from the whirlwind enters at the point at which this cycle of speeches/answers has ground itself to exhaustion and an impasse has been reached. It constitutes a *coup de théâtre* necessary for the resolution of the impasse. Yahweh's speeches overturn the poetics of suffering and the rhetoric of false consolation into the dark saying of wisdom. They constitute a magisterial litany of linguistic shock tactics that halt Job's spiral of descent and demolish every argument that has been made to account for the Jobian dilemma.

Concluding Remark

What the friends are lacking is the ability to dwell in uncertainties. Their speaking part in the drama is to provide answers. In contrast, Yahweh's speaking part instructively provides no answers, only further questions. The 'answers' are not answers except in the rabbinical sense of redirecting legal questions to contemplation, faith and worship. Thus, the 'answers' are initiatory questions, which is another reason why I have considered them as dark saying. Job, far from being confounded by the end of it all, is restored to more than his former glory. That he ends up being twice the man he was is surely intended as dramatic irony, a humorous touch on behalf of the author to remind us that the wisdom of experience *can* wear a smile.

CHAPTER I

'WHERE WAST THOU…?'

In this chapter I will examine 'Job' in detail and draw out some of its more complex themes. I will examine its textual influences and the influences it can be seen to have had on literature.

The Temple

The fact that Yahweh appears at all to Job and that Job understands, in the visionary sense, the import of the voice from the whirlwind (as is evidenced by the exclamation, 'now mine eye seeth thee') confirms him as a temple initiate. The relationship between the voice from the whirlwind and the significance of the temple is of paramount importance to an understanding of the verse drama.

'Job' is one of the Wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible and the wisdom tradition stems mainly from the Second Temple era, although obviously it has its roots in more ancient cultures. Owing to these facts, it would be a great omission not to take into account the significance to the Hebrew people of the temple and the effects that the destruction of the temple had on them. For the temple to be destroyed meant more than the loss of a place of worship, it evidenced Yahweh's disfavour with his people.

The temple was designed and constructed to reflect the structure of the cosmos, and so becomes an emblem for a place where the heavens and the earth meet in sympathetic resonance. Anyone entering, or invited to enter, had the chance to draw closer to God and penetrate into the mysteries. The priest, however, was the one who

had access to the holiest parts of the temple, where God's presence was experienced in the most direct way possible and at its most intense. In Proverbs 9 the temple is wisdom: 'Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars'. In examining Deuteronomic history, Ackroyd reminds us that the building of the shrine 'embodies that willingness of God to make his dwelling in the midst of the people'. [20] Thus the temple comes to symbolise the presence of God (or the presence which He chooses to offer). Furthermore, Ezekiel, a key text for understanding temple theology, evidences the link between the temple and the land, or between God's presence and the land, and consequently the people. Ezekiel 47: 1-12 is a vision of the restored temple and the healing waters flowing out over its threshold, fertilising the land. [21]

Given this historical contextualisation, 'Job' 38 can be understood to commence with a liturgy for the foundation of the temple, which, as I have said, reflects the foundation of the created world. In support of this notion, Robert Alter has noted that,

> God chooses for His response to Job the arena of creation, not the court of justice, the latter being the most insistent recurrent metaphor in Job's argument in chapter 3. And it is, moreover, a creation that barely reflects the presence of man, a creation where human concepts of justice have no purchase. [22]

The unusual fact that Yahweh speaks directly to Job can only mean that Job has been identified by Yahweh as a temple initiate:

> Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said,
> Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?
> Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and
> answer thou me.

[20] Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration*, p.74.
[21] For a full account of the restoration of the temple, see Ezekiel: 40-48.
[22] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), p.104.

> Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?
> declare, if thou hast understanding.
> Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who
> hath stretched the line upon it?
> Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? or who laid
> the cornerstone thereof;
> When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God
> shouted for joy?
> Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth, as if it
> had issued out of the womb?
> When I made the cloud the garment thereof, and thick darkness
> a swaddling-band for it …
> Hast thou entered into the springs of the sea? or hast thou
> walked in search of the depth?
> Have the gates of death been opened unto thee? or hast thou
> seen the doors of the shadow of death?
> Hast thou perceived the breadth of the earth? declare if thou
> knowest it all.
> Where is the way where light dwelleth? and as for darkness,
> where is the place thereof,
> That thou shouldest take it to the bound thereof, and that thou
> shouldest know the paths to the house thereof?
> Knowest thou it, because thou wast then born? or because the
> number of thy days is great?
> Hast thou entered into the treasures of the snow? or hast thou
> seen the treasures of the hail …
> Hath the rain a father? Or who hath begotten the drops of dew?
> Out of whose womb came the ice? And the hoary frost of heaven, who
> hath gendered it?
> The waters are hid as with a stone, and the face of the deep is frozen.
> (38: 1-9, 16-22, 28-30)

It is clear from these lines that Yahweh is asking Job questions which are of an initiatory nature, that is, questions which it would be foolish to answer in any conventional sense but which may be answered in the appropriate context of temple initiation. Such initiation concerns knowledge of the beginning (or 'foundation'), which is tantamount to wisdom. Proverbs 8 and 9 make it clear that wisdom is concerned with creation, creation coming before the giving of the Law:

> When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass
> upon the face of the depth:

> When he established the clouds above: when he strengthened the foundations of the deep:
> When he gave to the sea his decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment: when he appointed the foundations of the earth:
> Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his Delight, rejoicing always before him;
> Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men. (8:27-31)

Kingliness

Proverbs 9 has already served to establish the link between the temple and wisdom. Tied in with this theme of the temple and of temple initiation is Kingliness. The link between the two is in the fact that Kingship (or Majesty) was conceived of as the ability to understand mysteries, thus signifying initiation.

The implication for an understanding of 'Job' is that the text is also concerned with the question of what makes a king. The legitimate king of Judah at the time was Jehoiachin. His captivity prompted a re-envisioning of the nature of kingliness, which in turn was tied in with the search for restoration (literally, in the sense of getting king and land back and re-building the temple, and spiritually in the sense of proper worship). Traditionally it was thought that if the king was just and wise then the kingdom would be resistant to invasion; if the king was humiliated then the people were also. In other words, what happens to the king happens to the kingdom. Therefore, as Ackroyd says, 'the captivities of both belong together'. [23]

It is vision, in the sense of direct experience of reality, which makes a man a king. Job (and one must remember his status as corporate personality) is exemplary because he breaks the rules, he is a table-turner, knowing himself sufficiently well to have earned the right to behave defiantly, in a manner resembling Rilke's Orpheus:

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[23] Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration,* p.125.

'Und er gehorcht, indem er überschreitet'. [24] With one ear attuned to the Deuteronomic code and the other to the requirement of the *Gestalt,* he acts like an ideal king. [25]

Job's Antecedents

As far back as the pre-Babylonian civilisation of Mesopotamia, under the direction of the Sumerians, we find the notion that if a nation had succeeded in conquering another, this signified the superiority of their deity, or deities. The question of allegiance is then raised: if a god or goddess had victoriously exerted him/herself then why not worship him/her? As I mentioned in the introduction, this is one of the dilemmas facing the exiles of the *Diaspora*. As W.G. Lambert remarks, in *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*,

> When two Sumerian states went to war the gods of each side were also participants. If the one state prevailed and sacked the other city, the local gods shared in the disaster. This outlook is found in the Sumerian lamentations over cities in which the god or goddess participates in the grief for his or her plundered home. [26]

For both the Sumerians and the Babylonians the gods existed first and man was created to serve them. As Lambert says, 'he had therefore duties to perform for his

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[24] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (London: Picador Classics, 1987), p.232. Don Paterson's version reads, 'And yet in this defiance, he stays true…' Don Paterson, *Orpheus* (London: Faber, 2006), p.7.

[25] The OED defines *gestalt* as: 'a 'shape', or 'configuration', or 'structure' which as an object of perception forms a specific whole or unity incapable of expression simply in terms of its parts'. Use of this here is intended to hark back to the idea of the 'total purpose of God': Job is able to embody this 'total purpose' in his behaviour because he learns to accommodate spiritual truths, over and above apparent truths and received wisdoms.

[26] W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p.4.

divine lords, and could offend them'. [27] It is clear from a reading of Babylonian wisdom literature that the gods would employ a range of corrective measures should the representatives of the people offend them. We can see this particularly in 'Advice to a Prince', the composition of which is suggested to have been sometime between 1000-700 BC [28] :

> [1] If a king does not heed justice, his people will be thrown into chaos, and his land will be devastated.
>
> [2] If he does not heed the justice of his land, Ea, king of destinies, [3] will alter his destiny and will not cease from hostilely pursuing him.
>
> [6] If he heeds a rogue, the *status quo* in his land will change.
>
> [51] If he declares their treaties void, or alters their inscribed (treaty) stele, [52] sends them on a campaign, or [press-gangs] them into hard labour, [53] Nābû, scribe of Esagil, who organises the whole of heaven and earth, who directs everything, [54] who ordains kingship, will declare the treaties of his land void, and will decree hostility.
>
> [55] If either a shepherd, or a temple overseer, or a chief officer of the king, [56] who serves as temple overseer of Sippar, Nippur, or Babylon, [57] imposes forced labour on them (i.e. the citizens of Sippar, Nippur, or Babylon) in connection with the temples of the great gods, [58] the great gods will quit their dwellings in their fury [59] and will not enter their shrines. [29]

The notion that if a king did not heed the ordinances of the presiding deity, he would meet with disaster, was evidently operative around the time 'Job' was written and to some extent informs the contextual setting for the book. It is to the 'kingly' Job that Yahweh appears, not to the friends who 'darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge'.

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[27] Ibid., p.4.
[28] Hesiod, *Works and Days*, ed. M.L. West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p.7. West provides an excellent and informative prolegomena and commentary in the 1978 edition, including an introduction (or, "world tour", as he describes it) to the tradition of wisdom literature.
[29] Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature,* pp. 113-115.

A further antecedent to 'Job' is the figure of the 'righteous sufferer'. According to Lambert, the theme of the righteous sufferer 'must have arisen in the Sumerian academies of at least the Isin-Larsa period, and perhaps under the Third Dynasty of Ur.' [30] One text in particular, *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi* (literally, 'I will praise the lord of wisdom'*)*, written during the Cassite period (which came towards the end of the Babylonian period, possibly before or around 7 BC), has come to be known as "The Babylonian Job". However, Lambert suggests it would be better known as "The Babylonian Pilgrim's Progress" because

> Quantitively the greater part of the text is taken up with showing how Marduk restores his ruined servant, and only a small part with trying to probe the reason for the suffering of the righteous. In places the writer deliberately sheers away from plainly facing this problem because of its blasphemous implications … The author of *Ludlul* finds no answer adequate to solve this mystery. All he can say is though it be the lord who has smitten, yet it is the lord who will heal. [31]

Nevertheless some Cassite texts display a more profound reasoning than their predecessors and can be identified as definite antecedents to 'Job'. We can see when it comes to 'Job' that the idea of justice and man's relationship to the gods has undergone a remarkable development. Furthermore, Job's wisdom allows for such apparent transgression, precisely because it is a form of obedience. This development of theodicy in 'Job' is part of a process of a clearing of the ground in order to make way for a more revitalized understanding of suffering and justice.

In discussing such changes in theology from Sumerian to Babylonian, Lambert is further informative when he says that,

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[30] Ibid., p.11.
[31] Ibid., p.27.

> The chief differences are implicit in the change of conception about the gods … So long as the gods were simple personifications of parts or aspects of nature a wonderful reality pervaded thought. But as soon as human reason tries to impose a man-made purpose on the universe, intellectual problems arose. The big problem in Babylonian thought was that of justice. If the great gods in council controlled the universe, and if they ruled it in justice, why…? All kinds of very real difficulties had to be faced, and the position must have been worsened by the growth of law codes, from the Third Dynasty of Ur onwards. If, in the microcosm, a matter could be taken to law and redress secured, why, in the macrocosm, should one not take up matters with the gods? [32]

Job indeed grapples with the law codes upheld by the friends, and it is they who attempt to dissuade him from taking up his case with Yahweh. In this act of dissuasion it is clear that they represent the outlook of earlier books of the Hebrew Bible that share assumptions in common with the Age of the Cassite Kings. Job does take up his case with Yahweh, and in so doing, effectively overturns the notion that suffering implies guilt; he knows he is blameless. This is, therefore, a highly significant development, with wide ranging implications.

A second text that includes the figure of the 'righteous sufferer' is Hesiod's *Works and Days.* This text is likely to have been assembled sometime between 800 and 600 BC. Hesiod, who like Job is a victim of injustice and a righteous sufferer, addresses his brother and the kings who have wronged him. Furthermore, he is not simply writing on the theme of providence; there is also a theogonic aspect to *Works and Days*, and this fact alone suggests that the agricultural and the cosmological went hand in hand; that such didactic poetry as we see in Hesiod displays an implicit understanding of the alignment of the earth and the heavens, and therefore anticipates the maturation of temple ideology that was to come.

[32] Ibid., p.10.

The Book of Lamentations

Returning from classical Greece back to Judea, I will now examine another book of the Hebrew Bible that will assist in understanding 'Job', particularly in relation to the significance of hard work and perseverance, of weathering an ordeal. Lamentations was likely to have been written during the exilic period and therefore just predates 'Job'. It shares the same dilemma of cognitive dissonance but deals with it very differently. Gottwald refers to it as a 'literary deposit of a critical historical era', and says 'it possessed an important communal function and proclaimed a vital faith capable of adaptation to the storm and stress which attended the passing of the Hebraic age'. [33] However, it is not just a 'literary deposit' but an attempt, through literature, to give the fullest expression to collective grief, and would be only half as provocative if it were simply achieved in prose or expressed as an outpouring, that is, as an unmediated or unstructured expression of experience.

Indeed, it is highly structured. Among the 14 acrostics or partial acrostics in the Hebrew Bible, Lamentations is home to five of them. The author has skilfully selected the acrostic form as a means of expressing collective grief without it spilling over into effusiveness, an ingenious choice because, as Gottwald notes, it

> has enforced the most judicious economy upon the poet. Once having chosen the 2 or 3 line strophe, the lengths of his poems are predetermined. This constraint is probably largely responsible for the obvious compactness and concentration of emotion … the poet does not linger sentimentally over the scenes of horror he describes … the acrostic, combined with the clipped *Quinah* meter, has left the impression of deep feeling that is disciplined and restrained. [34]

[33] Gottwald, *Studies in The Book of Lamentations*, p.21.
[34] Ibid., pp.31-32.

Gottwald considers that Lamentations and Psalm 119 are the most accomplished of poetic material in the Hebrew Bible, but whereas Psalm 119 is 'monolithic', Lamentations resembles a cathedral, 'its unity broken in innumerable pleasing ways, never distracting but always contributing to the total impression'. [35] The book consists of 5 chapters or poems. The first four poems are acrostics using all 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, the fifth a partial acrostic. The first two and last two have 22 lines, the third has 66 and operates as an acrostic by starting a line with *aleph* three times, *beth* three times, etc., constituting an anaphora or triple acrostic at the very heart of the book where the theme of hope is at its most intense. [36] Gottwald observes that 'By a series of backward and forward movements [the author] has truly suited the expression to the fluctuations of grief and guilt'. [37]

These formal properties do not impose an artificial order on intense emotional experience because the acrostic has become a motif in itself, that of the fullest and most complete expression of grief possible, a motif which maximises the concept of the alphabet as embodying totality, encompassing the experience of grief, as Gottwald says, quoting a Jewish saying, 'from Aleph to Tav'. [38] The intended effect is not simply emotional catharsis but the navigation of this catharsis in the direction of confession, submission, and hope; a three-fold process designed to restore confidence in the intervention of Yahweh, and an appeal to his power to turn back the tide of catastrophic events.

There have been various theories as to why the acrostic form was used, including that of it being no more than an effective mnemonic aid for schoolboys.

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[35] Ibid., p.23.
[36] John Donne's *The Lamentations of Jeremy* is a fairly strict reworking of the City Lament poem, 'Lamentations'. The first two 'chapters' are sequences of 22 stanzas, the third is a poem of 66 lines (3x22). The fourth and fifth are both slightly more irregular sequences to a count of 22.
[37] Gottwald, *Studies in The Book of Lamentations,* p.31.
[38] Ibid., p.30.

Gottwald rashly dismisses another theory posed, that of the magical power of letters. He considers it out of the question that devout Jews in the sixth century BC could have attributed magical potency to letters, saying that there is no evidence for this. One objection might be that language has, and always will have, 'magical' properties in the sense that anything that is a medium for changing one thing into another is transmutative (and one does not have to hold this belief for such potency to be operative if it is already embedded in the collective psyche). For example, the transmutation of grief into hope through the medium of words can be understood in this light without recourse to, say, *Quabbalah*. Gottwald informs us that,

> Jeremias says of the letters among the Jews that they were thought of as holy, directly breathing the spirit of God. He derives this from the Babylonian idea that the entire alphabet represents the cosmic circle and possesses, therefore, a supernatural power. [39]

Gottwald adds that any transference of this belief to Lamentations is dubious but in so doing he seems to overlook the fundamental nature of language. There is no reason why it should not have an *inherent* capacity to 'ward off evil and secure benefits'. Whole traditions have based around the repetition of certain sounds, syllables, or phrases, whether these go under the term 'mantra', 'litany', or 'incantation'. Furthermore, one may wish to consider the relationship between language and incantation and ask: in what way can language be said to be inherently incantatory? I would argue that Gottwald has missed the point, reason being that the so-called magical potency of letters is precisely what is at play when the experience of grief, as Gottwald says himself, is encompassed 'from Aleph to Tav'. The poem is led, 'magically', through a prolonged cycle of mourning by using the linguistic device of repetition, a device that

[39] Ibid., p.25.

serves to incant consolation and protect against a premature abandonment of the grieving process.

This last comment is particularly relevant to 'Job'. 'Job' has in common with Lamentations the theme of the weathering of an ordeal, of the slow transition from a state of exile to one of restoration. I will be arguing, when I come to relate the Jobian dilemma to *ars poetica* more explicitly, that this has much to lend to a consideration of the proper maturation of a poem, any premature closing of it being tantamount to a shutting down of the creative processes essential for carving out the finished piece.

In its theological inquiry, 'Job' is radically more innovative than Lamentations. Instead of a call to confession, submission, and hope, it devotes page after page to defiance, foot stamping, and frustration, contrary to the misleading saying, "the patience of Job". Far from being the patient man of common myth, the afflicted Job is, for the most part, occupied with hurling accusations at his Creator.

'Job' may not be as compact and concentrated as Lamentations but it is much more vast in scope, ambition, and literary accomplishment. Habel notes that it is unprecedented in biblical Hebrew writing:

> The creative literary work of Job … does not conform to any single traditional genre structure. Traditional forms are incorporated, adapted, and transcended through the integration of curses, disputation, lament, trial speeches, wisdom poems, and hymnic materials into an underlying narrative plot. Plot and dialogue interact in a complex structure. Their interaction highlights counterpoint and controversy, ambiguity and audacity in an account of a mortal struggling to discover the meaning of life in the face of tradition, experience, and faith. [40]

[40] Habel, *The Book of Job*, p.45.

I would add that it is also unprecedented in containing the longest direct address given to Yahweh in the entire Hebrew Bible, and not only is it the longest, but it is in the form of poetry. I will explore the implication of this as the thesis unfolds.

Job's Influence on Literature

Given what I have said so far about the range and depth of the 'Job' material, which I have hopefully given at least some sense of, it is no surprise that the book has had a substantial influence on literature. A multitude of poets, novelists, playwrights, philosophers, and of course theologians, have been attuned to the power of its artistry and address of ultimate concerns. Unprecedented both as an awesome literary accomplishment and in its theological innovations, the book continues to be very much alive in the human imagination. Monumental texts such as Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (c.1387-1400), Milton's *Paradise Regained* (1671) and Goethe's *Faust, Part One* (published 1808) allude to 'Job' in one way or another. Barbara Lewalski's 1966 study of *Paradise Regained* suggests that the text is modelled on 'Job'. The 'Prologue in Heaven' from *Faust* consists of a wager that most likely borrows from the wager that makes up the prose opening to 'Job'.

Kierkegaard bases his philosophical novel *Repetition* (1843) on Job as a character who represents the hero of faith, much in the same way that Abraham informs *Fear and Trembling*. The novel consists of two parts, firstly a report by Constantin Constantius, and secondly, letters from a young man, incidental observations, another letter, and a concluding letter by Constantin Constantius. The young man writes:

> Job's greatness is that freedom's passion in him is not smothered or quieted down by a wrong expression. In similar circumstances, this position is often smothered in a person when faintheartedness and petty anxiety have allowed

> him to think he is suffering because of his sins, when that was not at all the case. His soul lacked the perseverance to carry through an idea when the world incessantly disagreed with him. [41]

Repetition is defined in the book as,

> a crucial expression for what "recollection" was to the Greeks. Just as they taught that all knowing is a recollecting, modern philosophers will teach that all life is a repetition. Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backwards, whereas genuine repetition is repeated forwards. Repetition, therefore, if it is possible, makes a person happy, whereas recollection makes him unhappy – assuming, of course, that he gives himself time to live and does not promptly at birth find an excuse to sneak out of life again, for example, that he has forgotten something. [42]

Furthermore, Kierkegaard's notion of the 'Absurd' anticipates Existential writers such as Albert Camus. Just as Kierkegaard is seen as the father of Existentialism, so one might conjecture than the Great-Great-Grandfather of the Absurd dilemma is none other than Job.

Kafka's *The Trial* (probably 1914) is a story in which Josef K. is absurdly accused of a crime but is never told what his crime is. We are confronted with the Jobian dilemma from the very first line: 'Someone must have been spreading lies about Josef K. for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one morning.' [43] Stuart Lasine contributes an informative chapter that discusses and debates the correlation between 'Job' and Kafka's novel in *The Voice from the Whirlwind*. He tells us that '[Martin] Buber considered Kafka's work to be the most important Job commentary of our generation. Other theologians agree. [Gershom] Scholem counseled Walter Benjamin to begin any inquiry into Kafka with the book of Job.'

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[41] Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p.207 (Letter from the Young Man, December 14).
[42] Ibid., p.131 (Report).
[43] Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (London: Picador, 1977), p.17.

Lasine goes on to say that Northrop Frye called *The Trial* "a kind of 'midrash' on the Book of Job". [44] What is so interesting about Kafka is that he never actually mentions 'Job'.

In his introduction to a selection of Thomas Hardy's poems, Tom Paulin notes that the wintry pond of 'Neutral Tones' (1898) is 'an intellectual as well as an emotional image of scepticism, loss of faith, that sense of eviction from the consolations of traditional religion. Behind it stands Job …'. [45] Hardy highlights his Jobian poem 'In the Seventies' (from *Moments of Vision*, 1917) with an epigraph from the Vulgate translation, '*Qui deridetur ad amico suo sicut ego*': 'I am as one mocked of his neighbour' ('Job' 12:4).

Although there is no single poem of Rilke's suggestive of a specifically Jobian influence, he writes in a letter to Lou Andreas Salome (dated July 18th 1903) that 'Job' 30 kept him up, as it did the young man of *Repetition*, long into the night: 'it was all true of me word for word'. [46]

G.K. Chesterton's novel *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908) owes much to 'Job', as does H.G. Wells' *The Undying Fire* (1919). Among W.H Auden's juvenilia is the poem 'Thomas Epilogizes' (1926) which contains the lines:

> … We are embraced by lichenous desires,
> The poodle has returned to her old vomit,
> We to our model homes like crouched Ophelias,
> Where Job squats awkwardly upon his ashpit,
> Scraping himself with blunted occam razors,
> He sharpened once to shave the Absolute.
> A cold wind clutches at his scraggy knees,
> The mindless wind, the trumpeter of April,

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[44] Stuart Lasine, 'Job and his Friends in the Modern World: Kafka's *The Trial*', in Leo G. Perdue and W. Clark Gilpin, eds., *The Voice From the Whirlwind: Interpreting the Book of Job* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), p.144.
[45] Thomas Hardy, *Poems Selected by Tom Paulin* (London: Faber, 2001), pp.xiii-xiv.
[46] Edward Snow and Michael Winkler, trans., *Rilke and Andreas Salome: A Love Story in Letters* (London: WW Norton and Co., 2008), p.50.

> Thrusting the grass blades into their America,
> Like bowler hats before a passing hearse,
> As April, that Byronic lover, comes,
> His 'gurdy coughing through the afternoon.
> Eliphaz, Zophar, Bildad, rise together,
> Begin to creek a wooden sarabande,
> 'Glory to God', they cry, and praise His name
> In epigrams that trail off in a stammer.
> Suave Death comes, final as a Handel cadence,
> And snaps their limbs like twigs across his knees;
> Silenus nods, his finger to his nose. [47]

Auden's take is wonderfully exacting and his poetic modernises 'Job' without in any way falling into effusive over-play. Written about a month earlier, 'Thomas Prologizes', references Leviathan and Behemoth of 'Job' 41:

> I can wring lightning from the clouds, or get
> Yon gibbous moon with child, or if you will,
> I'll drag Leviathan out by the nose,
> And send Behemoth sprawling on the grass … [48]

In a letter to Isherwood Auden says that,

> The idea of course is an adolescent, who feels that all his old ideas are breaking up and have taught him little but lyric and lechery. Then he thinks 'let's get onto something new' and in the usual way of romantic adolescence thinks that he is capable of doing any great and heroic thing though what he isn't quite sure of. [49]

A first play drawing explicitly on 'Job' is Archibald MacLeish's *J.B*: *A Play in Verse* (1959). A second is Robert Frost's *A Masque of Reason* (1945). Thompson and Winnick write in their biography of Frost that the play

[47] W.H. Auden, *Juvenilia: Poems 1922-1928*, ed. Katherine Bucknell (London: Faber, 1994), p.147.
[48] Ibid., pp.136-137.
[49] Ibid., p.137.

> grew out of Frost's lifelong fascination with the Book of Job, whose basic narrative line, that of a man forced to suffer a prolonged period of undeserved adversity, carried for Frost great emotional appeal. Having suffered a lifetime of frustration and neglect before achieving recognition as a poet, having lost … his first child, Elliott, and later a daughter, wife, and son (within a space of six years), Frost had little difficulty in identifying elements of his own experience with those of the archetypal sufferer of the Old Testament. Job's ultimate restoration to health and wealth also strongly appealed to his imagination and invited analogies with his own life. It was because of the opportunity it presented to explore the "reason" behind human suffering, however, that Frost had chosen, audaciously, to fashion a "Forty-third Chapter of Job". [50]

Robert Faggen, in his essay 'Frost and the Questions of Pastoral', says of Frost's poem 'The Most of It' (from *The Witness Tree*, 1942) that it 'leaves man's cry for a response answered only by a mysterious "embodiment," … as we are reminded of the inhuman theophany from the whirlwind as God rebuked Job'. [51] Further poems of Frost would appear to express aspects of the Jobian dilemma, including, for instance, the unexplained event which marks 'The Draft Horse'.

János Pilinszky's early collection of poetry, *Trapeze and Parallel Bars* (1940-46) contains a reference to 'biblical monsters', which would include Leviathan and Behemoth. Many of Ted Hughes's poems and critical writings suggest that he was more than familiar with the metaphysical implications of 'Job', implications that particularly impressed themselves into the material of *Crow* (1970). His critical remarks concerning a generation of Mid-European poets, in *Winter Pollen* – which include Popa, Pilinszky and Herbert – strongly resounds themes from 'Job'.

I have refrained from listing Jobian influence on philosophy and theology, as my remit must be strictly literary. A useful guide can be found in *The Lion Classic Bible*

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[50] Lawrance Thompson and R.H. Winnick, *Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981), pp. 429-430.

[51] Robert Faggen, 'Frost and the Questions of Pastoral', in *The Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost,* ed. Faggen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.60. See also Robert Pack's *Affirming Limits* for an informative discussion of the poem and what appear to be its Jobian overtones, overtones that are also apparent in Pack's discussion of 'The Draft Horse', pp.186-187, which he follows with a quote from *A Masque of Reason*.

Series, which contains a section of short essays on the use of quotations, characters, and themes adapted from 'Job'. [52]

One of the difficulties with drawing on 'Job' as an influence is that it redirects us away from rational thought towards 'worship' by playing at the limits of language. One might say that not only is man in love with what disappears, but that the human mind is most fecund when taken to the edge of all it can sense, but not encompass. It is surely valid to affirm that the poet's task is to report back from that place as best he can.

In the following two chapters I will make a detailed examination of how the author of 'Job' has worked at the limits of language and, given the themes of the book, take it as read that his intention is to use the techniques of Classical Hebrew poetry to effect a modification of our understanding of the created order through semantics.

[52] *The Book of Job* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1997).

CHAPTER II

LANGUAGE AT THE EDGE

In this chapter I will examine in depth the most significant techniques of biblical Hebrew poetry which are employed in the composition of 'Job' with a view to understanding how the author has worked at the very limits of language in order to parallel, through the verse drama, the theological innovations which the book encapsulates. As is, or should be, the case for all poetry, the techniques which serve to structure the work are themselves ways of saying, and it follows that, because the author of 'Job' wishes to present a particular theological outlook which in itself is subversive and shocking, he has used traditional techniques in a way which mirror that outlook. Habel suggests that the author chooses 'ambiguous variation' as his trademark style, both dramatically and semantically. [53] Hardly needing to argue for textual sophistication, he says, 'Style corresponds to theology; ambiguity is both a mark not only of the literary design but also of the paradox in the design of the cosmos'. [54] Paradox, ambiguity, the defeat of expectation, values turned upside down, irony – these are all in play in the Jobian verse drama and are employed as means of grappling with the theme of cognitive dissonance.

I would suggest that the most significant techniques employed in 'Job' are the following, all of which I have selected from Wilfred Watson's *Classical Hebrew Poetry*: parallelism, extended word-pairing, tour, list, erotesis (the rhetorical question), oxymoron and paradox, hyperbole, delayed intensification, reversal and inversion, and the envelope figure (inclusio). The use of erotesis in 'Job' is unprecedented and as such

[53] Habel, *The Book of Job,* p.47.
[54] Ibid., p.51.

merits its own chapter. Otherwise, except in the case of parallelism, I will not examine the rest of these individually, but within the context of a discussion of the trope of 'defamiliarisation' and, what I will term, the Jobian linguistic shock tactic.

Parallelism

It is necessary to provide a preliminary elucidation of parallelism. This has been done most notably by Bishop Robert Loweth in *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum*, and by James L. Kugel in *The Idea of Hebrew Poetry*. Further investigation is provided by, among others, Wilfred Watson and Robert Alter.

It has been assumed that parallelism is the defining characteristic and organising principle of Hebrew poetry. It was certainly a formal requirement (as opposed to metre), but some disagree that it can be seen as an overall principle. Watson suggests that the proper context for parallelism is that of it being one 'mathematical analogue' existing within a wider group. He gives a neat explanation of these as follows:

1. Parallelism (proper congruence):

same sequence
same sign

a1,a2,a3,… // a1,a2,a3,…

for example, Jer 51:27:

שאו־נס בארץ
תקעו שופר בגוים

Raise a standard in the land;
blow a trumpet among the nations.

(Similarly Job 8:3:

Doth God pervert judgement?
or doth the Almighty pervert justice?)

2. Chiasmus or mirror symmetry (reflexive congruence):

same sign
opposite sequence

a1,a2,a3,… // a3,a2,a1,…

for example, Ps 107:16 (with anacrusis):

כי
שבר רלתות נחושת
ובריחי ברזל גרע

For
he had shattered doors of bronze;
and bars of iron he has snapped.

3. Proper anti-congruence:

same sequence
opposite sign

a1,a2,a3,… // -a1,-a2,-a3,…

for example, Ps 85:12 (with gender parallelism and semantic reversal):

אמת מארץ תצמח
וצרק משמים נשקף

Fidelity (f) from the earth (f) will spring up (+),
and justice (-f) from the sky (-f) will peer down (-).

4. Reflexive anti-congruence (chiastic):

reversed sequence
opposite sign

a1,a2,a3… // -a3,-a2,-a1,…

for example, Ps 37:30:

פי צריק יהגה חכמה
ולשונו תרבר משפט

The just man's mouth (m) mutters (m) wisdom (-m)
his tongue (-m) speaks (-m) justice. (m) [55]

From this range of analogues one might be misled into thinking that parallelism, as such, is simply part of a system of variants of congruence. However, there is no doubt that parallelism is a fundamental device and that, as Hebrew poetry is largely composed of paralleling colons, or versets, some form of parallelism is contained within those colons, for example, parallel word-pairs. Contrary to earlier classifications of parallelism into synonymous, antithetical, and synthetic, there are many variants on the parallelistic line and these variants overlap with other devices. Identified variants on the parallelistic line include: gendered parallelism, parallel word-pairs, whether synonymous, antonymic, identical or augmented (i.e. with the addition of a modifier, as in: …the desert//…the holy desert.), number parallelism, noun-verb parallelism, and staircase parallelism. This latter variant, for example, is a couplet that proceeds in steps with three components, as outlined by Watson:

סורה ארני
סורה אלי

Turn aside, O sir,
turn aside towards me. (Jgs 4:18)

1. *the repeated element*: 'turn aside' (סורה);
2. *the intervening element*: 'O sir' (ארני);
3. *the complementary element*: 'towards me' (אלי). [56]

[55] Wilfred Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement series 26 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), pp.118-119.
[56] Ibid., p.150.

(Just to further evoke a sense of the complexity of classical Hebrew poetry, a variant on staircase parallelism is the three-line staircase parallelism where there is often ellipsis in the third line).

Linguistic Shock Tactics

1. Defamiliarization

Just how much flexibility parallelism has in the service of poetic expression cannot be understated. What is most relevant to my purpose is to draw attention to the key function of the techniques listed above, parallelism included: that of defamiliarization (and intensification, the latter being one possible consequence of the former). For this reason, coupled with the fact that the overall themes in 'Job' are played out through dramatic irony, I refer to these techniques as linguistic shock tactics.

I will now look at the connection between parallelism and defamiliarization. In accordance with Habel's comment on the use of parallelism in 'Job' being a case of 'ambiguous variation', Alter observes that parallelism is almost never used without some variation, ambiguous or otherwise: ' … literary expression abhors complete parallelism, just as language resists true synonymity, usage always introducing small wedges of difference between closely akin terms'. [57] Appropriately, he points us to Viktor Shklovsky's seminal essay, 'Art as Technique'. Shklovsky writes:

> … in my article on plot construction I write about defamiliarization in psychological parallelism. Here, then I repeat that the perception of

[57] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, p.10.

> disharmony in a harmonious context is important in parallelism. The purpose of parallelism, like the general purpose of imagery, is to transfer the usual perception of an object into the sphere of a new perception – that is, to make a unique semantic modification.
>
> In studying poetic speech in its phonetic and lexical structure as well as in its characteristic distribution of words and in the characteristic thought structures compounded from the words, we find everywhere the artistic trademark – that is, we find material obviously created to remove the automatism of perception; the author's purpose is to create the vision which results from the deautomatized perception. [58]

In the case of parallelism, defamiliarization operates by intensifying the content of the first colon in the second colon, to the effect of saying: "if this is this, then how much more so this". Good examples would be:

(of Leviathan:)

> The arrow cannot make him flee:
> slingstones are turned with him into stubble. (41:28)

(and of Job's *těšuwah*:)

> I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear:
> but now mine eye seeth thee. (42:5) [59]

Parallelism intrinsically harbours the emotion of suspense; one expects a second colon, which is always in some sense a development of the first. It may sometimes be the case that the first colon can stand independently and yet, even so, would await the development, or crowning, of its meaning from the second, and this is often a movement from literal to figurative or metaphorical. For example:

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[58] Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, in David Lodge, ed., *Modern Criticism and Theory* (London: Longman, 1988), p.27.

[59] These examples, and all those that follow, are taken from the King James Bible. Preferable would be to examine the Hebrew text itself. Nevertheless these translations still give a sense of varying ways in which the first colon is intensified in the second.

> Should a wise man utter vain knowledge,
> and fill his belly with the east wind? (15:2)

The very presence of suspense conduces to an atmosphere of the intensified. It is precisely the case, as Shklovsky observes, that intensification is intended to effect a change in perception, to 'transfer the usual perception of an object into the sphere of a new perception'. This, of course, can be of varying degrees:

> Neither have I gone back from the commandment of his lips;
> I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food. (23:12)
>
> I put on righteousness, and it clothed me:
> my judgement *was* as a robe and a diadem. (29:14)

In the following example defamiliarisation is already set up in the first colon, and doubly intensified in the second:

> Hath the rain a father?
> or who hath begotten the drops of dew? (38:28)

Semantic parallelism, generally, is employed as a device of intensification, and this is particularly the case in 'Job'. There are exceptions. For instance, strictly speaking, there is no intensification in:

> My lips shall not speak wickedness,
> Nor my tongue utter deceit. (27:4)

(the only intensification – if one wishes to argue the case – is in the fact of repetition, which is inherent in the parallelistic line). This example constitutes the rare case of, as Alter terms it, 'static parallelism'. [60]

Even where the effect is one of focusing, that bringing to focus is itself a form of intensification. For instance:

> Who giveth rain upon the earth,
> and sendeth waters upon the fields (5:10)

where 'earth' is focused into 'fields'. However it could be said that there is a reversal happening in this example: 'waters' is the less specific, less focused, parallel of 'rain'; one of the word-pairs (earth/fields) focuses, and another un-focuses (rain/waters). Alter would disagree with this point. He says that,

> If the sequence of "rain" and "water" here does not follow the pattern of specific term after general, that is because the water in the fields is the *result* of the rain, and the relation between process and consequence of process often obtains between first verset and second. [61]

This is fair enough, although it could be seen that with one word-pair focusing and the other un-focusing, what results is a deliberate evocation of paradox in the created order. And given that 'Job' is a text that, at its core, is occupied with exactly this, a modifying of our understanding of cosmology through semantics, we can see how that modification begins to burst into full operation from chapter 38 onwards.

Parallelism, when working in its full capacity for the effect of defamiliarization, is an excellent technique for evoking a sense of a cosmological hidden design that

[60] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry,* p.22.
[61] Ibid., pp.19-20.

eludes rational thought. Defamiliarization is the translation from Russian of *Ostranenie*. Seamus Heaney has rendered this as 'making strange'. Whether or not he had 'Job' in mind when he wrote the poem from *Station Island*, 'Making Strange', is by the by when we accept that the trope, as Shklovsky says, is an 'artistic trademark'. Poetry universally serves 'to remove the automatism of perception'. Line 17 of Heaney's poem, 'Go beyond what's reliable', would, however, sum up the poetic techniques employed in 'Job' where they serve the purpose of shocking the protagonist (and the reader) into a changed state.

Before I examine further linguistic shock tactics in 'Job', a consideration of Heaney's poem may help elucidate the trope of defamiliarization. I am going to consider it in the specific context of what I will term 'hermetic speech' (using 'hermetic' to refer to Hermes and not Hermes Trimegistus), a context not out of place given that Hermes is a pronounced point of reference within the discourse of poets, Heaney included. 'The Stone Verdict', from *The Haw Lantern*, is a good example. This poem may well be an elegy for Heaney's father. The collection also features a sonnet sequence addressing the death of his mother. Owing to the fact that another of the roles of Hermes was to lead the dead to the underworld one might say that he is the presiding genius of this volume. The reason for such a proliferation of references to Hermes is clear: his nature is that of a mediator, governing the transformation of one thing into another. As such, he can be said to govern metaphor, which bridges the unsayable and the sayable, if not the alteration that takes place between one colon of the parallelistic line and the other. He is regarded as a threshold god, a threshold implying two-ness: from/towards. He is dualistic in nature (and I will demonstrate in a moment how that might relate to parallelism), yet it is important to note that this dualism is of a mercurial sort, meaning that the two-ness is not fixed but fluid, just as

the metal, mercury, is not solid but liquid (quicksilver). A characteristic of the mercurial nature could be posited semantically as 'either-or', or, 'both-and', reason being that Hermes, as a mercurial figure, is associated with trickery or cunning, and that which cannot be pinned down.

Heaney's poem is hermetic from the outset:

I stood between them,
the one with his travelled intelligence
and tawny containment,
his speech like the twang of a bowstring,

and another, unshorn and bewildered
in the tubs of his wellingtons,
smiling at me for help,
faced with this stranger I'd brought him.

Then a cunning middle voice
came out of the field across the road
saying, 'Be adept and be dialect,
tell of the wind coming past the zinc hut,

call me sweetbriar after the rain
or snowberries cooled in the fog.
But love the cut of this travelled one
and call me also the cornfield of Boaz.

Go beyond what's reliable
in all that keeps pleading and pleading,
these eyes and puddles and stones,
and recollect how bold you were

when I visited you first
with departures you cannot go back on.'
A chaffinch flicked from an ash and next thing
I found myself driving the stranger

through my own country, adept
at dialect, reciting my pride
in all that I knew, that began to make strange
at that same recitation. [62]

[62] Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground* (London: Faber, 1998), pp. 221-222.

That 'cunning middle voice' which enters the poem at line 9 can be identified as the hermetic voice mediating between the learned type and the bewildered. This is further supported by the theme of telling (line 12) and reciting in the speaker's own dialect (line 26). In the last stanza the 'making strange' happens when the speaker is telling what he knows to the 'middle voice', to the unnamed other, the 'stranger'. And it is in that very act that the speaker goes beyond the familiar. The familiar is defamiliarized. This is precisely one of the key functions of poetry and why poetry can be regarded essentially as hermetic speech, Hermes governing the changing of one thing into another.

Another subtle change occurs. In line 11 we have: 'Be adept and be dialect'. By lines 25 and 26 this has transformed into 'adept/at dialect'. The change from 'and' to 'at' is of enormous significance. That Heaney does not overstate this is very smart indeed. Where the first expresses something to master, the second expresses the mastery of that thing, and the change occurs through the mercurial agency, evidencing that the speaker has gone 'beyond what's reliable'.

Lastly, reference to The Book of Ruth in line 16 is also a very telling detail. The theme of the book is two-fold: loving-kindness (*hesed*) and redemption. (It also establishes the lineage from Boaz through to David, and for Christians establishes the Davidic lineage through to Jesus.) The outcome of Ruth's loyalty to Naomi, of her choosing exile from her own land (implying, again, the weathering of an ordeal) and arriving in Bethlehem at the start of the barley harvest; the outcome of her day-in day-out gleaning of the harvest, where, as Keats says, 'sick for home/She stood in tears amid the alien corn', is that she comes into the confidence of Boaz. [63] In Ruth there is no premature abandonment of the grieving process but its full and proper maturation,

[63] John Keats, 'Ode to a Nightingale', in *Keats: Poems Published in 1820*, ed. M.Robertson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1909), p.111.

which can be said to lead her to a turning point, if not to her own *tĕšuwah.* The story, like that of 'Job', encompasses completely the transition from exile to restoration.

If we take it that 'the cornfield of Boaz' is not just a place in space-time where Ruth toils, but also a metaphorical place, representing that which *leads to* redemption, then it should be clearer what the reference is doing in Heaney's poem. The 'middle voice', the mediating voice, says '*call me* also the cornfield of Boaz'. If that is what *is,* metaphorically, the cornfield of Boaz, then the middle voice in the poem represents the mediating agency of redemption (Mercury/Hermes in alchemical discourse) – and redemption is only obtained by going 'beyond what's reliable', as Ruth did. Heaney would have been well aware of Keats' reference to Ruth, whether or not he had it in mind when writing 'Making Strange', and indeed the symbolism of the nightingale can be conflated with that of the middle voice: 'the self-same song that found a path/Through the sad heart of Ruth' is a song calling up the redemptive power of inspiration.

By this short detour it should be clear that the common ground between metaphor and parallelism is that they both make strange by turning the ordinary into the unexpected in order to, in Shklovsky's words, 'transfer the usual perception of an object into the sphere of a new perception':

> Should a wise man utter vain knowledge, (literal)
> and fill his belly with the east wind? (figurative/metaphorical)
>
> I put on righteousness, and it clothed me: (figurative/metaphorical)
> my judgement was as a robe and a diadem. (extended analogy based on metaphor in first colon)

Therefore, there is a third principle at work in the parallelistic couplet, a principle which is by nature 'hermetic', if we consider *hermetic* as referring to an agency which enables the intensification to take place from the first colon to the second. It is that which we do not see happening, and in this respect functions as a hidden teaching, a 'dark saying', which might be uncovered through a close and conscientious reading. Indeed, the whole of 'Job' 38 is a litany of making strange.

2. Intensification

In the context of the speeches of the friends (*alazōn*) in 'Job', parallelism serves to heighten a sense of the endlessness of the round of questioning, rationalising and received wisdom. Simultaneously we sense the intensification of Job's sufferings through these speeches, his mounting exasperation. When we come to Yahweh's speeches from the whirlwind, the impasse may have been reached and transcended, but the endlessness and intensification does not stop there. Chapters 38-41 epitomise the notion of the linguistic shock tactic whereby language is pushed to its limits.

One means by which this is effected is in the employment of the 'list'. Job's lament (chapter 3), for example, contains a list from verses 14-18 of those with whom he feels he should be at rest in the grave with. Further examples are abundant in Yahweh's speeches. A list of animals and birds constitutes chapter 39 for the purpose of intensifying a sense of the created order and the interdependence of its eco-systems. Another intensifying device is the 'tour'. Watson has defined this as 'an *extension of the word-pair*' (that is, of a single word-pair) and cites Job 4:10-11:

The *lion's* roar,
The *fierce beast's* cry,
– but the *whelps'* teeth are shattered;
the *big-cat* wanders with no prey,
the *lioness's* cubs are scattered.

He adds, 'five parallel terms for a *lion* are used in five consecutive lines, any two of which could form a word-pair', and then provides a useful distinction between the 'tour' and the 'list', should they appear to overlap: 'The *list* is a catalogue of nouns set out consecutively; the *tour* is a series of parallel lines each containing a noun or verb which is the focus of interest: an extended word-pair'. [64] The 'tour' is an intensifying shock tactic in the sense that it, too, induces a sense of the marvellous through repetition.

A further means employed in 'Job' of taking language to the edge is, of course, erotesis, another form of repetition. Chapters 38 to 41 are celebrated for their extensive use of erotesis, employed to convey a sense of the paradoxical nature of creation. They do so by employing, among other devices, unusual word-pairs, paradoxical or ironic statements (not without a good deal of humour), oxymorons, hyperbole, lists, and tours. At this point in the verse drama defamiliarization reaches its culmination, both semantically, because the shock tactics are at their most intense, and dramatically, because Yahweh has indeed appeared, thereby defeating the expectations (and theological outlooks) of the friends. Through this culmination of the technique of defamiliarization, Job experiences the visionary's *tĕšuwah,* and, having thus been utterly turned-about, is revealed to all the characters of the drama to be the true *eirōn.*

[64] Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry,* p.350.

3. Ironic Movements

Before moving on to a study of erotesis in the next chapter, I will examine two final techniques employed in 'Job', that of 'reversal', and how it relates to the notion of *tĕšuwah*, and that of the 'envelope structure'. Watson cites Genesis 25:8 in contrast to 'Job' 3:11 as an example of reversal:

> Abraham breathed his last and died at a happy, ripe age,
> old and full of years, and was gathered to his kin.

contrasted with:

> Why did I not DIE from the womb,
> come from the uterus and BREATHE MY LAST?

and suggests that 'this matches the overall mood of Job 3, where normal values are stood on their head: death is preferred to life.' [65] The turning upside down of values would appear to be the main reason for the employment of reversal. In the above example the A-B set (die/breathe my last) is, as Watson notes, split-up and inverted.

Another kind of reversal occurs within the larger, overarching, framework of the text taken in its entirety. 'Job' 38 is a massive reversal of 'Job' 3. Alter observes that, 'These first thirty-seven lines of God's response to Job constitute a brilliantly pointed reversal, in structure, image, and theme'. [66] He goes on to say that,

> In both structure and thematic assertion, chapters 38-41 are a great diastolic movement, responding to the systolic movement of chapter 3. The poetics of suffering in chapter 3 seeks to contract the whole world to a point of extinction,

[65] Ibid., pp.330-331.
[66] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry,* p.96.

> and it generates a chain of images of enclosure and restriction. The poetics of providential vision in the speech from the storm conjures up horizon after expanding horizon, each populated with a new form of life. [67]

Given the text of 'Job' to be, in part, a cosmological inquiry, this diastole-systole movement can be seen to have been employed not simply to express, as Alter says, 'the poetics of suffering' in contrast with 'the poetics of providential vision', but has a far wider implication. In *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism,* Gershom Scholem informs us that,

> The consensus of Kabbalistic opinion regards the mystical way to God as a reversal of the procession by which we have emanated from God. To know the stages of the creative process is also to know the stages of one's own return to the root of all existence … It is here that Kabbalism comes closest to Neoplatonic thought, of which it has been said with truth that "procession and reversion together constitute a single movement, the diastole-systole, which is the life of the universe". [68]

The wider implication is that the text itself simulates the patterning of the universe. It does so by conflating the linear narrative of the drama and the techniques of its literary execution. This simulation is the reason why I have suggested that 'Job' 38 can be understood to commence with a liturgy for the foundation of the temple, the temple reflecting the cosmological design. In which case the text can be seen to aspire towards, not only simulation of the cosmos, but of the temple.[69] The literary excellence of 'Job' in this respect would make a great deal of sense historically, given the events of the sixth century BC.

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[67] Ibid., pp.103-104.
[68] Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), p.20.
[69] Blake evidently understood this dimension to 'Job' in his illustrations to the book. It is interesting to note that the cathedral depicted in Plate 1 has disappeared in Plate 21. The latter Plate is a total reversal of the former. The implication is that true faith *is* the cathedral (temple). In his commentary to the illustrations, Andrew Wright remarks that 'This is in accord with that in [The Book of] Revelation itself, where there is no Temple. In Revelation there is simply light, inward and outward'. Andrew Wright, *Blake's Job: A Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p.51.

Aside from this overarching example of 'Job' 3 and 38, Alter also conceives of reversal in a slightly different sense, relating it to 'structures of intensification' in general. This kind of reversal occurs after the build-up of tension has reached an impasse:

> There are … many biblical poems in which any implied events, even metaphoric ones, are secondary while what is primary is a predicament, an image, or a thematic idea that is amplified from verset to verset and from line to line. Poetic form acts in these cases as a kind of magnifying glass, concentrating the rays of meaning to a white-hot point. This means … that the progression of intensifying thematic particles is brought to a culminating flare-up, or compels resolution by a sharp reversal at the end. This kind of poetic structure lends itself beautifully to the writing of a psalmodic plea for help, a prophetic denunciation, or a Jobian complaint … [70]

The first reversal, according to Alter's comments, would occur at the moment of Yahweh's appearance, for the reason that the 3x3 cycle of speeches and responses (plus Elihu's additional speech) has led to an impasse, a 'white-hot point', manifest in both the *alazōns'* condemnation of Job and in the *eirōn's* (Job's) contempt for them. It is a reversal because Yahweh effectively turns what has been said around: 'Who *is* this that darkeneth counsel with words without knowledge?' All the while the friends had each been convinced that they had knowledge and could thereby rightfully administer to Job's sufferings.

The second reversal would occur at the point of Job's turning from death wish to new lease of life. This is after Yahweh's first speech (40:3) and it is confirmed again after the second speech (42:1). So compelling are the speeches that a reversal is inevitable, and for this reason the device of reversal can be likened to the *tĕšuwah* which, as I have said, can denote, literally, a response to a question or a statement, or it can denote, metaphorically, an 'about-face' or a 'return' in the sense of a 'repentance'. The

[70] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry,* p.63.

'flare-up', as Alter puts it, 'compels resolution' and in the context of Job's predicament the only resolution is an increase in wisdom. Job's predicament is reversed. In both instances the device serves to intensify the dramatic irony.

In connection with this last point, I will now look at the technique of the 'envelope figure' (inclusio). It is sometimes impossible to separate different techniques in classical Hebrew poetry, and this case is a good example. Job's reversed predicament is also a form of the envelope figure. Watson defines this as,

> the repetition of the same phrase or sentence at the beginning and end of a stanza or poem. In effect, the poem is *framed* between the repeated phrases … Akin though it is to the refrain, the envelope figure occurs not more than twice. [71]

However, this definition can be expanded to include, for example, motifs, or variations on phrase that are not strictly repetitions. Habel suggests it is a device 'in which a key term, form of speech, image or motif given at the beginning of a unit is repeated or complimented as a signal of closure at the end of that unit.' He adds,

> Within the total framework of the book of Job, the correspondence between the opening verses (1:1-3) and the closing verses (42:12-17) has long been recognised. What has not been fully appreciated is that 28:28 clearly echoes 1:1 and seems to constitute an inclusion which signals a closure at the mid-point of the scenes in the book as a whole. [72]

This is a fascinating observation given that chapter 28 is known as the 'Hymn of Wisdom' and wisdom is central to the restoration of Job, being that which distinguishes the temple initiate and constitutes kingliness. It is through a process of heightened irony that Job comes to this experience. 1:1 reads: 'There was a man in the land of Uz,

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[71] Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry,* pp.282-283.
[72] Habel, *The Book of Job,* p.46.

whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God and eschewed evil'. 28:28 reads: 'And unto man he said, Behold the fear of the Lord, that *is* wisdom; and to depart from evil *is* understanding'. The major difference is that the first is reported *of* Job whereas the second is spoken *by* Job; the first is hearsay and conjecture whereas the second is actualisation. This implies that uprightness is not enough, that outward displays of rigid piety are the ironic opposite of integrity, an implication that recalls 2 Corinthians 6:3: 'the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth Life'.

1:3 and 42:12 are the verses giving the sum total of Job's livestock at the start and at the end of the prose-framework, or envelope, in which the verse-drama is situated. The sum totals are 11 and 22 thousand. This envelope-figure is also a kind of extended number parallelism in that there is a definite correlation or paralleling of numbers which conceal a symbolic evaluation pertaining to Job's status. The 11 suggests a man who is at a half-way point and has yet to weather a crisis which will effect an about-face, and the 22 suggests a man who has weathered the crisis, gone beyond what's reliable, and attained a hard-won wisdom. In so doing he is then required to atone for the friends, a detail which confirms him as a temple initiate, just as a priest in a temple would be thus qualified, atonement for others being one of the functions of the temple initiate.

Given what has been said about the envelope figure, we may view the essential structure of the book diagrammatically:

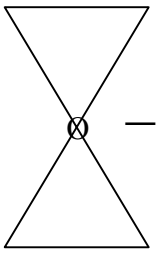
EXPANSION :

Ch.38-41: Yahweh's speeches

22

Increasing 'spiral' of awareness / wisdom

Universal scope



— Point of no return, reversal, or repentance:
the '*Těšuvah*' marked by Yahweh's appearance

↑ **Individual scope**

Decreasing 'spiral' of lamentation

11

CONTRACTION :

Ch.1-37: 3x3 speeches (plus Elihu) and responses

This enables us to see how many of the techniques I have been discussing overlap or interrelate. The only problem with this diagram is that the upper trine is in fact indefinite, in the sense that there are ever more levels to which the temple initiate may ascend, and one might wish to remove the horizontal line at the top! (However, in relation to the actual text of 'Job' – which has a beginning and an end, it seems apt to leave it there.) The horizontal line at the bottom, however, would seem to be fitting as it marks a definitive point at which the lamentations began.

Summing up

The techniques discussed in this chapter are all simultaneously structural devices and ways of saying, and parallel the theological innovation encapsulated in 'Job'. Taken together, they have been ingeniously employed by an author fully aware

of his intent. Poetic expression is pushed towards its own upper limits. It gathers sparks and takes us, hermetically, into the experience of a vision of reality that embodies Shklovsky's 'deautomatized perception'. The poetic architecture of the text replicates cosmological design.

This is a very radical book indeed. With its emphasis on the importance of careful speech, 'Job' is an impressive example of the capacity of language to magically replicate a complex picture of the play between order and chaos, suffering and assuagement. Language, when working at the very limits of itself, has always been one of the standard means of the process of initiation into the 'mysteries'. Defamiliarization can most certainly be understood to be a descendant of this archaic method. In chapter one I cited Gottwald, in relation to the acrostic form employed in Lamentations, dismiss as out of the question the idea that devout Jews in the sixth century BC could have attributed magical potency to letters. I hope I have provided conclusive evidence that through the medium of carefully chosen structural techniques, the transmutation of a state of exile into that of restoration has been 'magically' effected by incantatory methods which protect against a premature closing down of the grieving process, and, therefore, against eschewing the possibility of a hard-won *tĕšuwah.*

CHAPTER III

A LITANY OF MAKING STRANGE

Erotesis serves to defamiliarize, to make strange, especially when used in extended form. Although it is employed throughout 'Job', as I noted in the previous chapter, 'Job' 38-41 employs it in *litany*. These chapters of the verse drama are where defamiliarization reaches its culmination, both technically, because the shock tactics are at their most intense, and dramatically, because Yahweh has appeared, defeating the expectations of the friends and the theology they have been upholding in their reproaches. Erotesis, as I will demonstrate in the discussion that follows, is central to Job's *tĕšuwah.*

The Question as 'Dark Saying': 'Job' 38-41

> The most striking aspect about 'Job' with regard to rhetorical questions is their *frequency*. Chapter after chapter uses this device to a degree unparalleled by other books. It is highly likely that this is a component of the wisdom tradition. [73]

This remark of Watson's is adequate enough and yet it would not be presumptuous to dispense with 'highly likely', given that it is well known that in this tradition erotesis, and questioning in general, was often employed as part of a process of subjection to disorientating experiences. In fact, in so affording a glimpse of the ineffable, it was a means of ministering to the need for integration and wholeness at individual, social, and cosmic levels of experience. Taking the wisdom tradition as extending beyond the

[73] Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry,* p.340.

Hebraic context of 'Job', one might also think of the single-handed clapping of the Zen master, or of the Sphinx's riddle.

Rhetorical questions are questions that do not require, but imply, an answer. Michael V. Fox has observed that there are two types of rhetorical question in 'Job': firstly, 'oratorical gesture', and secondly, 'statement in interrogative form'. [74] The function of both is to disorientate the protagonist to effect an alteration of his understanding, and as such they serve the same purpose as other dark sayings, such as the riddle or enigma.

Whilst it is obvious that the questions of 'Job' 38-41 cannot be answered, they nevertheless cannot be categorised as nonsensical for the reason that they conceal a third principle, which transcends the duality of question and answer. I will call this principle the 'post-interrogative reality', a principle also operative in, for instance, the *Koan* (indeed, in the tradition of Zen Buddhism the utter confounding of the disciple is a crucial stage of discipleship). The import of this reality is as far removed from the nonsensical as it is possible to get. It is simply that it necessitates a use of language, of poetic language, which may appear nonsensical but in fact can 'remove the automatism of perception', in Shklovsky's words. To a trained mind it would make very real sense, and as I said in the introduction, the ability to understand 'dark sayings' constituted wisdom. Furthermore, the poetic idiom most suited to minister to the need for integration and effect a modification of thinking, which is surely one of the intentions of the author, is hardly likely to appeal to our rational inclinations. Instead, as Alter suggests, the authorial intention is an attempt to best show a vision of creation from a God's perspective:

[74] Michael V. Fox, 'Job 38 and God's Rhetoric', p.58.

> What needs to be emphasised, however, considerably more than has been done is the essential role poetry plays in the imaginative realisation of revelation. If the poetry of Job – at least when its often problematic text is fully intelligible – looms above all other biblical poetry in virtuosity and sheer expressive power, the culminating poem that God speaks out of the storm soars beyond everything that has preceded it in the book, the poet having wrought a poetic idiom even richer and more awesome than the one he gave Job. Through this pushing of the poetic expression towards its own upper limits, the concluding speech helps us see the panorama of creation, as perhaps we could do only through poetry, with the eyes of God. [75]

Reversal and Repetition

The verses of 'Job' 38 push poetic expression to its limits through repeated erotesis. These verses are for the most part, as Fox has noted, interrogations and oratory, but they are also revelations. One might look, for instance, at 19 and 20:

> Where is the way where light dwelleth? And as for darkness, where is
> the place thereof,
> That thou shouldest take it to the bound thereof, and that thou
> shouldest know the paths to the house thereof?

'Light and dark' is a classic word-pair. The verses suggest that the location of the light and the darkness is as unfathomable as how they have come into existence in the first place. They are revelatory in the sense that they are designed to push us to the limits of our comprehension and open an awareness of the infinite, an awareness which then puts our human concerns in context. This is supported by the fact that, in terms of the book as a whole, they pose a reversal of Job's use of light and dark imagery in his lament poem of chapter 3,

[75] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry,* p.87.

> Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived.
> Let that day be darkness; let not God regard it from above, neither let the light shine upon it …
> Let the stars of the twilight thereof be dark; let it look for light, but have none; neither let it see the dawning of the day (3:3-4,9)

and thus reverse, in a revelatory way, the yearning for self destruction into its opposite: a heightened sense of wonder at Creation, an astonishment which effectively cleans the slate of any traces of self-absorption.

An interesting detail which arises in relation to the use of erotesis in 'Job' is that it reverses the long recognised question, 'Ad-matai' (עַד־אָנָה: 'How long…?'). This is a standard phrasing (or formula), used in 'Job' (7:19, 8:2 – twice, 18:2, 19:2) and many other books of the Hebrew Bible, especially where a note of lamentation is being sounded. Psalm 13 uses it four times:

> How long wilt thou forget me, O LORD? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me?
> How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily? how long shall mine enemy be exalted over me?

Granted that cognitive dissonance raises questions, the first question is always: "Why?" (Why has this happened when I've done nothing to deserve it…?). In return, the answer is in the form of the question, "Well, why not?", or, 'Where wast thou … ?' (38:4). After a certain period of time has elapsed, the second question is going to be: "How long…?" (How long must I suffer? when is my suffering going to stop?). Again, in 'Job', the return does not answer the question on the level at which the question is being asked, but uses erotesis to shift the conceptual framework up to another level. The return to "How long?" is then something like, 'Canst thou bind the sweet

influences of Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion?' (38:31), or, 'Hast thou perceived the breadth of the earth?' (38:18). 'Job' is ground breaking because one of the questions posed by the righteous sufferer is: "Will you not come and answer for yourself?"

The poetics of suffering which arises from cognitive dissonance, the 'why?' and the 'how long …?', is reversed by what Alter terms 'the poetics of providential vision', when Yahweh does indeed 'answer' for himself. This reversal – of one kind of question into another – is of course what precipitates the *tĕšuwah,* itself being a reversal, an 'about-face'.

In the speeches of Yahweh the repetition of questions is employed so extensively that Job is inevitably swept along on a tide of revelation. The operation of repetition is two-fold. Firstly, it serves to give a panoramic view of creation in contrast to the difficulty the human mind has in encompassing it, or in thinking out of the box its own suffering. Secondly, it creates a sense of rapidity: the rapidity of the questions posed allows no time for rational processing (it does not appeal to the rational faculty), nor for the pause of personal reflection (wherein one tends to think within, or beginning from, the terms of reference one is already familiar with), and neither does it allow time for what, colloquially, is denoted by the phrase 'navel gazing'. Wordsworth's 'recollection in tranquillity' is about as far removed from the semantic intention in 'Job' as it is possible to get.

As I have already said, the linguistic shock tactic is at its most intense in Yahweh's speeches. Rapidity shocks the protagonist into an acceleration of his comprehension of reality. These rapid questions are the more effective for being fired tangentially, tangentially because, as Habel remarks,

> Yahweh does not fall into the trap of quoting Job's arguments and refuting them seriatim, in the style of a modern debate. Instead he employs the technique of posing a range of impossible challenges … Job's questions are not answered directly. Rather, Yahweh's defence embraces a series of subtle allusions, innuendoes, and ironic references to previous claims and accusations of Job. In every vignette of Yahweh's speech, these tangential connections can be discerned. [76]

This tangential approach is apparent, for example, in the ironic humour of 38:18: 'declare if thou knowest it all', which hardly plays along with Job's argument, and in 38:33-35, where Yahweh suggests Job has a go at creating the universe:

> Knowest thou the ordinances of heaven? canst thou set the dominion thereof in the earth?
> Canst thou lift up thy voice to the clouds, that abundance of waters may cover thee?
> Canst thou send lightnings, that they may go, and say unto thee, Here we *are?*

This approach is a further example of Habel's observation of style corresponding to theology. It enhances the sense of ambiguity, incongruity and paradox in the created order. Like the riddle, it is one step ahead. It has the knowing skill of being a *considered* indirectness rather than simply being haphazard. Ironically, the very indirectness of the questions assures they hit the mark, and the reason for this is that, like all dark sayings, they by-pass expectation.

The intensive use of repetition in biblical Hebrew poetry generally functions to lead a poem through a prolonged cycle, whether of mourning or some other initiatory state, and serve to defend against the premature abandonment of what must needs be a either a slow and thorough process; a process echoed in lines from John Donne's 'Satyre III' which are reminiscent of *tĕšuvah* (about-face or turn):

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[76] Habel, *The Book of Job,* p. 51. See pp.530-532 for a table of the speeches' content as they relate to, and reverse, the claims of Job.

Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and hee that will
Reach her, about must and about must goe. [77]

'Is a dictionary a sepulchre/or a sealed honeycomb?'

The speeches from the whirlwind transcend the dualism of question and answer into a post-interrogative reality. I will now conduct a brief exploration into the use of erotesis in contemporary poetry.

I would suggest that the post-interrogative reality concealed within erotesis is the same principle informing Neruda's *El libro de las preguntas* (*The Book of Questions)*. Parts LXVI to LXIX read as follows:

LXVI

Echan humo, fuego y vapor
las *o* de las locomotoras?

En qué idioma cae la lluvia
sobre ciudades dolorosas?

Qué suaves silabas repite
el aire del alba marina?

Hay una estrella más abierta
que la palabra *amapola*?

Hay dos colmillos más agudos
que las sílabas de *chacal*?

LXVII

Puedes amarme, silabaria,
y darme un beso sustantivo?

[77] John Donne, *The Satires, Epigrams and Verse Letters*, ed. W.Milgate (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p.13.

Un diccionario es un sepulcro
o es un panal de miel cerrado?

En qué ventana me quedé
mirando el tiempo sepultado?

O lo que miro desde lejos
es lo que no he vivido aún?

LXVIII

Cuándo lee la mariposa
lo que vuela escrito en sus alas?

Qué letras conoce la abeja
para saber su itinerario?

Y con qué cifras va restando
la hormiga sus soldados muertos?

Cómo se llaman los ciclones
cuando no tienen movimiento?

LXIX

Caen pensamientos de amor
en los volcanes extinguidos?

Es un cráter una venganza
o es un castigo de la tierra?

Con qué estrellas siguen hablando
los ríos que no desembocan? [78]

Unlike 'Job', there is no dramatic framework or context to *The Book of Questions*, a fact which can be seen to reinforce the paradoxical nature of the questions posed: they simply begin; shock tactics which come out of nowhere. In this instance, erotesis is both a device of defamiliarization and a means of communicating, indeed legitimizing,

[78] Pablo Neruda, *El libro de las preguntas,* trans. William O'Daly (Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2001), pp.66-69. For O'Daly's translation, see Appendix A.

openness and vulnerability. The questions come from the other side of the argument, that is, not from out of a whirlwind, but from the human.

In his introduction to the translations William O'Daly, echoing the themes of 'Job', says,

> Images of rivers, sea, and salt … all are substances or beings intertwined in our daily lives. Yet, even as they entice us to seek a reasoned answer, their tangible limits shine outward to reverberate in the Unknown. In that way, they invite us to move through our intuitive perceptions, beyond rehearsed patterns of thinking and feeling. [79]

O'Daly remarks that these poems are close to the spirit of the *Koan*. Whilst one may not have trouble agreeing with him, one might also add that a tradition of the unanswerable is ubiquitous; that it can not only be found in all the great mystical writers, but poetry, mystical or otherwise, is itself a form enduringly well disposed to accommodate it. Poetry tends to originate from questions, playing with the unanswerable, or mimicking the same hide-and-seek life's questions play with us. On account of this ubiquity, it is not necessarily the case that Neruda had either the *Koan* or 'Job' in mind when he wrote these poems, although the way they are phrased does pass a striking resemblance to both.

'What to make of a diminished thing'

I have cited Neruda because he presents us with a rare example, and quite possibly the only example, of erotesis constituting an entire book. It is certainly employed by poets here and there, for example, in Montale's 'L'anguilla': 'puoi tu/non

[79] Ibid., p.viii.

crederla sorella?' ('can you not see/that she is your sister?'). [80] To de-poeticise Montale, what he is saying is "Look! She *is* your sister!" However, sometimes it is difficult to say whether an unanswered question within the context of the poem is erotesis or not, or a variation on erotesis, if there can be such a thing. It is tempting to consider that a question within a poem does not require an answer. All it requires is for the poem to ask it. Therefore, close to the notion of catharsis, the asking is more significant than the answering and any given answer would make no difference to the poem. Thus, in a Job-like way, it alters the question-answer relationship. It opens up possibilities and defeats the temptation to answer and in answering find closure.

When it comes to mimicking the hide-and-seek life's questions play with us, this is the kind of playfulness that characterises many of Robert Frost's poems. 'The Oven Bird' *almost* ends with a question. It is asked indirectly:

> The question he frames in all but words
> Is what to make of a diminished thing. [81]

This is a trick question, not only because it isn't actually literally asked, or because we don't know for sure what the 'diminished thing' refers to – nor in what way a thing is diminished – but also because the question is wordless (the bird cannot say it, he can only symbolise it).

Although this question is not erotesis, it is relevant to my preceding discussion of the function of the question in 'Job'. Robert Pack suggests,

> … the question *implies* more than the words themselves can literally ask. The question embodies the *feeling* of the enigma of what man can make of himself and of his world … It is only because (like the oven bird's song) the poem is

[80] Eugenio Montale, *Tutte Le Poesie* (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1977), p.304.
[81] Robert Frost, *Poetry and Prose*, eds. Edward Connery and Lawrance Thompson (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1972), p.54.

> framed, because it is a made thing, that the question it asks, and the answer of belief that it implies, can remain dynamically in tension. The poem remains open to the reader's own scrutiny ... [82]

'The Oven Bird' is hardly a 'momentary stay against confusion'! [83] It is more like a playing *with* confusion, in the same way in which dark saying plays with our sense of what we think we know and positively confuses us into questioning our assumptions. It is also more than simple brain teasing. It exemplifies the high esteem in which Frost held the notion of dark saying: 'I don't like obscurity and obfuscation, but I do like dark sayings I must leave the clearing of to time'. [84] Indeed, many of Frost's poems read as enigmas or parables, and the clearing of their meaning needs time. Earlier in the same essay Pack says,

> Frost believed that the surface of the poem, like speech, should be simple and immediate, yet that, upon further scrutiny, the poem should reveal itself as elusive. After all, life does not readily yield up its meaning and purpose – indeed, if it has any. The poet must be accurate in describing his limited sense of the mysteries of nature and of God, and he must be true to his own "confusion" … His poems speak most profoundly when they speak by indirection; they are indeed "dark sayings," engagingly "enigmatical," and the best of them maintain Frost's characteristic reserve. [85]

I would suggest that the point of the confusing but crucial 'question' in the 'The Oven Bird' is that the question which the poem almost asks is a dark saying, an enigma, designed to suggest the limitations of language: language becomes the diminished thing. Frost deliberately diminishes it, not in a negative sense, but in order to thin it out so that it comes closer to dark saying, and thereby to an instructive

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[82] Robert Pack, *Affirming Limits* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), p.177.
[83] Frost, 'The Figure a Poem Makes', in *Poetry and Prose*, p.394. Frost is of course referring to the process of writing, and not necessarily the effect of the poem on the reader.
[84] George Monteiro, *Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988), p.139. Pack also uses this quote in *Affirming Limits,* p.174.
[85] Pack, *Affirming Limits,* pp.174-175.

expanding of the horizon of thought, as is precisely the case in 'Job'. The poem can be said to answer its own question, and does so through the device of dark saying. I have chosen this example because it is reminiscent of the Jobian theme of a diminishing which leads to an increase in wisdom. The bird famously makes its nest on the ground, hence why 'He says the highway dust is over all'. One might think of the diminished Job sitting down in dust and ashes.

CHAPTER IV

A READING OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE IN RELATION TO CONTEMPORARY *ARS POETICA*

The Jobian dilemma is one of how to resolve the dissonance between two incompatible cognitions: the reality of what happens and one's view of what *should* happen. Job is made aware that he has to move away from an existing belief that appeared to effectively maintain psychological order and yet is bemused as to what is going to take its place. It is a dilemma of how to account for suffering when that suffering appears not to have been caused by one's own actions. It is a dilemma, to employ biblical language, of how to move from a state of 'exile' to one of 'restoration'.

In this chapter I will initiate an exploration into varying responses to cognitive dissonance in the context of *ars poetica,* beginning with a critique of an essay by David Daiches and moving onto a detailed study of Seamus Heaney. This will then extend into subsequent chapters. I suggest that the undesirable response is what I will term 'premature closure'. By this phrase I am not addressing when or how a poem literally ends. I am addressing a category of poetry which refuses crisis, or, put another way, does not break through to an adequate awareness of the reality of the themes being addressed but rather stops short. Referring back to the historical context of 'Job', it should be remembered that cognitive dissonance calls for the working out of a larger purpose, as opposed to grappling for the quickest possible solution.

I am not suggesting that the opposite of premature closure is 'full closure'. I would say that its opposite is something more like 'linguistic inevitability', which would arise from a skilful resistance to closure and anything resembling wilful resolution. It is not possible for a poem to be marked by such inevitability if the poet has overplayed

their role in the poem's composition. This is suggested in the *ars poetica* of Robert Frost when he says that, 'Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting'. [86] And again, where he comments on 'Mending Wall':

> … was my intention fulfilled with the characters portrayed and with the atmosphere of the place? … I should be sorry if a single one of my poems stopped with either of those things – stopped anywhere in fact. My poems – I should suppose everybody's poems – are all set to trip the reader head foremost into the boundless. [87]

In so doing, such poems side with Job and not the false comforters.

Another obstacle is for the poet to resist their true subject matter. The question is, if any poet is serious about their work, then are they really going to resist their own subject matter? However, it does happen: there is a very real sense in which a poem can invest its interests in false comforting rather than in integrity, even though this is never the poet's intention. Integrity implies the weathering of a crisis that carries over into the quality of the poem. A failure of artistic nerve cannot but result in a lower standard of poetic articulation.

The implication is that poetry must pursue a point of crisis. I do not mean anything solemn by 'crisis', but rather that it signifies a break with the known and the reliable. Nor does crisis ever have to be invented. There is not in any epoch a lack of subject matter, neither in the personal nor public domain; what is always sufficient is a deeper engagement.

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[86] Frost, 'The Figure a Poem Makes', in *Poetry and Prose*, p.396.
[87] Monteiro, *Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance*, pp.125-126.

'And here we are as on a darkling plain': Cognitive Dissonance and Premature Closure

In mapping the Jobian dilemma onto *ars poetica*, it is necessary to make the rather obvious statement that the notion of exile extends beyond its geographical meaning. Joseph Brodsky, for example, conceived of exile as a metaphysical state. Michael Murphy clarifies Brodsky's position:

> … Brodsky recognised exile less as a biographical than a metaphysical condition, one he equated with both homecoming and homelessness; an essentially linguistic phenomenon which, in the only translation into English he made of a poem by Mandelstam, he defined as "the great craft of separation". In holding such a view, he proved himself an heir to Mandelstam, who was in turn a link in that chain of Russian exiles and émigrés stretching back through Tsvetaeva, and Nabokov to Pushkin. It was an inheritance that saw Russian writers joining the wider current of European exile that includes Heine, Byron, Mickiewicz, Dante, Petrarch, Ovid and all the writers of the Jewish Diaspora. [88]

Murphy suggests that one feature of this inheritance is that of being an 'intellectual upstart', in much the same manner as Job. Brodsky's writing was clearly unsettling to the status quo. In terms of the social contract he would have been seen as a renegade whose inherited memories, inhabiting his poetic imagination, were older than the social system enforced within the Soviet Union. As heir to Mandelstam, and to Mandelstam's thoughts on poetic speech as a hybrid process, Brodsky's threat to the status quo is in his very language being incompatible with authoritarianism. This recalls the break that Job's poetic idiom makes with the Deuteronomic consensus, how he sings, as it were, from a different hymn sheet.

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[88] Michael Murphy, 'Here and There: Exile as Homecoming in the Poetry of Joseph Brodsky', in *Poetry in Exile: A study of the poetry of W.H. Auden, Joseph Brodsky and George Szirtes* (London: Greenwich Exchange, 2004), pp.84-85.

In light of these comments, exile may also be considered as a state of mind effected by a powerful dissonance between one's own beliefs, or faith, and the *Zeitgeist*. This dissonance is precisely the theme of Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach'. David Daiches' essay, *The Valley of Tears and Dover Beach: Modes of Sadness in English and Hebrew Poetry,* is a fascinating study of what kind of English poetic mood can be readily translated into Hebrew, and vice versa. He concludes that in practice Victorian and, for the most part, Romantic moods do not translate, whereas the elegiac mood of, say, an Anglo-Saxon poem such as *The Wanderer*, does. In contrast to what he sees as a distinct strain of introspective melancholy in English poetry, he suggests that Hebrew lament is capable of a higher degree of uncertainty, not necessarily finding a need to resolve that uncertainty, and consequently is more alive to crisis. What Daiches is criticising, essentially, is premature closure and the lack of energy consequent in such a closure.

When he considers that,

> The loneliness of the poet is the result of his finding himself between the age of traditional faith and the attitudes of the modern world, and is thus precisely analogous to the sense of loss and loneliness in Arnold's 'Dover Beach' or Tennyson's 'Break, Break, Break'. [89]

he is in fact considering the problem of cognitive dissonance, as I have defined it above. The situation he describes is analogous to the predicament of Job when, in refuting the Deuteronomic wisdom of the false comforters, he opts to position himself on the cusp of a new understanding. Although the position represented in 'Dover Beach' is a reversal of Job's position, in that Job is looking forward whereas Arnold is

[89] David Daiches, *The Valley of Tears and Dover Beach: Modes of Sadness in English and Hebrew Poetry* (Yarnton, Oxfordshire: The Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies, 1974), pp.8-9.

looking back, they both meet in the same predicament of uncertainty that characterises the exile's path. 'Dover Beach' is also a poem positioned on a cusp:

> The Sea of Faith
> Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
> Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
> But now I only hear
> Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
> Retreating, to the breath
> Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
> And naked shingles of the world. [90]

Daiches does not speak fairly of 'Dover Beach', a poem that has been too often used as a pawn between literary critics. Neither, for that matter, does Paul Muldoon or Anthony Hecht. When Daiches writes that,

> There is nothing quite like this note of withdrawn personal elegy in Hebrew poetry. Nor is there anything quite like Arnold's turn to the one other person with whom to face the nothingness of the universe, that strange note of love as desperate remedy against chaos. [91]

he forgets, firstly, that Arnold was about to get married; secondly, that most people seek out partners or spouses to some extent as a form of refuge, and to say, 'desperate remedy' is simply impetuous; thirdly, that to draw any comparison between Arnold (or the Romantics) and the great lament tradition in Hebrew poetry is to set up an unhelpful comparison between two vastly different cultural and literary traditions.

In terms of the genre of the lampoon, Hecht's poem, 'The Dover Bitch: A Criticism of Life', is amusing and yet in comparison with Arnold's it is unlikely to

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[90] Matthew Arnold, *Selected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1889), p.145.
[91] Daiches, *The Valley of Tears and Dover Beach*, p.12.

endure. Muldoon's comments, referencing Arnold's remarks in *On the Modern Element in Literature*, are logical, but unconvincing:

> The idea which Arnold doesn't come to terms with … is that if an epoch "Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain" then the literature of that epoch, to be "commensurate" or "adequate" to it, is likely to have "neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain." Rather than accept the intrinsic logic of his own argument, or the argument of the poem "Dover Beach", Arnold continues to hanker after the possibility of salve, of salvation, of "enlightenment", of "*eluci*dation". [92]

'Dover Beach' does not settle into a peaceful resolution, nor does it offer help for pain, or certitude. On the contrary, it was written by someone who clearly understood that those things were contingent upon the ebb and flow of human misery which one would be better off leaving alone. What the poem leaves us with is a sense of the author having pursued the point of crisis; cutting away the contingent in order to reveal what is of lasting value, immutable and beyond the rotations of faith and unbelief. And this, in fact, is a true response to the problem of cognitive dissonance, a dissonance so akin to that 'darkling plain'.

Such a response is also apparent in *The Wanderer*, a poem whose tone Daiches is more enthusiastic about. The vision it leaves us with is of an exile who has yet come to grips with the loss of worldly privileges and yet has seen the path he needs to take. In terms of its narrative, it is a poem that is the more poignant for not giving closure to crisis. The wanderer has been enduring a state of dissonance between the life he was used to and how things actually turned out:

> So I in grief gone from my homeland
> far from my kinsmen have often to fetter
> the images of the heart in iron chains,

[92] Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures in Poetry* (London: Faber, 2006), p.338.

> for now it is long since the night of the earth
> lay over my lord and I then forlorn
> wintered with sorrow on freezing seas
> seeking in sadness some gold-giver's dwelling …[93]

In a 'darkling plain' between his exile and his restoration, the wanderer girds his loins and eventually begins to arrive at a desirable solution. This solution is, as S.A.J. Bradley notes, recognition that 'loss and yearning alike prove beneficial … for they define the need of his thinking mind and his feeling heart for that which is – what the world even of heroes is not – immutable'. [94] The protagonist manages to discern the immutable within the mutable and to prize out from his losses some enduring lessons:

> Wisdom is patience:
> to be neither too temperless nor too sharp of tongue,
> nor too feeble in fight nor too heart-heedless,
> nor too deep in fear, in pride or in greed,
> nor ever too boastful of things unknown. [95]

Such lessons closely echo those of 'Job': patience, in the sense of endurance (an attribute of wisdom), careful speech, and submission before the unknown. In every respect, *The Wanderer* is an excellent example of the brave lack of closure that is a truer response to the exiled mind's condition.

'The comet's pulsing rose'

It need hardly be said that premature closure is an undesirable aesthetic in any creative activity. I will now turn to a contemporary poet, Seamus Heaney, and explore

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[93] Edwin Morgan, trans., *The Wanderer*, in Michael Schmidt, ed., *The Story of Poetry* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2001), p.156.
[94] S.A.J. Bradley, ed. and trans., *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London: Everyman, 1982), p.321.
[95] Morgan, *The Wanderer*, p.157.

why he can be considered skilled in navigating the exile's path of uncertainty, and how he keeps a door into the dark open rather than closed.

Some of the most exciting poems are those capable of resisting closure and ending on a note of uncertainty or appeal. Heaney does this with noticeable frequency that one might think it his trademark. To start with I will consider the last stanza of 'Exposure', the sixth poem from 'Singing School':

> … I am neither internee nor informer;
> An inner émigré, grown long-haired
> And thoughtful; a wood-kerne
>
> Escaped from the massacre,
> Taking protective colouring
> From bole to bark, feeling
> Every wind that blows;
>
> Who, blowing up these sparks
> For their meagre heat, have missed
> The once-in-a-lifetime portent,
> The comet's pulsing rose. [96]

And what a difference there is between 'meagre heat' and the 'pulsing rose' of a comet. This is a distinction I will be applying throughout this thesis to represent the difference between falsity and integrity in 'Job', a difference I have already applied to *ars poetica* at the start of this chapter.

Given the poem's theme of uncertainty as to the responsibility a poet can, or should, have in a war-troubled society, and given the preceding militaristic imagery, the final image of the 'comet's pulsing rose' becomes an image disconcertingly proximate to the image of a wound. The 'Exposure' would appear to be two-fold: firstly, that of the poet being exposed by politics and asked to answer for his position,

[96] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, p.144. Osip Mandelstam appears in the fourth stanza of the poem, as Heaney tells us in *Stepping Stones*, 'as a David of poetry facing the Goliath of power'. Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, (London: Faber, 2008), p.175.

and secondly, the writing of the poem itself exposes the wound of this predicament, allowing the poet to fully encounter it and even with raw nerves feel 'Every wind that blows', thereby affording some measure of healing. Put another way, the pursuit of the point of crisis through the poem itself allows for assuagement. The question of responsibility is not answered in any conventional sense, yet in another sense it is answered by the fact of its articulation in the context of a poem. Such questions cannot be resolved on their own level. Such positive disengagement from a redundant rhetoric is precisely what allows for that transcendent element to enter, if by 'transcendent' we mean those unwilled miracles of semantic aptness and their corresponding assuaging effect on the poet's sensitivity, what Geoffrey Hill has described as a process of moving from difficulty to semantic epiphany: '[to] burn off impurities and present them in a kind of final seraphic light'. [97]

Paradoxically, it is through being barely possessed of himself, changing, protean-like, from émigré to wood-kerne, 'feeling/Every wind that blows', that the poet is able to achieve the degree of sensitivity necessary to attain a far greater comprehension of the crisis and to answer his critics.

This letting-go is at one and the same time a quality of openness, or spaciousness, in which case the poem exemplifies what Heaney himself has said in 'The Government of the Tongue': 'poetry holds attention for a space, functions not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves'. [98] The aesthetic of holding attention for a space, of the poet not overplaying their conscious role in poetic composition, is one way in which they resist premature closure.

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[97] In Conversation with Dr. Rowan Williams, *Geoffrey Hill and his Contexts* (Conference, Keble College, Oxford, July 2-4th 2008).
[98] Heaney, 'The Government of the Tongue', in *Finders Keepers* (London: Faber, 2002), p.190.

The Half-said Thing: A Poetics of the Negativa

Another angle on the aesthetic solution to the problem of premature closure is that of the elusive 'half-said thing'. This tradition of the old Gaelic poets is distinctively present in Heaney's work. The phrase appears in Kuno Meyers's introduction to *Ancient Irish Poetry*. In speaking of nature poetry in the Gaelic tradition he says,

> It is a characteristic of these poems that in none of them do we get an elaborate or sustained description of any scene or scenery, but rather a succession of pictures and images which the poet, like an impressionist, calls up before us by light and skilful touches. Like the Japanese, Celts were always quick to take an artistic hint; they avoid the obvious and the commonplace; the half-said thing to them is dearest. [99]

This last phrase, 'the half-said thing to them is dearest', becomes the title of an essay on Muldoon's poetry by Bernard O'Donoghue. It is helpful to an understanding of what the half-said might entail that O'Donoghue says,

> It is ultimately reductive, I think, to suggest that Muldoon's attitudes and rhetorical effects are principally aimed at the avoidance of the statement of opinion. The 'hermeticism' that seems common to all these devices is well-attested throughout the Irish literary tradition, from Old Irish to Joyce and Beckett. Its essence is a preference for form over substantial assertion and for logic over facts …[100]

Muldoon is excessively fond of conditional constructions that, whilst being logical and formal, manage at the same time to embody a kind of deliberate mercuriality, a mercuriality suggesting, as O'Donoghue points out, that elusiveness is not necessarily evasiveness. It is especially important to remember this when considering 'Job' 38-41,

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[99] Kuno Meyer, trans. *Ancient Irish Poetry* (London: Constable, 1994), pp.xii-xiii.
[100] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'The Half-Said Thing to them is Dearest', in Michael Kenneally, ed., *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995), p.415.

which in itself is full of half-saying. Many of Muldoon's poems contend, in a typically post-modern way, that it is not possible to be certain about anything. O'Donoghue remarks that,

> This is to become increasingly open-ended and unjudgmental: 'it's all much of a muchness', to quote the heavy-hearted phrase from 'Aisling'. Modern critical terminology would describe the stance as 'resisting closure'. [101]

Half-saying is not a failure of language, nor is it an excuse for what could have been said had the poet tried harder. On the contrary, it is a break made from grandiose self-certainty, a confession of ultimate unknowability, or of the provisionality of all interpretation of experience. It therefore reflects an immense discipline on behalf of the poet and a restraining from poetic effulgence, and indeed false comforting.

Returning to Heaney, we can observe the half-said in 'Squarings', part xxxi, in the section, 'Crossings':

> Not an avenue and not a bower.
> For a quarter mile or so, where the country road
> Is running straight across North Antrim bog,
>
> Tall old fir trees line it on both sides.
> Scotch firs, that is. Calligraphic shocks
> Bushed and tufted in prevailing winds.
>
> You drive into a meaning made of trees.
> Or not exactly trees. It is a sense
> Of running through and under without let,
>
> Of glimpse and dapple. A life all trace and skim
> The car has vanished out of. A fanned nape
> Sensitive to the millionth of a flicker. [102]

[101] Ibid., p.403.
[102] Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London: Faber, 1991), p.89.

The use of full stops is very effective in creating a sense of the unknown and the partial. The road is running across a bog, and bogland is liminal land, unsettled and unsteady. 'Glimpse' and 'flicker' add to this sense of inchoateness, as well as the 'prevailing wind'. Wind is traditionally associated with not-quite–here-nor-there-ness, with the invisible workings of the created order, with *pneuma*, spirit and breath. The vanishing car tells us that it is not only the landscape which is liminal, but whatever passes through it becomes so too for the duration of its passing. It is rather like a Bermuda Triangle, a place entered into where something unusual occurs. Unlike the Bermuda triangle, the poet is able to come back from that place and report his experience.

Similarly, 'Postscript' reports from a drive along the flaggy shore of County Clare:

> …You are neither here nor there,
> A hurry through which known and strange things pass
> As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
> And catch the heart off guard and blow it open. [103]

This poem recalls 'The Peninsular' from *Door into the Dark*:

> …drive back home, still with nothing to say
> Except that now you will uncode all landscapes
> By this: things founded clean on their own shapes,
> Water and ground in their extremity. [104]

In both cases what has been seen is seen 'in the dark'. None of the sights can be grasped as they are seen, they can only be recalled; 'things founded clean on their own shapes' are nevertheless ineffable. Poetry can lend itself to approximation, it can assume shapes, but, as with the Apophatic tradition in Christian mysticism, it cannot, and should not attempt to, capture the essence of the (mystical) encounter. On the one

[103] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, p.444.
[104] Ibid., p.21.

hand language has failed. The poet cannot tell us what exactly it is that has occurred in these three examples. At the same time, there is a presence in the poems akin to that of the wind and the buffetings, a presence whose habitation is in the quotidian. So, on the other hand, in drawing out that presence, language has done its work.

From a young age Heaney read extensively in the field of mysticism and its relationship with language, including books such as Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism*, and Thomas Merton's *Seeds of Contemplation*. As Henry Hart tells us in his essay, 'The Poetry of Meditation':

> For a poet who attended a catholic school as a young man … the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola, as well as of his compatriots St. Theresa of Avilla and St. John of the Cross, must have presented obvious parallels to his poetic practises … Heaney's meditations usually focus on scenes of artistic as opposed to Christian passion; still, they employ traditional meditational techniques in doing so. [105]

Heaney quotes Loyola in the last stanza of 'St Kevin and the Blackbird': 'To labour and not to seek reward'. [106] In contrast to Loyola's objectives in *The Spiritual Exercises*, Heaney, especially in 'The Peninsula', has brought language back from a process of purgation and renewed it. Whereas Loyola sought to subvert language by striving for its opposite, indifference, Heaney, Hart tells us, 'passes through linguistic indifferences (the unmarked landscape and his own silence) to a situation where differences are marked, distinct shapes uncoded …' [107] There is nothing grandiose or elevated in the diction, it is handed to us with a mixture of humility and confidence, and can be seen to embody the earlier instruction, from 'North', to 'Compose in darkness'. [108]

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[105] Henry Hart, 'The Poetry of Meditation', in *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993), p.33.
[106] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, p.410.
[107] Hart, *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions*, p.41.
[108] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, p.101.

The half-said thing confesses to the limits of language without giving in to them. In a sense all language is a half-saying, and yet we disavow it if, like Loyola, we see it merely as an abstraction, an obstacle between ourselves and the divine, or the unknowable. It may be true that there is as much silence in a good poem as there is in the mystic's *noche oscura*. It is just a case of being able to make the journey there and back again.

'Description is Revelation'

I will now pick up on a phrase Heaney uses in the fifth poem of 'Singing School', 'Fosterage', which precedes 'Exposure'. In it Heaney has Michael McLaverty say: 'Description is revelation!', and then,

> 'Go your own way.
> Do your own work. Remember
> Katherine Mansfield—*I will tell*
> *How the laundry basket squeaked* . . . that note of exile.'
> But to hell with overstating it:
> 'Don't have the veins bulging in your biro.' [109]

This phrase, 'Description is revelation', offers a further aesthetic solution to the problem of how to navigate the exile's path of uncertainty. It does so by suggesting that if the poet is faithful to description, and to the adequate preparation it requires, the thing described will provide its own revelation. This preparation entails the relinquishing of any ready-made or formulaic viewpoint and therefore assumes 'holding attention for a space', striking the right balance between the intentions of the conscious creative mind and the will and volition of the work itself. The phrase

[109] Ibid., p.142.

suggests a method by which the poet can avoid falling into unexamined half-truths by encouraging the same quality of openness that characterises Job. 'Description is revelation' could well be applied to the content of the voice from the whirlwind in 'Job' 38-41.

McLaverty's phrase is linked to the 'half-said thing' in that the describing is itself a kind of 'half-saying'; the unsaid thing is implied within the description. It is pertinent that Meyer references the Japanese in his introduction to *Ancient Irish Poetry*. It is said in Japanese painting that the tradition was to stare at a thing (blossom, for instance), not thinking of the paintbrush, in order for the mind of the painter to become so absorbed in what he was observing that this absorption would effect a fusion with the thing observed. After an appropriate interval, on picking up the brush, the painting would take only a matter of seconds. Like Rilke in his hurricane-phase of *Die Sonette an Orpheus*, wherein he produced fifty-four poems in thirteen days of 'breathless obedience', it would be a mistake to assume this is a demonstration of sheer effortlessness. [110] Rather it is a matter of adequate preparation.

Meyer's analogy, quoted above, between poetry and painting further supports the case against premature closure. Those 'light and skilful touches' are commensurate with the notion in Gaelic poetry that to not say something fully is to testify to its sacredness and to its status as ultimately unfathomable, a notion and stance towards language shared by the Apophatic tradition. This averts the poet from the danger of writing according to a perceived grid of explicable reality. It legitimises uncertainty, encouraging keeping the door into the dark open.

In the next chapter I will examine why this uncertainty is a necessary precondition for *tĕšuvah*, a Hebraic term first used in 'Job' which I will be introducing

[110] Rilke, *Selected Poems*, p.336. Letter to Xaver von Moos, April 20, 1923.

into the context of *ars poetica*. I will focus my discussion by concentrating on poems by János Pilinszky, Vasko Popa and Ted Hughes.

CHAPTER V

A READING OF *TĚŠUVAH* IN RELATION TO CONTEMPORARY *ARS POETICA*

In his introduction to Vasko Popa's *Collected Poems* Ted Hughes discusses a generation of Mid-European poets, which also includes Holub, Herbert and Pilinszky, saying that:

> their world reminds one of the world of modern physics. Only theirs is more useful to us, in that while it is the same gulf of unknowable laws and unknowable particles, the centre of gravity is not within some postulate deep in space, or leaking away down the drill-shaft of mathematics, but inside man's sense of himself, inside his body and his essential human subjectivity. They refuse to sell out their arms, legs, hair, ears, body and soul and all it has suffered with them, in order to escape with some fragmentary sense, some abstract badge of self-estrangement, into a popular membership safety. In their very poetic technique … we read a code of wide-openness to what is happening, within or without, a careful refusal to seal themselves off from what hurts and carries the essential information, a careful refusal to surrender themselves to any mechanical progression imposed on them by the tyranny of their own words or images, an endless scrupulous alertness on the frontiers of false and true. In effect, it is an intensely bracing moral vigilance. They accept in a sense what the prisoner must accept, who cannot pretend that any finger is at large. Like men come back from the dead they have an improved perception, an unerring sense of what really counts in being alive.
>
> This helplessness in the circumstances has purged them of rhetoric … In the end, with delicate manoeuvring, they precipitate out of a world of malicious negatives a happy positive. [111]

This passage embodies the whole of the Jobian dilemma and is especially proximate to it where the problem of suffering is concerned. By conflating the verbs 'hurts' and 'carries', Hughes displays his insight into the healing process by implying that within the experience of suffering lies the possibility of restoration, and a way to this lies in

[111] Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen* (London: Faber, 1994), pp.222-223.

emotional honesty and courage. This is exactly the situation in 'Job'. Furthermore, what characterises Job is precisely that 'intensely bracing moral vigilance' and openness which marks him out as the *eirōn*, the person of integrity. Unlike the false comforters, Job is purged of rhetoric and forgoes 'popular membership safety' within the Deuteronomic consensus. This quality of vigilance is what brings him back from the dead, as it were, or from the prison of malicious circumstances, and constitutes his *tĕšuwah.* This term, as I defined it in the introduction, denotes a 'turn' or 'about-face', from falsity to integrity, an experience of a radical change in scope from the individual to the universal, and is what prepares the way for Job's final restoration. A further similarity is in Hughes' mention of the 'gulf of unknowable laws', a reminder of the cosmological import of chapters 38-41.

This is not simply coincidence. There is ample evidence to suggest that Hughes had absorbed the story of 'Job' and was well aware of its implications. References to it abound in *Winter Pollen*. In the same essay he writes: 'whatever terrible things happen in their work happen within a containing passion – Job-like – for the elemental final beauty of the created world'. [112] It is this combination of terror and elemental beauty that are brought together so brilliantly in the figures of Behemoth and Leviathan in 'Job' 41. These biblical monsters represent the paradoxical nature of the created order and its final unfathomability, as Alter notes when he says of Behemoth that, 'What is stressed in the description of the hippopotamus is the paradoxical union of pacific nature – he is a herbivore, seen peacefully resting in the shade of lotuses on the riverbank – and terrific power …'. [113] Such 'terrific power' is suggested, for instance, in the highly poetic description of Behemoth's genitalia: 'He moveth his tail like a cedar: the sinews of his stones are wrapped together' (40:17). So too for Leviathan: the

[112] Ibid., p.221.
[113] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, p.108.

description of the shining wake he leaves behind encapsulates the notion that the mind is most fecund when taken to the edge of all it can sense but not encompass.

'The biblical monsters/start slowly towards me'

János Pilinszky's work mirrors the Jobian Dilemma in a number of ways. Job's agony prior to his *těšuwah* is the agony of a man in an impossible place who must, nevertheless, weather it. Like Celan, Pilinszky was faced with extreme situations in his life, so much so that, as Hughes says in his introduction to the *Selected Poems*, referencing 'The Book of Revelations', his experience in the prison camps in the last years of the Second World War 'evidently opened the seventh seal …'. [114] As with Job, rather than shutting down, Pilinszky pursues the point of crisis: 'The only possible direction of movement is away from the nailed wound – out of the flesh, and that he rejects'. [115] He refuses to sell out.

It is poetry that enables him to pursue the point of crisis, with its capacity to contain and to direct experience so that even the most horrific experience can be transmuted. A glance back at Lamentations confirms this point. It is as though, rather than closing, the wound stays open and speaks. If, as Hughes says, 'he spoke from the disaster centre of the modern world' it is not surprising that the kind of speech appropriate to this task is charged with a sense of the ultimate. It is as though it has been infused in silence, a silence natural to one who, like Job, has suffered unspeakable things. Perhaps this is why Pilinszky himself says, 'I would like to write … as if I had remained silent'. [116]

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[114] Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p.231.
[115] Ibid., p.233.
[116] Ibid., p.232.

Purged of rhetoric, sparse, desolate, constricted, his poems are at the same time radiant, expansive and profoundly positive, a paradox embodied by the Christian image of the Cross. The poems are indeed, as his 1971-72 collection was entitled, like 'Splinters' from the cross. That Pilinszky's work was so paradoxical is what Hughes has in mind when he says,

> when all the powers of the soul are focused on what is final, and cannot be altered, although it is horrible, the anguish, it seems, is indistinguishable from joy. The moment closest to extinction turns out to be *the* creative moment. [117]

The energy of intense suffering is in direct proportion to the potential energy of a revelation, and what occurs when the one is transferred into the other is precisely what we find in the poems. It is not that Pilinszky gets away from his predicament but that he sees it through, which again is reminiscent of the *eirōn* whose fate it is to experience the turning-about, the *tĕšuwah.* He takes the most frightening of confrontations and in staying with it approaches the revelatory. 'Under the Winter Sky', from the 1940-46 collection, *Trapeze and Parallel Bars,* clearly references the 'biblical monsters', and, by implication, the widened frame of reference, the change in scope, that an awakened sense of final things necessitates:

> Over my head the stars
> jostle their icy flames.
> A sky without mercy.
> I lean my back to the wall.
>
> Sadness trickles searching
> past my orphaned lips.
> What happened to my mother's milk?
> I smudge my coat.

[117] Ibid., p.235.

> I am like the stone –
> no matter what comes, let it come.
> I shall be so obedient and good
> I shall fall flat full length.
>
> I shall not deceive myself any longer.
> There is nobody to help me.
> Suffering cannot redeem me.
> No god will protect me.
>
> Nothing could be simpler than this
> or more horrible.
> The biblical monsters
> start slowly towards me. [118]

Faced with the dilemma of the incomprehensibility of events he witnessed and personally experienced, Pilinszky has wrought a poetic idiom that captures an intensity of feeling unmoderated by the desire either for closure or for resolution.

A poem can hold just about anything. The redemptive power of poetry lies in the fact that one has the freedom to begin from any state of mind. In the process of writing nothing is banned, nothing censored. Hughes says of the poems that,

> They reveal a place where every cultural support has been torn away, where the ultimate brutality of total war has become natural law, and where man has been reduced to the mere mechanism of his mutilated body. All words seem obsolete or inadequate. Yet out of this apparently final reality rise the poems whose language seems to redeem it. [119]

It is this paradox of unexpected redemption, issuing from the most horrific of beginnings, that Hughes refers to when he says of Pilinszky's work that 'In each poem we find the same diamond centre: a post-apocalyptic silence'. [120] The sparkling diamond is, of course, the result of the intensive compression of coal, a process

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[118] János Pilinszky, *Selected Poems*, trans. Ted Hughes and János Csokits (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1976), p.19.
[119] Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, pp.233-234.
[120] Ibid., p.233.

encapsulated in the phrase, *Post Tenebras Lux,* from the Vulgate translation of 'Job' 17:13.

'I turn myself into a sun/Above your nightmare'

In the poems of Vasko Popa, we hear very clearly the stripped-back language that speaks out of the extreme encounter with final things. The shades of Behemoth and Leviathan are again present when we hear Hughes remark in his introduction to *Collected Poems* that,

> His words test their way forward, sensitive to their own errors, dramatically and intimately alive, like the antennae of some rock-shore creature feeling out the presence of the sea and the huge powers in it. This analogy is not so random. There is a primitive pre-creation atmosphere about his work, as if he were present where all the dynamisms and formulae were ready and charged, but nothing created – or only a few fragments. [121]

If one were to look, for example, at the poems in the series 'Games', from *The Field of Unrest* (1956), the imagery and twists of imagination suggest a poetry feeling its way towards the limits of what is possible. Flesh is tortured or dislocated but in a disturbingly light sort of way. Pain is almost a kind of intimacy. The poem 'At the Beginning' from the series 'Bone to Bone' is especially pre-creational:

> That's better
> We've got away from the flesh
>
> Now we will do what we will
> Say something

[121] Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p.223.

Would you like to be
The backbone of a streak of lightning

Say something more

What should I say to you
Pelvis of a storm

Say something else

I know nothing else
Ribs of the sky

We're no one's bones
Say something different [122]

This is poetry completely stripped to the bone. It is devoid of all punctuation (a common feature of Mid- and East- European poetry, as in the work of Zbigniew Herbert), song-like, deeply implicated in ancestral memory, in Serbian folklore. Its minimalism to some extent recalls the emotional restraint of Lamentations that safeguards against excess. Reading these poems we are made aware of the debt to Popa in Hughes' own work, especially *Crow*. The common ground, besides the brutal sparseness of the language, is that both Popa and Hughes mix the bodily with the out-of-body; a device which suggests an extremity of psychological experience reporting back from its encounter with the limits of the bearable. Both poets employ imagery of dislocation and reassembling, death and resurrection, imagery deeply embedded in the human psyche in mythical figures such as Osiris and Orpheus, and indeed in Christianity. The 'games' that are played out in *Crow* are remarkably similar to what is happening in Popa's series, 'Games'. Games are a way of coming to terms with reality, of acting out things normally too powerful and disturbing to be experienced or remembered directly. The energy played out in the game must have a container or else

[122] Vasko Popa, *Collected Poems* ed. Francis R. Jones, trans., Anne Pennington and Francis R. Jones (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1997), p.85.

it might simply lead to disintegration. This is where the imagination, particularly in the form of poetry, reveals itself in its most redemptive capacity. Hughes says of the poems in the series that, 'They are deeper than our reality as puppets are deeper than our reality: the more human they look and act the more elemental they seem'. [123]

'Far Within Us', a series of thirty love poems from *Bark* (1953), whilst being open and spacious in that characteristically pre-creational way, exposed and vulnerable to the forces that sustain or negate life, is starred with some stunningly beautiful lines:

> Beneath your eyelids
> Your violets sleep
>
> I turn myself into a sun
> Above your nightmare
>
> You throw open
> Every window in your forehead
>
> I pick you white
> Waterlilies from my blood
>
> You give my tree of ashes
> Green leaves [124]

Such lines indeed refuse to seal themselves off from 'what hurts and carries the essential information'. Vulnerability shape-shifts into vitality, like flowers in the blood.

The poems of both Pilinszky and Popa, among others, arose from a catastrophic turn of events that made absolutely no sense whatsoever, from an experience of social and political disaster that precipitated the same crisis of cognitive dissonance out of which 'Job' was composed in post-exilic times. It is therefore a truly astonishing remark, and a testimony to the incredible powers of the creative mind, that

[123] Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p.227.
[124] Popa, *Collected Poems*, p.65.

Pilinszky should have said: 'In art the deaf can hear, the blind can see, the cripple can walk, each deficiency may become a creative force of high quality'. [125] This is exactly the meaning of *těšuwah* when related to contemporary poetry. Deficiency becomes capability and diminishing becomes increase, the true resolution to cognitive dissonance.

'When God hammered Crow/He made gold'

I have already mentioned that Hughes' *Crow* draws on the dark fabulist tradition of the Mid-European writers. There is no doubt that what appealed to Hughes in the story of 'Job', and in the work of Popa and Pilinszky, was the question of how to face trauma and turmoil, personal or historical, how to write from that place without either shutting down or becoming excessive. Antony Rowland has noted that 'Pilinszky praises Hughes's translations of his work in a letter to Hughes because '*Ce n'est pas une phrase rhéthorique*' (18 April 1975). This anti-rhetorical style of writing allowed Hughes to eschew the melodramatic excesses of early poems …' [126]

It would be an unforgivable omission not to notice that of all the slim volumes published in recent years, it is *Crow* that most deeply mirrors themes from 'Job', as well as drawing on the Bible as a whole. One only need consider the following excerpts:

'The Contender':

> …And towards the whole paraphernalia of the heavens
> Through the seams of his face
> With the strings of his lips
> Grinning through his atoms and decay

[125] Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p.230.
[126] Antony Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry: Awkward Poetics in the Work of Sylvia Plath, Geoffrey Hill, Tony Harrison and Ted Hughes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp.163-164.

Grinning into the black
Into the ringing nothing
Through the bones of his teeth

Sometimes with eyes closed

In his senseless trial of strength.

'Crow's Nerve Fails':

His prison is the earth. Clothed in his conviction,
Trying to remember his crimes

Heavily he flies.

'Crow Alights':

Crow saw the herded mountains, steaming in the morning,
And he saw the sea
Dark-spined, with the whole earth in its coils,
He saw the stars fuming away into the black, mushrooms
of the nothing forest, clouding their spores, the virus of God.

And he shivered with the horror of creation.

'Crow Communes':

Crow the hierophant, humped, impenetrable.

Half-illumined. Speechless.

(Appalled.)

'Crow's Song of Himself':

'When God hammered Crow
He made gold' [127]

[127] Ted Hughes, *Crow* (London: Faber, 1972), pp. 34,40,10,20,67.

Despite what Hughes may have said about modern physics in his introduction to Popa, the poems (as he writes in 'Crow's Account of the Battle') are a 'mishmash of scripture and physics'. [128] In common with techniques employed in 'Job' is Hughes' use of the question and answer format in 'Examination at the Womb-door', implying an initiatory trial. Secondly, Crow, like Job, is a quest-hero and survivor, characterised by endurance and a heightened sense of wonder. In a letter to Leonard Baskin, Hughes himself said of the poems that they were 'an epic of ordeals'. [129] Thirdly, Crow is also part of a wager, a device also employed in Goethe's *Faust* in the 'Prologue in Heaven'. Lastly, both 'Job' and *Crow* draw upon early Babylonian creation myth. Hughes references this in a letter to Keith Sagar:

> I tried to dissolve in a raw psychic event, a history of religion & ideology rooted in early Babylonian Creation myth, descending through Middle Eastern religions, collision of Judaism & its neighbours, the mannichees & the early Christians and the Roman Empire, the reformation & its peculiar development & ramifications in Englishness, down to linguistic philosophy & the failure of English intelligence in the modern world – failure in comprehensiveness, depth, flexibility, & emotional charge. [130]

This makes *Crow* a very ambitious project indeed, yet this last comment regarding a failure of 'depth, flexibility, & emotional charge' is especially relevant to a discussion of *ars poetica* in relation to 'Job' because it mirrors the contrast between false comfort and integrity, between selling-out and pursuing the point of crisis.

Writing on *Crow* in *The Laughter of Foxes*, Sagar informs us that,

> Its basic shape was that of the traditional quest narrative, ending, like all quests, with the hero's emergence from the blackness of his crimes and sufferings into a

[128] Ibid., p.16.
[129] *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Christopher Reid, (London: Faber 2007), p.280.
[130] Ibid., pp.339-340.

> raw wisdom, the healing of the split within him, the release of his own deepest humanity, all expressed in images of ego-death, re-birth and marriage. [131]

In Jobian terms, it is clear that the intended fate for the character of Crow, had the final third section of it been completed, was that very same *těšuwah* which is tantamount to '[precipitating] out of a world of malicious negatives a happy positive'.

Ars Poetica: *Těšuvah* and Commitment to the Poetic Project

I will now demonstrate how the *těšuwah* might apply to the finer details of *ars poetica*. In 'The Word and Culture', Osip Mandelstam alludes to the origins of the term *versus*: 'Poetry is the plough that turns up time in such a way that the abyssal strata of time, its black earth, appear on the surface.' [132] Agrarian imagery lent to verse making is as apt as it is ancient. Not only does it stress rhythm and pacing, and a certain amount of digging in the field of ultimate human concerns, but it also stresses the grounding and sobering notion of hard work, of slow progress and proper maturation of the work. The Hebrew *těšuwah,* as I have been demonstrating, is likewise a phrase which implies the hard-won achievement of personal – and poetic – integrity, coming as it does only after an ordeal of hard work or the weathering of a crisis, personal or collective. Such a weathering implies, as we have seen in Pilinszky, Popa and Hughes, that the subject has *turned* his or her attention to a deeper than usual contemplativeness, called for either by the circumstances of their life or the society in which they live. The notion of the *těšuwah,* therefore, like that of the turn of the plough,

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[131] Keith Sagar, *The Laughter of Foxes* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), p.171.
[132] Osip Mandelstam, 'The Word and Culture', in *The Collected Critical Prose and Letters,* ed. Jane Gary Harris, trans. Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link (London: Collins Harvill, 1991), p.113.

lends itself well to the context of *ars poetica*, to a consideration of what is involved in the actual making of a poem.

It should be noted that both *versus* and *těšuwah* relate to the notion of a 'turn'. 'Trope' also means 'turn', i.e. the turning of a word or expression into a figurative use. Furthermore, the *volta* in the sonnet, usually coming at the first line of the sestet, means a 'turn'. Phillis Levin remarks that,

> … the various acoustical partitions accentuate the element that gives the sonnet its unique force and character: the volta, the "turn" that introduces into the poem a possibility for transformation, like a moment of grace … we could say that for the sonnet, the volta is the seat of its soul. And the reader's experience of this turn reconfigures the experience of all the lines that both precede and follow it … [133]

Traditionally the *volta* signifies a move from the conservative to the innovative (for instance, Heaney's 'The Skylight'), or, mapped onto 'Job', from reason/received wisdom to faith, from contraction to expansion, pressure to release. If 'Job' could be condensed into fourteen lines, the *volta* would come at the point where the cycle of speeches and answers has ground to a halt and the voice from the whirlwind makes its dramatic entrance. Like the *těšuwah,* it is a trope of resolution, or even, as Levin suggests, revelation.

From draft to finished poem, one may often find it to be the case that at some stage in the process of composition the poem 'turns' or undergoes an 'about-face'. It is in this definitive moment that one gains a deeper sense of what the poem wants to be, as opposed to what one's original idea for it might have been. From then on it is a case of vigilantly following its course and motion. It is crucial to concede that this 'about-face' is a matter of degree: there are always further levels of turning-about.

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[133] Phillis Levin, ed., *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet* (London: Penguin, 2003), p.xxxix.

Furthermore, the experience of a 'turning' in the process of a poem's composition does not necessarily guarantee that it will be a good poem, as Geoffrey Hill notes when he says, 'The poet will occasionally, in the act of writing a poem, experience a sense of pure fulfilment which might too easily and too objectively be misconstrued as the attainment of objective perfection'. [134] It may well be that one is encountering a preliminary stage of turning, that is, a presentiment of a yet greater turn that could be made if one chooses to stay with the processes involved. If we refer back to Heaney's poem 'Exposure', there is no mistaking 'meagre sparks' for a 'pulsing rose'.

The importance of commitment, of enduring the crisis, cannot be underestimated. In referring to Lamentations earlier, I demonstrated how the 22 letter acrostic was employed to convey a sense of the fullest and most complete expression of grief possible, maximising the concept of the Hebrew alphabet as embodying totality. It was employed as a means of leading the poem through a prolonged cycle of mourning, the effect of repetition, or slow progress, offering consolation and, what is most crucial, a defence against any premature abandonment of the grieving process. By implication, diligence, thoroughness and slow progress would defend against premature closure of the poem and allow for the possibility of a greater turn, and indeed a better poem. Once this greater turn has been effected, a poem can be said to be nearing completion. It is only complete when the integration of all aspects of the poem: form, content, rhythm, cadence, etc. has been achieved. Every single word must merit inclusion, find its right timing and placement.

In a section entitled 'Professional Sickness' from *Hope Against Hope*, Nadezhda Mandelstam observes this when she writes:

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[134] Geoffrey Hill, 'Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement'', in *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. Kenneth Hayes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.3.

> As many poets have said – Akhmatova (in 'Poem Without a Hero') and M. among them – a poem begins with a musical phrase ringing insistently in the ears; at first inchoate, it later takes on a precise form, though still without words. I sometimes saw M. trying to get rid of this kind of 'hum', to brush it off and escape from it … The 'hum' sometimes came to M. in his sleep, but he could never remember it on waking. I have a feeling that verse exists before it is composed (M. never talked of 'writing' verse, only of 'composing' it and then copying it out). The whole process of composition is one of straining to catch and record something compounded of harmony and sense as it is relayed from an unknown source and gradually forms itself into words. The last stage of the work consists in ridding the poem of all the words foreign to the harmonious whole which existed before the poem arose. Such words slip in by chance, being used to fill gaps during the emergence of the whole. They become lodged in the body of the poem, and removing them is hard work. This final stage is a painful process of listening into oneself in a search for the objective and absolutely precise unity called a 'poem'. In his poem 'Save my Speech', the last adjective to come was 'painstaking' (in 'the painstaking tar of hard work'). M. complained that he needed something more precise and spare here, in the manner of Akhmatova: 'She knows how to do it'. He seemed to be waiting for her help. [135]

It is somewhat amusing that Mandelstam spent so much time looking for the word 'painstaking'. Confirming his widow's comments, the following extract from his essay, 'The Word and Culture', might make it sound easy, but in fact supplies the evidence of his having understood the process so intimately, precisely because he persevered with it:

> The poem lives through an inner image, that ringing mold of form which anticipates the written poem. There is not yet a single word, but the poem can already be heard. This is the sound of the inner image, this is the poet's ear touching it. [136]

Both these passages confirm a sense of the commitment necessary to the success of the poetic project. Such commitment requires consenting to Akhmatova's wry observation: "If only you knew what rubbish verse grows from", and then being able to

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[135] Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope*, trans. Max Hayward (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1975), pp.82-83.
[136] Mandelstam, 'The Word and Culture', p.116.

see at what point that 'rubbish' has been transformed as much as it can be. [137] In the course of this process of poetic transmutation, the poem might go through five, or fifty, drafts. Just so, the plough must turn many times before the work is done. The more one is prepared to accept this, the better the work becomes.

Hughes expresses similar notions relating to completion when he writes:

> In each poem, besides the principal subject … there is what is not so easy to talk about, even generally, but which is the living and individual element in every poet's work. What I mean is the way he brings to peace all the feelings and energies which, from all over the body, heart, and brain, send up their champions onto the battleground of that first subject. The way I do this, as I believe, is by using something like the method of the musical composer. I might say that I turn every combatant into a bit of music, then resolve the whole uproar into as formal and balanced a figure of melody and rhythm as I can. When all the words are hearing each other clearly, and every stress is feeling every other stress, and all are contented – the poem is finished. [138]

I would read this passage as emphasising the aspect of the poetic project that can be said to be autonomous, in contrast with the faculty of conscious effort. The *ars poetica* of both Hughes and Mandelstam overlap on this exact notion. Only through a continuing balance and cooperation of these two aspects can the poet hope to overcome the mediocrity and failure of artistic nerve that characterizes so much contemporary poetry. Many poems are not memorable to the reader (although they may be to the author), nor, in Geoffrey Hill's words, do they 'add to the stock of available reality'. [139] The diagnosis need not be that the poetic material is inadequate (no material is inadequate if it is attended to with sufficient awareness), but that the poem simply is not finished and needs to go through more turnings.

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[137] Akhmatova's words quoted in: Joseph Brodsky, 'Footnote to a Poem', trans. Barry Rubin, in *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (Middlesex: Viking Penguin, 1986), p.202.
[138] Clare Brown and Don Paterson, eds., *Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in their Own Words* (London: Picador, 2005), p.122.
[139] *Geoffrey Hill and his Contexts* (Conference).

In the next chapter I will elaborate on the notion of *tĕšuwah* in relation to 'The voice from the whirlwind', exploring in more detail what this 'about-face' is an 'about-face' towards. I will ask what relevance 'Job' 38-41 has to a consideration of *ars poetica* and how it might impact upon our understanding of language, particularly poetic language.

CHAPTER VI

A READING OF 'DARK SAYING' IN RELATION TO CONTEMPORARY *ARS POETICA*

The *tĕšuwah* denotes a 'turn' from falsity to integrity, a notion that is as much applicable to theology as it is to *ars poetica*. In the Jobian verse drama this turn is effected by the import of the voice from the whirlwind (38-41), a voice that, through its dark saying, its indirectness, so dazzles the protagonist as to totally re-orientate his understanding. The answer given to Job is not what anyone would have expected. It is not an answer that directly addresses Job's human predicament on the level at which he was accustomed to operating, but on a level to which he had to ascend before any genuine assuagement of his sufferings could occur. In colloquial terms, he doesn't hear what he *wants* to hear; he hears what he *needs* to hear.

The phrase 'dark saying' can be found in Psalm 49:

> My mouth shall speak of wisdom; and the meditation of my heart shall be of understanding.
> I will incline mine ear to the parable: I will open my dark saying upon the harp.

As I mentioned in the introduction, skill in understanding dark sayings constituted wisdom. Examining parallelism in the psalm, this is supported by 'wisdom' being paralleled in the first verse with 'understanding', and in the second verse with 'parable'. Wisdom concerning the effects of what is said, firstly, upon others, and, secondly, upon one's own mental and bodily states, is surely one of the intended effects of 'Job' because the book is also about language, about speech and silence, what can

and what cannot be said, when to speak and when to keep silent. It draws attention to precepts regarding speech and the centrality of these precepts to religious practise.

This is apparent in the following quotations. When Job first sits down among the ashes, he wife says, 'Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die' (2:9), but Job, who is precisely the kind of man who will not give up his integrity, replies, 'Thou speaketh as one of the foolish women speaketh', and the verse ends with, 'In all this did not Job sin with his lips' (2:10). When the false comforters arrive, 'they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him: for they saw that his grief was very great.' (2:13). In his returns to Zophar and Eliphaz, Job says:

> Surely I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to reason with God.
> But ye are forgers of lies, ye are all physicians of no value. (13:3-4)
>
> Who is he that will plead with me? for now, if I hold my tongue, I shall
> give up the ghost. (13:19)
>
> Shall vain words have an end? or what emboldeneth thee that thou
> answerest?
> I also could speak as ye do: if your soul were in my soul's stead, I could
> heap up words against you, and shake mine head at you.
> But I would strengthen you with my mouth, and the moving of my lips
> should asswage your grief. (16:3-5)
>
> Mark me, and be astonished, and lay your hand upon your mouth. (21:5)

When we come to Yahweh's speeches, a very different rulebook is followed. The voice from the whirlwind brings a change of idiom that effectively places poetic speech at the pinnacle of all modes of speech. It serves as an antidote to the rhetorical poetry of the false comforters, which as I have been pointing out, is essentially a fear-based reaction to that which they cannot account for, namely Job's dilemma. Their rhetoric is one of presumption and self-righteousness, in contrast to the frankness,

emotional honesty and vulnerable openness of Job's poetry. As I said in the previous chapter, Hughes' intention in his Crow poems was to provide an antidote to 'failure in comprehensiveness, depth, flexibility, & emotional charge', which is another reason why I have posited that *Crow*, more than any other poetry of the modern era, is a collection which most directly mirrors 'Job'. It comes as no surprise that in traditional myth-systems it is widely understood that the Crow symbolises prophetic (dark) speech.

The voice from the whirlwind needs no introduction. Indeed, it has none, issuing unexpectedly from an unknown sphere with the force of a revelation, a mighty wind. It presents us with a litany of 'dark saying', its idiom designed to effect a turn towards a fuller comprehension of reality, of cosmology and man's place within it. This implies a radical change in scope from the individual to the universal. The following passage, in which Ricoeur discusses the 'problematic' idiom of Yahweh's speeches, provides us with a useful elucidation on this change in scope:

> It is this unfolding of being, in the absence of personal concerns and through the fullness of word, that was already operative in the revelation that comes at the end of The Book of Job: "Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said…" But what did he say? Nothing that could be considered as a response to the problem of suffering and death; nothing that could be used as a justification for God in a theodicy. On the contrary, he spoke of an order that was alien to man, of that which is beyond the limits of human finitude: "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the world? Declare if thou hast understanding." The path of theodicy has here been closed off; even the vision of the Behemoth and the Leviathan, which is the culmination of the revelation, has no relationship to Job's personal situation. No teleology emerges from the whirlwind; no intelligible connection is established between the physical order and the ethical order; what remains is only the possibility of an act of acceptance which would be the first step in the direction of consolation, the first step beyond the desire for protection. [140]

[140] Ricoeur, 'Religion, Atheism, and Faith', in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, p.461. The Editor translates 'la parole' as 'word', saying that, 'In the theological and Heideggerian context of this essay, *parole* has been translated as "word". In this sense "word" is often used by Ricoeur as a "third term" between language and the "speaking" of the subject. "Word" is not at our disposal; it comes to us.' (p.449). It is therefore closer to 'Logos'.

Ricoeur's contrast between protection and consolation is a contrast between the individual and the universal: the former (protection/the individual) denotes a 'narcissism of desire', which is present in the fear-based religion of the false comforters, whilst the latter (consolation/the universal) denotes a 'forgetting of my own desires and interests', which is the tragic faith of Job, and is what Ricoeur refers to when he talks of 'impersonal unfolding of being, in the absence of personal concerns and through the fullness of word'. In the context of *ars poetica*, this is the contrast between premature closure and pursuing the point of crisis.

It is highly significant, given the above discussion, that 'Job' contains the longest direct address given to Yahweh in the entire Hebrew Bible and that this is in the form of poetry. The implication is clear: ordinary speech is not enough to convey what the book seeks to convey; poetry becomes a form of language, a dark saying, better suited to such purposes, for it is in poetry that language can be pushed to its limits.

'Muse of dots lost in space!': Dark Saying in Relation to *Ars Poetica*

'Job' confirms the primacy of worship over rational questioning. This notion has much to offer to a consideration of *ars poetica*. I am proposing that one can redefine 'worship' beyond a strictly theological context and consider it as denoting a suspension of the conscious intentions of the poet for the sake of the will and volition of the work itself. This comes close to Nadezhda Mandelstam's observation regarding verse; an observation highly suggestive of the existence of an autonomous dimension to poetic composition.

I will now map this notion of the primacy of worship over rational questioning onto comments made by Joseph Brodsky in his Nobel Lecture. Brodsky says:

> There are, as we know, three modes of cognition: analytical, intuitive, and the mode that was known to the Biblical prophets, revelation. What distinguishes poetry from other forms of literature is that it uses all three of them at once (gravitating primarily toward the second and the third). For all three of them are given in the language; and there are times when, by means of a single word, a single rhyme, the writer of a poem manages to find himself where no one has ever been before him, further, perhaps, than he himself would have wished for. [141]

Brodsky has, with characteristic perceptiveness, penetrated into the heart of dark saying, where dark saying employs the second and third modes of cognition (but, I might add, gravitates primarily toward the third). His phrasing in the last sentence implies worship in the sense I have set out above. The ego of the writer is on hold as the work begins to host the worker. This is, in fact, a distinguishing feature of *ars poetica*, whether expressed as 'poetry holds attention for a space' (Heaney), or, 'From the depths of the self we rise to a concurrence with that which is not self' (Hill). [142] Once the poem has been started there is no saying where it might take its writer, what notions and clarities it might excite, and this uncertainty is at once terror and exhilaration. But it has to be done. Brodsky continues:

> The one who writes a poem writes it above all because verse writing is an extraordinary accelerator of conscience, of thinking, of comprehending the universe. Having experienced this acceleration once, one is no longer capable of abandoning the chance to repeat this experience; one falls into dependency on this process, the way others fall into dependency on drugs or on alcohol. One who finds himself in this sort of dependency on language is, I guess, what they call a poet. [143]

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[141] Joseph Brodsky, 'Uncommon Visage: The Nobel Lecture', trans. Barry Rubin, in *On Grief and Reason: Essays* (London: Penguin, 1997), p.58.
[142] Hill, 'Poetry as Menace and Atonement', p.4.
[143] Brodsky, 'Uncommon Visage', p.58.

What hooks the poet to the poetry is sound, the patterning of sound, how meaning is shaped out of this in absolute cooperation and is arrived at, as it were, inevitably, via the semantic and metrical current of the sounds. This inevitability is the measure by which the poem can be seen to have reached completion: nothing else could have been said.

I would posit that linguistic inevitability suggests that the poet is listening-in to reality as if the dimensions of reality were audible, as if reality were realising itself through the poem, hence the saying, 'the world is sound'. This is what would make a poem feel like an organic whole, although one may not be able to say exactly why such and such a word was right over any other word. Murphy confirms this by saying of 'Autumn in Norenskaya' that Brodsky 'declares reality to consist essentially of verbal depth'. [144] This is surely a reference to the logos principle (*In Principio Erat Verbum*), to the relationship between language and reality, and indeed Murphy later says of 'Lithuanian Nocturne' that throughout the poem 'language memorialises the myth or houses the faith of a human reconciliation with God, or the Divine Logos.' [145]

In 'Footnote to a Poem' Brodsky writes that 'Language propels the poet into spheres he would not otherwise be able to approach'. This is the kind of comment one might make concerning the effect upon Job of the voice from the whirlwind. [146] Brodsky certainly stays true to his word, as is evidenced by the following excerpt from 'Lithuanian Nocturne' (XVII), an excerpt which brilliantly echoes the ethic of poetic transmutation, according to my discussion of it in the last section of chapter five:

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[144] Murphy, 'Here and There: Exile as Homecoming in the Poetry of Joseph Brodsky', p.126.
[145] Ibid., p.106.
[146] Brodsky, 'Footnote to a Poem', p. 203.

Muse of dots lost in space! Muse of things one makes out
through a telescope only! Muse of subtraction
but without remainders! Of zeroes, in short.
You who order the throat
to avoid lamentation,
not to go overboard,
that is, higher than "la"!
Muse, accept this effect's
little aria sung to the gentle
cause's sensitive ear,
and regard it and its do-re-me-ing tercets
in your rarefied rental
from the viewpoint
of air,
of pure air! Air indeed is the epilogue
for one's retina: nobody stands to inhabit
air! It is our "homeward"! That town
which all syllables long
to return to. No matter how often you grab it,
light or darkness soon darn with their rapid
needles air's eiderdown. [147]

Brodsky's use of the word 'propels' in 'Footnote to a Poem' is a telling detail. He goes on to say that,

> this propulsion takes place with unusual swiftness: with the speed of sound – greater than what is afforded by imagination or experience. As a rule, a poet is considerably older when he finishes a poem than he was at its outset. [148]

In its intense sonic velocity, 'Lithuanian Nocturne' is remarkably similar to the voice from the whirlwind: its propulsion effects a bypassing of the faculty of rational questioning so that the whole being of the listener is brought into one-pointed concentration. Caught off-guard, the mind astonished is also an open mind. The words are then able to have a much greater transformative impact than is the case with ordinary speech. As I said at the outset of this chapter, it is this kind of speech – dark

[147] Joseph Brodsky, *To Urania* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1992), p.15.
[148] Brodsky, 'Footnote to a Poem', p. 203.

saying – that effects Job's *těšuwah,* for only in better comprehending the universe can his sufferings ultimately be assuaged.

Given this discussion of what can be described as Brodsky's *ars poetica*, one might almost come to expect a reference to 'Job' somewhere in his work. That expectation is met: apart from referring, in conversation, to Marina Tsvetaeva as 'Job in a skirt', in an essay on Osip Mandelstam Brodsky discusses these 'revelatory' lines from the poem 'Verses on the Unknown Soldier':

> An Arabian mess and a muddle,
> The light of speeds honed into a beam –
> And with its slanted soles,
> A ray balances on my retina …

Again using one of his favourite words, 'acceleration', Brodsky clearly understands the implication of the poetic mode of discourse operative in 'Job' when he says that,

> There is almost no grammar here but it is not a modernistic device, it is a result of an incredible psychic acceleration, which at other times was responsible for the breakthroughs of Job and Jeremiah. This honing of speeds is as much a self-portrait as an incredible insight into astrophysics. [149]

Post Tenebras Lux **: Poetry and Restoration**

The two modes of cognition that Brodsky insightfully suggests poetry gravitates primarily toward, the intuitive and the revelatory, imply a changed relationship with time. This is because the kind of language they generate has the effect of *accelerating* one's comprehension of reality, and such acceleration may on occasion give way to a sense of the a-temporal, or to non-linear time, and to revelation; as though what occurs

[149] Joseph Brodsky, 'The Child of Civilisation', in *Less Than One*, p.139. For Brodsky's comment on Tsvetaeva, see: Solomon Volkov, *Conversations with Joseph Brodsky*, trans. Marian Schwartz (New York: The Free Press, 1998), p.43.

within the acceleration is in fact our customary perceptual experience of time burning itself out. It would be as if one had passed through a barrier, like that of sound or light. (One need only consider what happens in a particle accelerator: things begin to behave differently, and according to different laws.) This experience would be tantamount to the kind of poetic epiphany in which one is astonished to find that a phrase, or a line, or a whole poem, reaches that level of linguistic inevitability that feels like an encounter with the audible dimension of reality, with the timeless logos, as if creativity were mimicking creation. This aspect of composition is of course what the Greeks termed *Poiēsis*.

Brodsky was moved to hear Auden say 'Time …Worships language' and responded, in 'To Please a Shadow', with the contention that language is therefore older than time and has the capacity to restructure it. Auden got him thinking:

> … if time – which is synonymous with, nay, even absorbs deity – worships language, where then does language come from? For the gift is always smaller than the giver. And then isn't language a repository of time? And isn't this why time worships it? And isn't a song, or a poem, or indeed a speech itself, with its caesuras, pauses, spondees, and so forth, a game language plays to restructure time? [150]

To say that language is older than time is to point towards the notion of the logos as a stratum of reality existing before time, or rather beyond time as we perceive it. Undoubtedly modern physics has its own description of this.

It is language that is Brodsky's place of restoration, not any geographical place from which he may be exiled and to which he might return. Murphy concludes his essay:

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[150] Brodsky, 'To Please a Shadow', in *Less Than One*, p.363. For Auden's poem, see Appendix B.

> The only point of rest in time or space is that of the pen on the page … Inevitably, it is to language – in all its "twists" and "spiral splendour" – that Brodsky returns. It is language – the Logos – which brought the world into being; and it is language … that he imagined his own destination. [151]

One must be a little cautious about simplifying a term such as 'logos', but nevertheless the implication here is pertinent.

I will now illustrate Brodsky's notion of language restructuring time through a reading of Montale's 'L'anguilla', and in so doing will attempt to clarify the notion of poetic language as having a restorative function. *La Bufera e altro* (*The Storm and other poems*), the collection featuring this poem, was not published until 1956. In his introduction to Charles Wright's translations, Vinio Rossi informs us that the word 'bufera'

> was a dialect term introduced into the literary idiom by Dante. It signifies a high wind with precipitation; figuratively, the word suggests upheaval and is frequently used to suggest the effects of passion. "Bufera," then, has a literary resonance much like "tempest" in English. [152]

Rebecca J. West makes the decisive comment that 'The storm of the title refers both to the chaos of the war and to the sense, more intense than ever before, of a personal and essentially spiritual turbulence centering around the beloved, Montale's poetic lady Clizia'. [153] Given Montale's admiration for Dante, some relationship between the image of the eel and the beloved is probable, the latter being recurrent in the work of both poets. Male poets have likened women to all sorts of things, and an eel is perhaps slightly more flattering than, for example, Frost's 'Silken Tent'. However, it is not so

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[151] Murphy, 'Here and There: Exile as Homecoming in the Poetry of Joseph Brodsky', p.130.
[152] Eugenio Montale, *The Storm and other poems*, trans. Charles Wright, FIELD Translation Series 1 (Ohio: Oberlin College Press, 1978), pp.18-19.
[153] Rebecca J. West, *Eugenio Montale: Poet on the Edge* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981), p.7.

much that there is a direct correlation between lady and eel, but that the lady's attributes have influenced the poem's descriptive language, its passion and its chemistry. Tracing this influence through Montale's previous collections, West notes that, 'this is the alchemy of art that transforms *trillo* to *scintilla* to *sorella* to *anguilla*'. [154]

It could be said, given lines 23 to 25 (which Robin Robertson renders as, 'she is the spark which says/that all begins where all appears to end') that the eel herself is like a voice from within a storm:

> L'anguilla, la sirena
> dei mari freddi che lascia il Baltico
> per giungere ai nostri mari,
> ai nostri estuarî, ai fiumi
> che risale in profondo, sotto la piena avversa,
> di ramo in ramo e poi
> di capello in capello, assottigliati,
> sempre più addentro, sempre più nel cuore
> del macigno, filtrando
> tra gorielli di melma finché un giorno
> una luce scoccata dai castagni
> ne accende il guizzo in pozze d'acquamorta,
> nei fossi che declinano
> dai balzi d'Appennino alla Romagna;
> l'anguilla, torcia, frusta,
> freccia d'Amore in terra
> che solo i nostri botri o i disseccati
> ruscelli pirenaici riconducono
> a paradisi di fecondazione;
> l'anima verde che cerca
> vita là dove solo
> morde l'arsura e la desolazione,
> la scintilla che dice
> tutto comincia quando tutto pare
> incarbonirsi, bronco seppellito;
> l'iride breve, gemella
> di quella che incastonano i tuoi cigli
> e fai brillare intatta in mezzo ai figli
> dell'uomo, immersi nel tuo fango, puoi tu
> non crederla sorella? [155]

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[154] Ibid., p.54. See also Glauco Cambon, *Eugenio Montale's Poetry: A Dream in Reason's Presence* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp.156-159.
[155] Eugenio Montale, *Tutte Le Poesie*, pp.303-304. I will be using Robin Robertson's version throughout: Robin Robertson, *Swithering* (London: Picador, 2006), pp.10-11. See Appendix C.

I have singled out this poem for a number of reasons. Firstly, the poem embodies Brodsky's notion of poetic language as propulsion and swiftness: 'lancing upstream hard against the current', 'a dart of light', 'firebrand, whiplash, shot/bolt of the earth's desire', 'quick rainbow'. Secondly, it contains the motif of the ordeal, which may be related to the search for renewal after a period of atrocity: 'she is the green spirit looking for life/in the tight jaw of drought and desolation'. Thirdly the poem contains a reference to 'Job' 25:5-6 where Bilad the Shuhite says in answer to Job:

> Behold even to the moon, and it shineth not;
> yea, the stars are not pure in his sight.
>
> How much less man, that is a worm?
> and the son of man, which is a worm?

Although Robertson's uses 'generation mired in mud', 'sons of men' has been used in other versions, including Wright's. Muldoon remarks that 'These verses from The Book of Job contain the poetic spark of 'L'anguilla', including its basic structure of comparing and contrasting the sullied with the celestial, as well as the "worm" image, itself a sister of the "serpent".' [156] Lastly, and most significantly, the poem imaginatively contains the trope of a journey from exile to restoration.

Not only is this trope apparent in the leaving behind of one place of residence for another, 'che lascia il Baltico/per giungere ai nostril mari' ('leaves behind the Baltic/ for our warmer waters'), but in the transition from 'l'arsura e la desolazione' ('drought and desolation') to the eel becoming 'la scintilla che dice/ tutto comincia quando tutto pare incarbonirsi' ('the spark which says/that all begins where all appears to end'). This line is strongly reminiscent of the Jobian dilemma in that it sums up how

[156] Muldoon, *The End of the Poem*, p.211.

the problem of cognitive dissonance is to be resolved: the problem itself creates the conditions necessary for a clearing of the ground; the hard labour of the journey generates a fiery revelation, the eel herself becoming, through this process, the messenger in the form of a (burning) spark. It is the same transition denoted by the phrase, *Post Tenebras Lux,* a phrase particularly applicable here, as can be seen from the proliferation of light imagery in Montale's description of the eel: 'una luce scoccata' ('dart of light'), 'guizzo' (which Robertson renders as 'glimmer'), 'scintilla' ('spark'), 'l'iride breve' ('quick rainbow'), and 'fai brillare' ('shining out'). More specifically, the use of 'spark' denotes not simply a spark, but a spark that *says something*, a spark that speaks as though it partook of the nature of lightning, just as speech came out of the storm in 'Job'. [157]

Obviously, this is not simply a poem on the theme of an eel returning to her breeding grounds, it is not simply about fecundity. In a change of scope from the individual to the universal, the eel becomes an emblem for the restorative, or redemptive, aspect of Creation (and indeed for love if one thinks of Dante's redemptive journey) even as she journeys towards 'the dark paradise of her spawning'. The last image, 'can you not see/that she is your sister?', effectively tells us that although represented through the eel, or through the beloved, the drama is of universal proportions; the eel metaphorically presents us with a blueprint for the human journey towards fuller comprehension of the created order, which in a sense is fecundity on a higher level, the same fecundity which marks Dante's journey in the *Commedia*.

My analysis of the poem cannot end there. One final note needs to be sounded. What Montale appears to have done, whether or not it was intentional, is to create a poem consisting of a metaphor for the nature of metaphor. The eel herself, like the

[157] 'breve' is closer to brief or fleeting, but the use of 'quick' covers, in addition, the idea of propulsion.

beloved and like Dante's Beatrice, is a *mediator* between the sullied and the celestial (a notion supported, for example, by the metaphorical description of her as 'quick rainbow', the rainbow being another motif of mediation as we know from its biblical use as a sign of the Covenant between God and man). A metaphor is also a device of *mediation* between what is said and what is unsaid, i.e. a word is used/said to stand for something else/unsaid, and so the eel thereby operates in *doubled-mediation*. [158] Read this way, the effect, given also that the poem is one continuous sentence, is to intensify and propel language to a point of such high velocity as to make it revelatory. This is indeed, as Brodsky says, poetry gravitating towards the revelatory mode of cognition.

If West is right and this is a love poem, then the impulse behind such intensification is surely to enable the poet to approach the closest approximation to the 'beloved' herself; it is ostensibly the beloved who is behind this propulsion. And yet, in so doing, she then reveals her own symbolic essence: the beloved as that which cannot be improved upon, is ultimate, is truth. In other words, her representation is the means most conducive to attaining, through language, a revelation of the ultimate. The impulse of the lover and the impulse of the poet are confluent.

West says that this poem is 'the final, climactic poem to the beloved, the one in which her linguistic reality is most explicitly asserted'. [159] By implication, given the aforesaid confluence, the poem also most explicitly asserts the restorative function of language, i.e. for want of actually being with the idealised beloved, fulfilment is redirected into its creative equivalent which in some ways actually goes further: the poem climaxes in an a-temporal sphere, restructuring time not only because of its syntax but because of its use of metaphor. Montale has collapsed language back into the original epiphany from which it came, which is, in a sense, the same logos (word

[158] If there is any Jobian coincidence besides 'sons of man' it would be in the fact that Job is also a mediator: by virtue of his integrity he is asked by God to atone for the friends.
[159] West, *Eugenio Montale*, p.87.

made world) of Mandelstam and Brodsky. The beloved may have disappeared from the equation, but language has propelled the poet into spheres he would not otherwise be able to approach, just as Job was astonished into a fuller comprehension of reality through the disorientating poetic idiom of the voice from the whirlwind. Put another way, the poet, like the eel, has left behind one place of residence for another altogether different one. As I said at the end of chapter one, the human mind is most fecund when taken to the edge of all it can sense but not encompass, and 'L'anguilla' reports back from that place, testifying to the fascination human beings have for limits and for going beyond the known.

One might ask, as one might ask a Modern Physicist admiring his atom-smasher, what implication does this have for everyday life? If we remember that the quest of the eel is, at least ostensibly, a quest for the forces that sustain life, for fecundity, and if we also note, given the above discussion, that the theme of fecundity in 'L'anguilla' is doubled because it is also a poem alert to its own *creative* spark, then the answer would be that an attentive reading of the poem should to some extent evoke the kind of doubling Li Po alludes to when he says that 'to write poems is to be alive twice'. [160] The greatest and most memorable poems, those that don't die after a first or second read but live on in a deeper part of the psyche (even if we might not literally remember them), deflect us out of sameness, converting entropy into availability, an experience akin to the *těšuvah*. If we map *ars poetica* back onto the Jobian dilemma, we can see what it means that Job's ordeal ends with a doubling of fortune, making him twice the man he was. [161]

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[160] Quoted in: Robert Hass, *The Poet's Choice: Poems for Everyday Life* (Hopewell, New Jersey: The Ecco Press, 1998), p.15.

[161] This doubling is an aspect of Kierkegaard's 'repetition'. See Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, Part One (Report), pp.131-133 and Part Two (Letter, May 31), p.221. See also Ricoeur, ' Religion, Atheism and Faith', in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, p.465.

CHAPTER VII

WHAT THE SPARKS SAY

> … she is the spark which says
> that all begins where all appears to end,
> here, with this charred, half-buried stick;
> the quick rainbow
> a twin to your own bright eyes:
> shining out
> among a generation mired in mud … [162]

Montale's poem tells us that in certain conditions metaphor has the potential to harbour dark saying because, operating on the principle that one speaks most adequately of a thing by speaking of it indirectly, the necessity of probing the poem to uncover what is being said leads us to make some significant discoveries concerning the dynamic nature of language.

In this chapter I intend to shed further light on Brodsky's image of propulsion through a discussion of the trope of metaphor, looking specifically at the kind of thought processes it involves. I will explore contrast and coincidence between two aspects of poetic technique, labour, and what I will term 'quick thinking' (and this motif of quickness is intended to follow on from Brodsky's comments). I will examine two recent contemporary poems, 'By Kautokeino' and 'Sliding on Loch Ogil'. In the subsequent chapter I will consider various ways in which we might approach the notion of 'labour' and how it can be considered as constituting an apprenticeship.

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[162] Robertson, *Swithering*, pp.10-11.

Metaphor: *'A twin to your own bright eyes'*

Metaphor is a device of mediation between what is unsaid and what is said; a word is used (said) to represent or resemble something else (unsaid). It directs us towards what is not, or cannot, be said. It may not be possible to say something for reasons of, for example, censorship (as Borges has said, 'Censorship is the mother of metaphor' [163]), protection (as is the case for the Gaelic tradition of the half-said thing), or simply the shortcomings of language and the inexpressibility of a thing. Metaphor can provide the best possible approximation to the unsaid-thing.

Another of its functions is to effect the bypassing of what Blake termed 'single vision and Newton's sleep'. [164] That is, it has the capacity to reawaken and open our perceptions of the world, making it possible for us to, as Shklovsky says, 'remove the automatism of perception' and see things anew.

Ricoeur, in his lecture 'The Metaphorical Process', considers metaphor as a 'semantic innovation'. He insists that the theories of the ancient rhetoricians had not developed so far as to attribute this function to metaphor and that they still considered it as simply a decorative device. He lists six propositions of the ancient rhetoricians, including the following:

> The substituted meaning does not include any semantic innovation; we can thus translate a metaphor by restoring the literal word for the figurative word which was substituted … Since it admits of no innovation, metaphor gives no information about reality; it is only an ornament of discourse ... [165]

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[163] Quoted in: James Wood, *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), pp.169-170.
[164] William Blake, *Poems and Prophecies* (London: Everyman's Library, 1991), p.323.
[165] Paul Ricoeur, 'The Metaphorical Process', in John Dominic Crossan, ed., *Semeia 4: Paul Ricoeur on Biblical Hermeneutics* (Missoula: Scholars Press, University of Montana 1975), p.77. This is the second lecture delivered at the seminar, *Religious Language and the Parables*.

By and large this is true, and yet it should not mislead us into thinking that semantic innovation is the sole property of modern poetics. Classical Hebraic use of metaphor in 'Job', which dates further back than Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, is itself a highly advanced semantic innovation.

Semantically, metaphor opens up rather than closes down. This characteristic of non-closure is also present in the half-said thing and in dark saying. As I said earlier in relation to Heaney, half-saying is not a failure of language but a confession of ultimate unknowability. Dark saying, on the other hand, is unknowability making itself not so much known as felt, or perceived. Both appeal to the intuitive and revelatory modes of cognition identified by Brodsky, and both create a third, new meaning which is present precisely through its suggestion *in absentia*. As I said in chapter two, in the case of dark saying, this third principle is the post-interrogative reality.

Nowhere is this function of metaphor so apparent as in 'Job' 38. In commenting on Ricoeur, Loretta Dornisch relates his stance towards metaphor to 'Job':

> Metaphor makes language new and thereby redefines reality … In the narrative structure of Job … there is a similar metaphorical twist which carries us from an initial situation through complex processes of describing and redescribing reality, reaching a climax in Job 38 where the rhetorical shift is so dramatic as to bring about a new vision of reality. [166]

As a final preliminary observation on metaphor, I would like to consider it in relation to our perception of time and suggest that it can be seen as a method of short-circuiting the rational faculty in order to create the conditions necessary for language to move into its intuitive and revelatory modes. In this respect, metaphor possesses the

[166] Loretta Dornisch, 'The Book of Job and Ricoeur's Hermeneutics', in *Semeia 19*, p.13, referencing Ricoeur, 'The Metaphorical Process', p.80.

ability to convey something *in a flash*, which, without the use of this device, could take up half a page or more, and in this respect can be said to operate through a kind of perception that partakes more of the a-temporal than of the temporal.

All the above is implied in Boris Pasternak's statement, in his essay 'On Shakespeare':

> Metaphorical language is the result of the disproportion between man's short life and the immense and long-term tasks he sets for himself. Because of this he needs to look at things sharply as an eagle and to convey his visions in flashes that can be immediately apprehended. This is just what poetry is. Outsize personalities use metaphor as a shorthand of the spirit. [167]

That this 'shorthand' can be 'immediately apprehended' suggests that there is more at work in those 'flashes' than meets the eye. It confirms Brodsky's notion of poetic language operating through the intuitive and revelatory modes of cognition. 'Flashes' recalls the light imagery of 'L'anguilla' ('dart of light', 'spark', 'quick rainbow'). [168] The idea of quickness implied by Pasternak's comment on metaphorical language, and present also in Montale's poem and Brodsky's reflections on poetic language, is encapsulated in the mythic figure of Hermes, 'god' of writing. I will now map this mythos onto *ars poetica*.

Arguably, Hermes can also be considered as 'god' of metaphor. His characteristics have a great deal in common with it. In Greek theogony his first act, on the day of his birth, was to steal his brother's cattle. Also attributed to him, soon after, was the making of the first lyre from a tortoise shell with strings made from cattle intestines. Some time later on the same day he is said to have invented the panpipes. Of specific relevance is his reputation for rapidity and what may seem on the surface to

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[167] Boris Pasternak, 'Translating Shakespeare', trans. Manya Harari, in *I Remember: Sketch for an Autobiography,* trans. David Magarshack (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), p.126.
[168] See earlier remarks on Robertson's use of 'quick' from Montale's 'breve'.

be evasiveness and unpredictability (hence the 'quicksilver' characteristic of Mercury, his equivalent in the Roman pantheon). He is the quick thinking, wing-sandaled, messenger of the Gods and has a foot in both worlds, mediating between the divine and the human. He is dualistic in nature, and one aspect of this two-ness is the ability to change from one state to another without anyone else observing it. [169]

This latter quality is distinctively related to *ars poetica* in that when the poem is finished, it can look to an outsider as though the process had been an effortless one; the poem's seamlessness is what marks it out as an accomplished poem. The changes it had to go though are not apparent, and no one should be able to see how it has been done. This is perhaps one of the hidden meanings of the word 'eloquence'. There is more than a hint of suggestion that a finished poem, in its rightness, in its linguistic inevitability, can be referred to as hermetically sealed. This seamlessness also underscores the way that a metaphor can possess a poem without ever disclosing how it did so.

One thing which can be disclosed is that, in considering a metaphor as a bridge between the sayable and the unsayable, what happens in between is a great deal of quick-thinking, a quick-thinking so quick, in fact, that it would seem to occur outside of thought (or at least outside of rational thought), 'in a flash', as it were, which is nevertheless immediately comprehensible. This quickness recalls Brodsky's comments in the previous chapter. When Brodsky says that 'Language propels the poet into spheres he would not otherwise be able to approach', and that this propulsion 'takes place with unusual swiftness', he is talking about the same distinguishing feature of poetry which finds its highest manifestation in metaphor. This feature is of course the

[169] Given my comments at the end of the previous chapter regarding 'doubling', I would suggest a link between the doubling of fortune, in the Jobian sense and the sense intended by Li Po, and the double nature of Hermes. This is best considered with reference to Alchemical discourse where Hermes/Mercury is the agent of transformation in the work.

ability which poetry has to leap across a seemingly unbridgeable gap, a gap between what one wants to say, what one knows on a pre-verbal level is the absolutely right configuration of language, and the apparent limits of the language that one has to overcome in order to say it. Metaphor takes a leap from one mode of discourse to another. Or, in other words: 'All begins where all appears to end'. [170] This notion of the metaphoric leap is another peculiarity of what I defined in chapter two as 'hermetic speech'.

In the language of modern physics, the quantum leap signifies a change that is discontinuous and instantaneous. One might consider how the idioms used by the author of 'Job' leapt from the poetics of suffering to the poetics of wisdom. The voice from the whirlwind, as I have said, has no introduction – it cuts in, *discontinuous* with what has preceded it. This is a highly significant point in the text, if not the most significant point, a point at which reality is about to become re-envisioned. One may take from this an analogy for the poetic process, for how the leaps one might make during the process of composition indicate a bridging of the aforesaid gap.

This rhetoric of 'leaping' suggests an *ars poetica* that values an element of surprise over prediction, that values faith in the work. The following discussion will consist of an exploration of this.

What the Sparks Say: Labour and Quick Thinking

Any poet can tell us that a poem often becomes a finished piece by a combination of labour and quick thinking. If it is possible to adequately define 'quick thinking', I would say, in the light of the above discussion, that it is the kind of thinking

[170] Robertson, *Swithering*, p.10.

which enables the poet to find exactly the right words instantaneously, as if somehow they had managed to *leap* from a language too narrow to that 'pulsing rose' of rightness. This recalls Nadezhda Mandelstam's comment on her husband's work, particularly when she says,

> I have a feeling that verse exists before it is composed (M. never talked of 'writing' verse, only of 'composing' it and then copying it out). The whole process of composition is one of straining to catch and record something compounded of harmony and sense as it is relayed from an unknown source and gradually forms itself into words. [171]

It also recalls my comment in the previous chapter concerning 'linguistic inevitability': quick thinking is a gift of being able to listen-in to reality, as if the dimensions of reality were audible. As for 'labour', it does not need to be defined, labour is labour, although it is often drastically undervalued.

Quick thinking may rest on a sufficiency of labour, which is to say, adequate preparation, but between draft and finished piece the poet *sparks* upon the right turn of phrase, such as can be discerned in John Burnside's 'By Kautokeino':

> Nothing explains the pull and lurch of the sky,
> how, sooner or later, each of us goes to answer;
> no logic stills the heartbeat in the earth:
> it never stops, it knits within the bone,
> a world around the world we understand
> waiting to be recovered and given names:
> this gravity, this lifeblood in the thaw,
> this salt of love, this mercury in absence. [172]

It is not a case of skirting around the unsayable with abstractions, and although Burnside may seem to come quite close to abstraction, when these lines are examined

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[171] Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope*, p.82.
[172] John Burnside, *The Good Neighbour* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), p.43.

in the light of the rest of the poem it is apparent that 'lifeblood in the thaw', for instance, or, 'mercury in absence', are phrases which have been slowing making themselves within the poem all along, catching sparks and turning into form. The poem concerns itself with a particular place and the lore of that place, and is filled with images of snow, cold, calling, and listening. What we see in the poem is the spirit of place condensed into diction which is spacious and fine-tuned and which uses the device of half-saying all the way through. This is precisely what metaphor allows one to do.

The central motif of the poem is the heartbeat in the earth. The elemental or animal, or whatever it is which calls both to the speaker and to the blue-eyed girl, serves as a metaphor not just for the earth and the spirit of the earth but also for the unknowability of that in which we live and move and have our being, 'waiting to be recovered and given names'. The speaker calls back to the calling with 'names' (for description, along with metaphor, is a form of naming) that imply interdependence *in* the created order, and not singularity: lifeblood/thaw, salt/love, mercury/absence: in/of/in. And metaphor, by nature, is also pluralistic. It is to do with relationship, not singularity, as Ricoeur implies when he says, 'we must not speak of words used metaphorically, but of metaphorical *statements. Metaphor proceeds from the tension between all the terms in a metaphorical statement'.* [173]

The above lines are not achieved though a kind of provisional guesswork. Rather, Burnside seems to have struck the right balance between labour and quick thinking, between having something he might want to say and allowing the poem to surprise him. And unless that quality of surprise is present, a poem might not stand the test of time.

[173] Ricoeur, 'The Metaphorical Process', p.77.

I will now turn briefly to Heaney's comments on his publication for *Art for Amnesty* of the poem 'Anything can Happen'. He writes,

> The indispensable poem always has an element of surprise about it. Even perhaps a touch of the irrational … Such a poem arrives from and addresses itself to a place in the psyche that Ted Hughes called 'the place of ultimate suffering and decision'. [174]

'Job' 38 is the sort of poetry that addresses itself to that place, and, bearing in mind the surprise factor, one could say that the best poetry is that which, to some degree, allows for a voice out of the whirlwind to enter.

A version of one of the Odes of Horace, Heaney's poem comments upon the events of 9/11, beginning with the image of the thunderous Jove driving his chariot unannounced through the skies, and continuing throughout with images of volatility, layered one after another:

> Ground gives. The heaven's weight
> Lifts up off Atlas like a kettle lid.
> Capstones shift, nothing resettles right.
> Telluric ash and fire-spores boil away. [175]

'The place of ultimate suffering and decision' is surely another way of describing the Jobian dilemma that arises from cognitive dissonance. By confronting the pressure of the dilemma, the poet ensures that the poem born from this encounter stands its ground even though the materials from which it is created are volatile. This notion of volatility belongs to Alchemical discourse, specifically to its consideration of Mercury/Hermes as agent of transformation in the *Magnum Opus*.

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[174] Seamus Heaney, *Anything can Happen: a poem and essay by Seamus Heaney with translations in support of art for amnesty* (Dublin: Townhouse, 2004), pp.13-14. For Hughes' phrase, see 'The Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems'.
[175] Ibid., p.11.

In employing the imagery of water, or more specifically, frozen water, Don Paterson's 'Sliding on Loch Ogil' also suggests the volatile nature of creative material. Ice is an image which represents both the liminal and the volatile, reason being that it is unpredictable, or subject to sudden change. The poem would seem metaphorically to comment upon the writing process itself:

> Remember, brother soul, that day spent cleaving
> nothing from nothing, like a thrown knife?
> Then there was no arriving and no leaving,
> just a dream of the disintricated life –
> crucified and free, the still man moving,
> the balancing his work, the wind his wife. [176]

The achievement of the balance between labour and quick thinking crucial to the success of the poetic project can be equated with the kind of mutability one would need in order to skate on ice. This poem has a liminal edge to it, set up from the start by the image of the 'thrown knife'. This image is doubly liminal: not only is it a knife (which in fact already has two-edges), but it is a knife in mid-air, having left the hand and not yet landed. The poem seems to be ghosted by all the things that have had to be cut out, or modified, in order for it to come to its crystalline maturation. Ghosted, because that very act of cutting-out seems to have taken the poet to a place they may not necessarily have intended to go, for the reason that lines 3 to 6 present a picture of freedom which is initiatory in nature, having come from the hard work of 'cleaving', i.e. it is not a freedom normally assessable unless a certain process has been gone through, a process which is by no means what the majority of people would wish to engage with. To support this, I would look more closely at the use of the word 'disintricated'. Coming after the image of the knife, this word suggests being cut-free

[176] Don Paterson, *Landing Light* (London: Faber, 2003), p.4.

from entanglements, carrying, as it does, an almost surgical connotation. As such, it is the *near*-opposite of intricate or complex, and the *near*-meaning of simplified. 'Disintricated' does not connote exactly with 'simplified', and, coupled with the use of 'crucified and free', this concords with a sense that the attainment of the kind of freedom that the poem addresses has not come easily. This freedom is bound up with paradox, and perhaps can never entirely be separate from it.

It may well have been the case that, through the process of writing the poem, the poet *leapt* from an original idea into an insight into reality. This is indicated in lines 5 and 6. Line 5 presents the harmonisation of opposites: crucified/free, still/moving. Line 6 qualifies this harmonisation in terms of the work and the life: the work is to balance, or harmonise (and not only in terms of the work of living but in terms of the work of writing), while the last phrase, 'the wind his wife', suggests a further ambiguity in that the wind can work both for and against the balancing, but in both instances is what makes the whole process of a search for balance possible; it is what imbues it with movement and life. As in the context of 'Job', it is incongruity that sets the process of restoration rolling, and this fact in itself reflects the paradoxical nature of life. There is also a further opposition between the speaker as male, and the feminine gendering of the wind.

In mapping this poem onto the Jobian context, it is clearly far removed from false comforting, firstly because it appears that the poem's own will and volition triumphed; secondly, because it would not have done so if the poet were not stationed in the *quick* of his thinking; and thirdly, because the poem would appear to concern itself with the paradoxical nature of reality and with the bearing that an inquiry into reality might have upon the actual lived life. In this respect it bears similarities to 'Job', one of the themes of which is also cosmological inquiry.

Concluding Remark

These two examples of recent contemporary poetry demonstrate how much of the process is a matter of 'playing it by ear'. This quotidian phrase becomes spectacularly true in the light of Heaney's poem 'The Given Note'. In the next chapter I will use this poem – envelope style – to discuss various ways in which we might approach the notion of labour.

CHAPTER VIII

LABOUR OF LOVE

On the most westerly Blasket
In a dry-stone hut
He got this air out of the night.

Strange noises were heard
By others who followed, bits of a tune
Coming in on loud weather

Though nothing like melody.
He blamed their fingers and ear
As unpractised, their fiddling easy

For he had gone alone into the island
And brought back the whole thing.
The house throbbed like his full violin … [177]

Playing it by Ear

To start with the obvious, this phrase usually refers to performing a piece of music without reading the score, 'by heart'. A further usage is of course the idea of proceeding to do something without having formed a plan. The usage I intend for *ars poetica* is a combination of both. One feels one's way into the work without prior knowledge of what it is going to end up being; it cannot be planned. At the same time, one rolls on the currents of the acoustic and the semantic, testing out what seems most *inevitable* to the poem and scoring out what was provisional, what was just a step into that inevitability. At some level, one already knows how to do it, perhaps because the language itself works according to certain patternings. Composition therefore becomes the exercise of a very close concentration that is both *focus* and *breadth* at the same time

[177] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, p.36.

– *a practised unknowing*. In other words, one has practised something enough to know, not what it is going to be, but how to make it happen.

The story behind Heaney's poem has many retellings, one of which is the story of the Pentecostal wind. In a radio interview marking his 65th birthday, Heaney says, "it's the story of Pentecost, of the mighty wind and the revelation coming. It's the story of Rainer Maria Rilke, Duino Castle, when he hears the first line of the Duino Elegies coming in". [178] The ability to play it by ear is, in the majority of cases, the outcome of much labour, of what – in light of how Rilke's *Die Sonette an Orpheus* got written – is in a very legitimate sense, apprenticeship. Rilke was in fact busy labouring over the Elegies when the Sonnets appeared. This celebrated feat exemplifies exactly how what I have termed 'quick thinking' results from labour. That labour is both the labour of endurance and the labour of letting go. I will now deal with these in turn.

1. Endurance

In the case of endurance we might remember that it is not so much that Job comprehends but that he *endures*, and his faith wins out over the all-too-comprehending attitude of the friends, an attitude that shows no capacity to endure. The question raised by the book becomes not that of suffering but of how to suffer. In chapter four I mentioned in relation to *The Wanderer* that endurance (or patience) is an attribute of wisdom. The so-called "patience of Job" is best understood in this light. It certainly does not mean that he kept his voice down or refrained from stamping his foot. Ricoeur has precisely expressed this aspect of the Jobian dilemma when he says,

[178] Seamus Heaney, *Night Waves*, interviewed by Paul Allen, produced by Martin Smith (BBC Radio 3: April 13th 2004).

> Wisdom does not teach us how to avoid suffering, or how magically to deny it, or how to dissimilate it under an illusion. It teaches us how to endure, how to suffer suffering. It places suffering into a meaningful context by producing the active quality of suffering.
>
> This is perhaps the most profound meaning of the book of Job, the best example of wisdom. [179]

The relationship between cognitive dissonance and endurance, both in the Jobian context and in the context of *ars poetica*, is that the latter is the antithetical solution to the former: rather than shutting down the process, which is always a choice, protagonist and poet are advised to stay in the gap, to keep going against the very strong pull towards satisfaction or resolution, or personal bias (that is, what the poet might want to say in contrast with the will and volition of the words themselves).

For the poet, what is endured is the sheer amount of false starts, crossings-out, and the elusiveness of the real subject matter as opposed to the initial intention or 'good idea'. It may take anywhere between five and fifty drafts, any time between a couple of weeks and several years to complete a single poem. What is endured is the unpredictability of the process and the dismay attendant on finding what one thought was finished to be still undergoing torture in the just-about-intact crucible of the imagination. Furthermore, poetry, being not simply a hobby, has a habit of taking up the whole of one's life. Endurance therefore comes to have much wider implications; some things need to happen in the life before the poem is complete. What may pass as a published poem in a poetry magazine may in fact still be a draft that has conceded its premature closure, has lost its direction and, one might say, fallen into temptation.

A comparison between the first and last plates of Blake's illustrations to 'Job' provides an apt analogy for the creative process. In the first the assembly are pictured in front of a tree in which are hung a variety of musical instruments. But there is no

[179] Ricoeur, 'Towards a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation', p.12.

music, just rigidity and aspiration in stasis. In the final plate the assembly are merrily absorbed in what appears to be effortless music making. They are now, after the ordeal and Job's about-face, unhindered by the obstacles of awkward self-consciousness, received wisdom, egotism and fear. I would suggest that Blake's visual depiction of true artistic liberty has in common with Heaney's poem, above, an emphasis on inspiration as the result of courage and labour. In the absence of these qualities 'their fingers and ear' are 'unpractised', 'their fiddling easy'. In contrast, the man of integrity has 'gone alone into the island/And brought back the whole thing'.

The contrast between the two plates is a contrast apparent in a comment made by Dylan Thomas, quoted by M. Wynn Thomas in a review of Kathleen Raine's *Collected Poems:*

> the verdict passed in future on her poetry may resemble Dylan Thomas's comment on the work of his friend Vernon Watkins. "All the words are lovely," Thomas wrote, "but they seem so chosen, not struck out. I can see the sensitive picking of words, but none of the strong inevitable pulling that makes a poem an event, a happening, an action perhaps, not a still life … They seem … to come out of a nostalgia for literature." [180]

Dylan Thomas' comment resembles the Blakean difference between the instruments in the trees and those in the hand. It cautions against too much ego-involvement and deliberate making (the words seeming so chosen), as opposed to submitting to, and enduring, the uncertainty of the process until the poem pulsates with its own life – to the point where it becomes 'an event'. This difference does not only apply to the peculiar genre of Raine's poems, but, in principle, to anyone engaged in poetic composition.

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[180] M.Wynn Thomas, 'Called Back to Earth', at *http:www.Guardian.co.uk/books/ 2008/oct/04/ poetry. kathleen.raine* (*Guardian Review*, October 4th 2008).

To recall another of Heaney's poems, the labour of endurance is the kind of labour that underscored St. Kevin's feat of hatching a clutch of blackbird chicks in his hand. His task is clear as soon as the bird lands in his hand and starts to lay. The eggs must hatch. The chicks will take a while to fledge. The hand must endure. The hand must not move away from the gravity of its task. Thus, the poem can be seen to comment on the labour integral to the success of the poetic project, to the amount of self-forgetting it requires. '… 'To labour and not to seek reward,' he prays,'

> A prayer his body makes entirely
> For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird
> And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name. [181]

There are clear parallels between this attitude of endurance on behalf of the poet, and the mystic's path, as I have already noted in chapter four. More specifically, the term *via negativa* is as applicable to the poetic project as it is to mysticism. It implies staying with the process, having the skill to get it wrong over and over again and not knowing if, or when, it will come right. In a sense, this is another example of cognitive dissonance where the dissonance is between the actual state of affairs and the hoped for poetic achievement, between the false starts and final flourish. Something has to happen to make that meagre spark pulse into a rose, but quite what that is may continue to elude the poet for some time. In the same interview from which I quoted above, Heaney uses a phrase from Borges, 'the immanence of revelation', and expands on it, saying it is

> the promise, that's what keeps calling artists back … a desperate need just to get it right … it's the inspiration, it's the thing that draws you forward, it's the sign of the best poems really. That's what's missing in adequate poems is the

[181] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, pp.410-411.

> sense of that original insight that you have to follow … to get somewhere with it. Quite often you can begin with a notion that can be worked … I think the real things take you beyond; when it seems finished, get another bit further. [182]

The 'revelation' may be immanent for quite some time before the poem comes true.

2. Letting Go

This brings me onto the second aspect of labour, the labour of 'letting go'. This is always harder than it sounds, given the strong bias in human nature towards rigidity and the tendency to want to hold on to the known. In the context of *ars poetica*, one has to let go of draft after draft, correction after correction; of good ideas and initial intentions which may get the poem going in the first place but are better being lost in the process; of cherished phrases, lines or structural forms which, as good as they may be, nevertheless obstruct the poem from coming right. One has to let go of the desire for closure 'when it seems finished', as Heaney says. In short, one has to let go of the temptation to overplay one's own role in the poem's composition. And this has a deep psychological component; it implies undergoing a parallel process of letting go in terms of self-identity, as though every time we sit down to write what we are engaging with is an exercise in shaking off any way in which this conditional construct might be limiting the scope and range of our articulation.

I will elucidate on this aspect of composition by focusing specifically on St John of the Cross, firstly because to look at a mystic who also wrote poetry is a good way of drawing out the *ascetic* side of poetic composition, in contrast to the *aesthetic*, and stressing the possibility of a practised unknowing. Secondly because St John's poems exemplify the unlikely compatibility between language and what is beyond language.

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[182] Heaney, *Night Waves.*

Not only his poems, but his mystical writings in general, are, as Denys Turner points out, unprecedented in 'mapping out in detail [negative mysticism's] psychological topography'. [183] They report back from the height of unknowing through a language rich in dark saying: through metaphor (e.g. the bride and the bridegroom, or courtship), paradox (such as 'luminous darkness') and negation (*noche oscura* as guide). Not surprisingly, his theological writings are abundant with references to 'Job'. Thirdly because his example offers to *ars poetica* the peculiar notion that as soon as you no longer recognise your 'I' in the poem you know you're onto something. Where the emphasis for St John is on letting go of ego-dependency into a reliance on other agencies in order to experience God, for the poet this would translate as not overplaying their role in composition but allowing for the surprise factor, for Mandelstam's inner image, for Heaney's given note.

The following lines from 'Songs of the soul in rapture at having arrived at the height of perfection, which is union with God by the road of spiritual negation', can be read as, not so much parallel to, as a concordance between, the spiritual quest for the divine and the making of a poem:

> En una noche oscura,
> Con ansias en amores inflamada
> ¡Oh dichosa ventura!
> Salí sin ser notada,
> Estando ya mi casa sosegada. [184]

Roy Campbell's translation uses the word 'gloomy' where 'dark' may have been more appropriate. The Spanish is *noche oscura*, and the emphasis in the rest of the poem is on

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[183] Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.231.

[184] St John of the Cross, *The Poems*, trans. Roy Campbell (London: Harvill, 2000), p. 24. Campbell translates this as: 'Upon a gloomy night,/With all my cares to loving ardours flushed,/(O venture of delight!)/ With nobody in sight/I went abroad when all my house was hushed.', p.25.

night and darkness. The poem references one of St John's stock themes, that of the 'dark night'.

In his study of negativity in Christian mysticism (in particular, of the Apophatic tradition, a term from Platonist Christian theology akin to the *via negativa* of the Latin), Turner informs us that St John's theological account of the cause of the sufferings undergone during the dark night belongs within the tradition which sought to coincide the 'Allegory of the Cave' in Book 7 of Plato's *Republic* with the scene from Exodus in which Moses encounters Yahweh on Mount Sinai, 'in a dark cloud'. The coincidence is that in both cases there is a presence of light which is so bright it appears as darkness. As Turner says, it is

> so excessive as to cause pain, distress and darkness: a darkness of knowledge deeper than any which is the darkness of ignorance. The price of the pure contemplation of the light is therefore darkness…but not the darkness of the absence of light, rather of its excess – therefore a 'luminous darkness'. [185]

For Plato the shared theme is a metaphor for wisdom and for Christians it is an allegory of the ascent to God (I would contend that these are, in essence, the same). In *Life of Moses*, Gregory of Nyssa writes,

> What does it mean that Moses entered the darkness and then saw God in it? ...
>
> For leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees, it keeps on penetrating deeper until by the intelligence's yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible, and there it sees God. This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing which consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness. [186]

[185] Turner, *The Darkness of God*, pp.17-18.
[186] Ibid., p.17.

St John's affiliation to this Apophatic tradition sheds some light on his approach towards poetry. In his notes to the poems, John Frederick Nims says that,

> Nowhere in St John's work or what we know of his life does he indicate the slightest sense of embarrassment or self-consciousness (or pride) about his poetry, or the slightest regret when he came to write no more. Apparently he had no scruples about its being in conflict with other interests: he urged the religious under him to improvise verses *a lo divino* in their times of recreation. He left it with no grand gestures of renunciation. [187]

Indeed, his poetic career lasted only about fifteen months or so. Poetry was not at odds with his practise of self-emptying and purgation, and he does not share the same conflicts in his personality as Hopkins, for example, who was at pains to reconcile his religious vocation with poetry. The Jesuits were a didactic teaching order that, more often than not, perceived the words of poets to open a door into a sort of exploration outside the proper search for religious truth. St John, rather than disavowing language as an obstacle to the ascent to God, as Loyola does, made poetry compliment the ascent, perhaps suspecting that it was capable of embodying some of that luminous darkness.

There is as much a passive aspect to the dark nights as there is to poetic composition. The passivity is this: just as the 'seeing which consists in not seeing' cannot be attained by knowledge, so the poem, when it comes right, is more than the sum total of its intelligent devices and conceits, and would seem to have a life beyond that of its author; with the letting go of personal preferences comes the poem as it wants to be and it is perhaps as much a matter of making as of receiving, of getting an 'air out of the night'.

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[187] St John of the Cross, *The Poems*, trans. John Frederick Nims (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p.122.

This is what tends to happen when the poet drops down a level into the work, goes deeper into it, not content with the draft or drafts they have. Furthermore, because the practise of poetic composition is not just about the poems themselves but is as much about the experience of the process, there is a very real sense in which the ascent of the mystic towards God is analogous to the ascent of the poet towards…well, towards what? This question can be answered by asking another question – which is, why does anyone do it?

In order to answer this second question I will refer back to Heaney's remarks in 'The Government of the Tongue'. Heaney references the account given in St John's gospel of Jesus writing (or drawing) in the sand whilst the scribes and Pharisees await his verdict on a woman taken in adultery:

> The drawing of those characters is like poetry, a break with the usual life but not an absconding from it. Poetry, like the writing, is arbitrary and marks time in every possible sense of that phrase. It does not say to the accusing crowd or to the helpless accused, 'Now a solution will take place', it does not propose to be instrumental or effective. Instead, in the rift between what is going to happen and whatever we would wish to happen, poetry holds attention for a space, functions not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves. [188]

The rift 'between what is going to happen and whatever we would wish to happen' is again an instance of cognitive dissonance as I have been employing the term. The rift *is* the Jobian dilemma, and it opens a space through which *těšuwah* becomes a possibility.

The motivation for writing poetry cannot be anything other than to awaken new perceptions. As Brodsky says, 'The one who writes a poem writes it above all because verse writing is an extraordinary accelerator of conscience, of thinking, of

[188] Heaney, *Finders Keepers*, p.190.

comprehending the universe'. Just as, in a particle accelerator, things begin to behave differently and according to apparently different laws, so too language behaves differently once that 'attention for a space', which Heaney describes, is held open as part of a sustained poetic inquiry. 'Attention for a space' implies the labour of letting go (which is a letting go of the known or the expected), which in turn allows for a new use of language. To come back to 'Job' again, an acceleration of the comprehension of reality is exactly what Yahweh's poetry effects in Job, leading to his *tĕšuvah.*

This leads back to the first question: if for St John the ascent is an ascent towards God, what is the nature of the poet's ascent if not towards the awakening of perception, the acceleration of a comprehension of reality, and the effecting of *tĕšuvah*. This may well be the very same thing that characterises St John's religious vocation.

As a poet, St John's language behaves differently as his perceptions are altered through the dark nights of unknowing. Jerzy Peterkiewicz, in *The Other Side of Silence: The Poet at the Limits of Language*, maintains that 'St John acts like a traveller returning from the other side, each object, each word has to be known again, for nothing is recognisably familiar'. [189] And as a consequence of this St John's imagery becomes more and more paradoxical:

> As always when we touch something ultimate we are up against its opposite meaning … St John of the Cross has images of wilful contradiction. One of them is 'luminous darkness'… Perhaps the unknown silence is at its closest to poetic truth when mystical opposites become the only language expressing the poet's *via negationis*. [190]

The use of paradox in his poems serves the same purpose as paradox in 'Job'. Mary Anne McPherson Oliver defines paradox as 'a way of bypassing rational thought to go

[189] Jerzy Peterkiewicz, *The Other Side of Silence: The Poet at the Limits of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p.98.
[190] Ibid., pp.104-105.

beyond it', a definition which confirms it as a form of dark saying. [191] The same is true of metaphor in its function of renewing perception. Add negative dialectics and the result is one of, as McPherson Oliver says, 'bringing discourse to a standstill'. [192] However, one might quote a line from Robertson's version of 'L'Anguilla' and say of St John's apophaticism that 'All begins where all appears to end': St John reports back to us, having held 'attention for a space'.

Where cognitive dissonance is a dissonance between knowing and unknowing, St John, both as mystic and as poet, exemplifies the desirable response to it: not to seek a solution, nor to have any expectations met, but to ground the poetic project in its true integrity. This letting-go of the known is an intensive labour, yet through that his poems embody the insight expressed by St Thomas Aquinas: '*Melior est amor Dei quam cognito*.' [193]

When Turner, in commenting on St John's theology, says that, 'in the case of the dark nights, ego-dependant agency is destroyed as such only to reveal the presence within us of other sources of agency which, without the disablement of our active natural powers, we could not have detected', this does not mean that the self is to be eliminated. Rather, it is re-shaped and re-tuned in order for those 'other agencies' to work. This reconciling approach is what makes St John so lovable, and it is no coincidence that P.J. Kavanagh, in his introduction to Campbell's translations of the poems, notices that 'all St John's mystical poems are about success, and this alone would make him unusual among poets'. [194] His labour is a labour of love.

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[191] Mary Anne McPherson Oliver, 'Mystical Experience and the Literary Techniques of Silence', in *Studia Mystica*, vol.1, part 1 (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1978), p.8.
[192] Ibid., p.11.
[193] Peterkiewicz, *The Other Side of Silence*, p.106. 'It is better to love God than to know him'. See also the First Epistle of St John, 4:8: 'He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love'.
[194] St John of the Cross, *The Poems*, p.19.

Concluding Remark

One does not need to be of a religious temperament to recognise that peculiar note of transcendence inherent in any attentive use of language; a transcendence of all-too-familiar dictions (like the dictions of the false comforters) which is enabled by a shaping of the self through what I have termed the labours of endurance and letting go, so as to be able not only to hear the 'given note', but to play it back. And this *is* the apprenticeship, the labouring on which quick thinking rests.

> ... So whether he calls it spirit music
> Or not, I don't care. He took it
> Out of the wind off mid-Atlantic.
>
> Still he maintains, from nowhere.
> It comes off the bow gravely,
> Rephrases itself into the air. [195]

[195] Heaney, *Opened Ground*, p.36.

CHAPTER IX

AT-ONE-MENT

In this concluding chapter I will begin with an examination of the denouement of 'Job' and then, in a final demonstration of the relevance the Jobian dilemma has for *ars poetica*, show how Job's restoration can be mapped onto the poet's work.

Job 42: An Interpretation

After Job's encounter with the voice from the whirlwind we are told that,

> … the Lord turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends: also the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before …
> So the Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning: for he had fourteen thousand sheep, and six thousand camels, and a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand she asses. (42:10,12)

Two points require attention, firstly that Job's fortunes are doubled and secondly that he atones for the friends. At the start of the story Job's livestock totalled 11,000, and at the end, 22,000. [196] Commentaries do not attribute any special meaning to these figures. As part of the Wisdom corpus, rich in dark sayings, it would be erroneous to interpret the conclusion of 'Job' literally, and its motifs, symbols, and metaphors are the closest representation of what the author is trying to communicate. I would argue that it is therefore feasible to suggest that these figures indicate more than a simple

[196] See comments in chapter two on the use of the envelope figure in Classical Hebrew poetry.

case of doubling, or hyperbole. First they must be reduced to 11 and 22. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet and, for the Jews, letters 'were thought of as holy, directing breathing the spirit of God.' [197] The implication in 'Job' is that because the 22 letters of the alphabet symbolise totality, the occurrence of this number suggests that Job has had an experience of totality akin to a high degree of enlightenment. Further evidence in support of my interpretation comes from the use of the 22 letter acrostic in Lamentations, discussed in chapter one. The acrostic form served to encompass the experience of grief from, as Gottwald said, 'Aleph to Tav', again, maximising the concept of the alphabet as embodying totality. In 'Job', therefore, the 22 would appear to express the same qualified totality, in his case, pertaining not to the expression of grief, but to the experience of a cosmic awakening, a *těšuvah,* through – and this is crucial – the *speech* from the whirlwind (speech as 'directly breathing the spirit of God').

The number 11 then comes to signify a halfway point and, related to the judicial theme in 'Job', untried faith. This can be conceived of in terms of an impractical idealism, such as one sees in the first plate of Blake's illustrations. The 22, being 11+11, therefore represents practical idealism, the active manifestation which culminates in wisdom and is tantamount to both mastery of one's own life in the world and higher purpose in the form of service to others. This last conception, service to others, is evidenced by the fact of Yahweh's request that Job make atonement for his friends, a request which effectively restores his priestly role in the community.

This leads me on to the second point. I have already suggested in chapter one why Job can be seen to be a 'temple initiate', and this is further confirmed in the

[197] Gottwald, *Studies in The Book of Lamentations,* p.25.

conclusion of the story where we see him atoning for the friends. This is significant because, as Habel remarks, 'Ironically, Job is the only mediator Yahweh will accept to intercede for the friends (42:8). Job's act of intercession implies his full restoration as a righteous mediator for his community.' [198]

In the language of temple theology, his encounter with Yahweh can be read as implying that he has entered into the holiest part of the 'temple', the holy of holies, the 'place' from where Yahweh appeared to the prophets. Margaret Barker, in her study of temple theology, explains that,

> The secrets of the holy of holies concerned the origin of creation, Day One; those who entered the holy of holies saw the vision of creation as Moses had seen … Exactly the same experience, however, is implied in the Book of Job …The holy of holies was the invisible creation, beyond the veil and so outside time and matter, and rituals in the holy of holies were deemed to take place in eternity, before the creation of the visible world. [199]

That Job has passed beyond such a veil is confirmed by 42:5: 'I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee'. The movement from 'hearing' to 'seeing' is comparable with the movement from the 11 to the 22, a movement which can only happen once Job's consciousness has reached the point of no return and then passed beyond it. Given this context, the enlightenment mentioned earlier can be qualified as an experience of a radical change in his perception of the nature of time, and of the architecture and meaning of reality, and a ministering to the need for integration and wholeness (and justice); the lifting of the veil effects Job's *těšuwah*, his about-face, which in turn impacts on his social standing.

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[198] Habel, *The Book of Job*, p.34.
[199] Margaret Barker, *Temple Theology* (London: SPCK, 2004), pp.23-24.

At-one-ment and *Ars Poetica*

Turning from this theological examination of the final verses of 'Job' to *ars poetica*, I will now consider in what way poetry can be seen to have the capacity to 'atone' for falsity by promoting integrity. This may sound like a rather grand proposition, and yet it may be more ubiquitous than one would suspect once one puts aside any constricting theological connotation that this term may at first present. To avoid seeming to err on the side of the theoretical, or at worse the abstract, the following comments assume that poetic composition is viewed as an apprenticeship, an aspiration *towards* higher degrees of mastery, a moving from the 11 to the 22, towards an actualisation of that vision of artistic liberty depicted in the final plate of Blake's illustrations.

In his essay, 'Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement'', Geoffrey Hill proposes that,

> …the technical perfecting of a poem is an act of atonement, in the radical etymological sense – an act of at-one-ment, a setting at one, a bringing into concord, a reconciling, a uniting in harmony ... From the depths of the self we rise to a concurrence with that which is not self. [200]

Recalling the contrast between *eirōn* (reality/integrity) and *alazōn* (pretence/falsity), integrity also implies a state of at-one-ment. It is a stay, however momentary, against falsity. 'Falsity' then comes to denote a failure to pursue the point of crisis (or indeed, menace), a conceding of the poem's premature closure, and all attendant reasons for this failure. In a broad sense, falsity is the un-transmuted 'rubbish' from which all poetic endeavours originate.

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[200] Hill, 'Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement'', p.4.

It is no accident that a notion of 'not self' should follow so closely after the notion of at-one-ment. This is in keeping with the motif of the temple as a place which, reflecting the structure of creation, was designed to bring about an experience of integrity and wholeness (which would include 'otherness'), and although Hill does not reference the temple in his essay, to speak of atonement is to make an inadvertent reference to it because atonement is a word that belongs to temple discourse. Hill is in fact providing another angle on the unselfconscious aspect of poetic composition I have been exploring throughout this thesis, an angle particularly relevant to my proposition. 'At-one-ment' is reminiscent of Hughes writing of poetic composition that the poet 'brings to peace' the feelings and energies that constitute the poem's *prima materia* (or indeed, 'rubbish'): 'I might say that I turn every combatant into a bit of music, then resolve the whole uproar into as formal and balanced a figure of melody and rhythm as I can'.

Both Hill and Hughes would have been keenly aware of the Wisdom tradition of the biblical corpus, and its values of balance, harmony, composure, health and completion, as displayed in the structure of the temple, are also displayed, in their own way, in much contemporary *ars poetica,* especially where it addresses the question of the process through which a poem comes to be completed.

'Today a temple rises in their hearing'

Owing to the Jobian context of this thesis, I have talked in terms of 'atoning' for 'falsity' by promoting 'integrity'. This same notion has been expressed in many other ways and is one of the root-functions of poetry, a function Rilke celebrates in *Die Sonette an Orpheus*:

> … Und wo eben
> kaum eine Hütte war, dies zu empfangen,
>
> ein Unterschlupf aus dunkelstem Verlangen
> mit einem Zugang, dessen Pfosten beben, –
> da schufst du ihnen Tempel im Gehör. [201]

The temple Orpheus builds, 'in their hearing', is built from sound (or rather, song), not matter. Like metaphor (and Montale's eel), the temple is another trope of mediation. As a 'place' of atonement, it was designed to convey information about the architecture and meaning of reality, to mediate between, and harmonise two axes, above and below, celestial and sullied. I would propose that in some sense poetic language can do the same, for after all, this is the purpose of liturgy, of speech as heard in the temple. Scholem has said that one of the key doctrines of *Quabbalah* is 'divine language as the substance of reality'. [202] Such a notion has informed many other traditions and folklores. Therefore, Orpheus' role as sonic architect is not as strange as it might sound. Furthermore, another of his roles is that of making atonement.

Rilke's first sonnet neatly links the themes I have been exploring in this thesis, not only in his use of the motif of the temple, and what it signifies for *ars poetica*, but also because Orpheus is another mythic figure who, like Hermes, possesses the ability to leap across the gaps and inhabit spaces normally inaccessible, to 'play it by ear'. In a sense, both figures pass back and forth across the threshold of the temporal and the a-temporal. To bring the mythic down to earth, we might consider this in the light of

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[201] Rilke, *Selected Poems*, p.226. Don Paterson's version reads: '…Before this day, there hadn't been a shack//That might have held the song, a plain earthwork/Hollowed by their most obscure desire:/Today a temple rises in their hearing.' Paterson, *Orpheus*, p.3.

[202] Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p.133. *Quabbalah* literally means 'Tradition'. It is helpful to note that *Quabbalah* was once part of Orthodox Judaism before the quasi-mystical teachings of various individuals discredited it. *Quabbalah* takes many of its terms of reference from Ezekiel. From a historical perspective, the temple visions of Ezekiel, being of exilic date, foreshadow the appearance of Yahweh in 'Job' and it is highly likely that the author has mapped aspects of Ezekiel onto 'Job'. In light of this it is not inappropriate to relate *Quabbalah* mysticism to 'Job'.

Brodsky's contention that poetry has the capacity to restructure time, that it can propel the poet (and hopefully the reader) into *other* spheres.

In the afterword to his version of *Die Sonnette an Orpheus*, Don Paterson writes,

> Orpheus was a man who found the perfect balance between death and life, eternity and the living present, by singing across the gaps and inhabiting both at once. The Sonnets imply that how well a man or woman deals with their twin citizenship determines the degree of their authenticity; and in Orpheus, Rilke sees the ideal possessor of the 'double realm'. He knows that the answer is to live in the heart of the paradox itself … [203]

The coincidence between Orpheus and Job is clearly indicated in Paterson's remark. Both weathered an ordeal of loss and had experienced '[living] in the heart of the paradox'. Furthermore, the Greek Orpheus and the Semitic Job can be thought of as temple initiates to whom the structure of the temple, and by extension the universe, was revealed. If this is to have any meaning for the practicing poet in an age where interest in the Judeo-Christian tradition is, to all appearances, rare, it is in the inherent emphasis on integrity, as opposed to falsity: the poet can easily lose their way by succumbing to excessive self-consciousness in the compositional process, or being seduced by an estimated public reception; by succumbing to the tyranny of the intellect, cleverness, conformity, 'popular membership safety', or any other manifestation of sameness (false comfort), rather than pursuing a point of 'crisis' and pushing to make their work fulfil its prestigious role as the art form most capable of harmonising our experience in realms beyond the familiar. I would go further and say that a well-wrought poem has the capacity to embody the notion of the temple; that it can be, as it was for Brodsky, a place of restoration.

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[203] Paterson, *Orpheus*, p.69.

CONCLUSION

> For in a house that serves the Muses
> there must be no lamentation: such a thing
> does not befit it. [204]

The composition of a poem, more often than not, takes a lot longer than one expects. It is always disheartening to concede that one has not quite put enough work in, and that the apparently finished piece is in fact still a draft, even two or three months – or even years – after one had decided enough was enough. Sappho's precept is useful to us in this respect, in that it can be read as advising proper maturation of the work: 'lamentation', or any other *prima materia*, must be fed through a process of transmutation before it can truly become art; and artistic liberty does not mean that one gives oneself permission to pour out any vaguely poeticised sentiments, but, rather, it arises from a refining and disciplining of the material.

This thesis has sought to present what I would term *the long view*: how the process by which the poem reaches completion is, like the process depicted in 'Job', a matter of taking whatever time necessary to confront the dissonance between how one wishes things to be, which is to say, that linguistic inevitability one aspires towards, and the actual state of affairs; of having the confidence to raise one's standards in co-operation with the will and volition of the work itself; of maintaining a good-humoured faith in the poetic project, with all its tests and serendipitous surprises. It has attempted to validate and reaffirm the qualities of labour, perseverance, resourcefulness, courage,

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[204] Fragment 150, quoted in: Arthur Weigall, *Sappho of Lesbos: her life and times* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1932), p.295.

and emotional honesty, and to provide substantial confirmation of the value and reward of pursuing them.

The text of 'Job' has informed each turn of the work. There appeared to be no end to the coincidences between its tropes and the poetic project. I might add that my original intention was not to claim the material of 'Job' for a secular arena, nor to uphold a religious point of view. It lay somewhere between the two, necessitating that 'cognitive dissonance', '*těšuwah*', and 'dark saying' be considered in a literary context. At the same time I have refrained from appropriating these terms in any way that would compromise their essential significance.

The mapping of 'Job' onto *ars poetica* could be developed further than the constraints of a short thesis allows. There can never be a last word on the parallels and coincidences, precisely because the common denominator is 'creation'. As Dornisch remarks,

> The text of Job provides a theoretical model of reality which is multi-levelled, with cosmic, oneiric, and poetic aspects which have not been exhausted in spite of all the interpretations over the centuries. As a theoretical model of reality, the book of Job challenges the reader, and thereby offers the possibility of making Job a living text. Job is poetry as creation in the ontological sense of the word. [205]

The implication is that not only does the text address, thematically, the nature of creation, it exemplifies this in its ontological status: the text's exegesis is inexhaustible (and resists the deadness of closure); interpretations are being constantly created and recreated, and these interpretations belong to a living and dynamic dialogue.

I would take this further and suggest that the text is not simply 'words on a page'; one enters into it, into deeper meanings and dark sayings, as if stepping over the

[205] Dornisch, 'The Book of Job and Ricoeur's Hermeneutics', p.17.

threshold of a temple. Perhaps this is why Osip Mandelstam writes that 'Whoever shall raise the word on high and confront time with it, as the priest displays the Eucharist, shall be a second Joshua of Nun.' [206]

Recalling the problem of cognitive dissonance in the context of the *Diaspora* – that there was no explanation for the exile so long as the view held by the Hebrew people continued to be that of Yahweh's guaranteed protection of them and their land – then not only can the text of 'Job' be seen to serve a priestly function, to atone for the rift between the real and the ideal, but it does so by an act of re-creation. I hope I have demonstrated how this also underscores the process of poetic composition: as the poem goes about its work of re-creation, it simultaneously re-sensitises the psyche at a level far below the conscious strata, making possible – for both the poet and the reader – the transformation of falsity into integrity.

> The fat crust of the earth is so pleasant against the ploughshare
> as the steppe lies in the April upheaval.
> Salutations, black earth, be strong and alert,
> there's a fertile black silence in work. [207]

[206] Mandelstam, 'The Word and Culture', p.115.
[207] Osip Mandelstam, 'Black Earth', in *The Voronezh Notebooks,* trans. Richard and Elizabeth MaCane (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1996), p.32.

Part II

Bedrock: Poems

Contents

I

II

I

Cabin Fever

When night and the key to the door
descend together to the bottom
of a bottle of Laphroaig,
have your good ear ready
until the firth is a salty chorale
of octaves, suggesting
rain mural, the moon's meadow,
or Collect for the day that never was
quite how you'd hoped,
but better – beyond hope,
distilled from some deeper resource
of things as they are, just as they are;
Collect, also, for peace
in the faint hours that come
once the final decision to sleep
is made, then unmade,
then tossed aside, and so on;
and for aid against peril by way of saying
that, yes, water is holy desire
and good counsel, possesses a body
unlike other bodies,
neither singular nor plural –
and as you bed down with it
the light in the room tilts and begins to decant.

Frog Genesis

As if they'd come down clean in vertical weather,
a line of descent straight from the rainstorm,
afterbirth of lightning and thunder,
each just a centimeter long, crossing the track.
Little sobrieties, little regenerations,
sickle-green, cold strobes of earth
you watched your step for, scrotum-soft,
hopping into your hand for their first lesson in trust.

You were the place of overlap – almost meniscus,
one side human, and one otherness
bent down so that the arc of your spine sheltered,
your cupped hands offered, and the word *frogs,*
camouflaged in the lobe of your curiosity,
asked, *what smallest thing grew from your grieving?*

Peace and Plenty

Beside the snug window of a rancid pub in Kendal
my bed is made for the overnight stop.
It's about half way. The car cools
in someone else's parking space,
a pint of kindness from downstairs ticks
on top of the cupboard, the plumbing is bust,
the charity event in full swing, wallpaper folds
back in brittle hieroglyphs of peace and plenty.

Charmed out of my socks and shoes
by soft-spoken water, I lie there thinking
of the riverbed's licorice vernacular sucking
at heron's feet, storing vowels deep in its mulch, and say:
good riddance to the English apology,
bring me the black drop! Or failing that, a minty cake.

Three Poems after Rioja

I

Lap-dissolve

Eels of the evening size up the rug,
extend from oil-filled radiator
and recharging laptop;
its one square eye dissolving
into ropes of light caught on camera
as we accelerated across the Tay Bridge.

II

That's the one you took, moments after
we delayed the traffic by discussing
tolls with the man inside the box,
found we'd created a whiplash of lights
that followed us out of the city,
turning chthonic as we hit the back road.

III

Beard Trim

There is no narrow escape from jealousy –
just step on it, while I ask this:
if the food of love were eels,
would you refute these fingers
as they slip across your face,
feeling for each porous starting point?

Cycle Path

(Kennet and Avon Canal)

Face lowered to curb the grits of the rain
from dashing against my eyeballs
I followed a ghost-flowered hedgerow
into self-forgetting, my tongue cleaving
to the roof of my mouth. Calling out
along the rapid pathway, my words,
addressed to no one but resembling prayer,
skidded like loose gravel across the air waves.

Thank my lucky star the bridge was clear.
By evening the mirrors in the trees had diminished,
as had any sense of where I was going,
or at what point I was supposed to turn back.
Only the dippers and skaters, and with
their entire bodies, could chart my fortune in the water.

Loch Loch

For our purposes, the enlivened loch
is churning out verses,
page after page of exaggerated waves
repeating the word *water* over and over.

We assume they can be traced
along this default marked by sand and stones –
instead they reappear while disappearing
widening the margin of error.

And what we're left with is not the end
of something, nor its beginning,
but the tryst still echoing its *yes-yes!* its *no-no*,
still flirting at our vision's periphery as we turn away.

We can lie awake all night
with the meaning-making light in our heads
wavering like this, but truth is there's nothing there –
just the water's bare arms holding out in the dark.

Agrarian Songs

I

Mars was once considered a god of the soil,
which seems about right, given the effort
of turning it. I sang as I worked –
I sang for you – I sang to let the muscles
of my back know *this could go on all day*.

II

As I pulled at horsetail the hurt earth's
claim on it seemed intricate.
Its effort is the effort of resistance –
each root-node, palpably unclasped,
made for a tug of war with the unseen.

III

The effort of the earthworm is in contorting
what volume he has headlong.
Left to draw the missing half of his habitat
down like a hood, I imagine he'd have seen stars,
pushing like that, into the pixels of his darkness.

IV

You're taken with this muck under my nails,
these gardener's hands that crackle
along your arms like flame –
plant in me the effort of your dark songs,
and let them go on all night, like a constellation.

Ruth

I saw you in chapel in the vanishing village,
Dunino, with a blue armful of barley
and the light shining right through you.
The scribe said your sorrows were 'numerous',
that to leave father, mother and homeland
would translate into *hesed* once the heart had calmed.
No mention of grappling with your load
on the road from Moab to Bethlehem, your griefs
held back for Naomi's sake, biting your lip, absently noting
what those tides of desert sand were doing to you.
All this condensed into: *And it came to pass…*

And seeing as we were alone there, I asked
about the dark stain of tears and sweat on the fabric
of your dress, the sprain of the mile by mile,
stretching your exilic limbs for those lengths
the widowed have always taught
will be worth it, one way or another, in time.
It seems you'd calculated, clear as glass, the day-in-day-out
gleaning of the harvest would lead up to something.
Yet one more question shines out for the asking:
as you uncovered the feet of your near-kinsman
what was it like, for a change, to *not go away empty*?

Caritas

(St Andrews Cathedral)

These stones speak a level language
murmured word by word,
a speech pocked and porous with loss,
redressed by the slow hungers of weathering.
And there, in the broken choir, children
are all raised voice, loving the play of outline
and absence where the dissembled god
has shared his shape and homed us.
At the end of the nave, the east front stands
both altered and unchanged,
its arch like a glottal stop.
And what comes across, half-said
into all that space, is that it's enough
to love the air we move through.

The Extra Mile

(The wife of Job has a re-think)

I

After three hours kip the day slumped
into one meandering back-drift.
She'd have slept anywhere, almost drove the car
into a ditch of primroses so soft
in their long sunk hammock.

And as for that feeling of being pulled
over the sea into another time zone,
by then he'd have been far gone
on diazepam (as aerodynamic as ever
he could be), nose-diving

into a well deserved dream of the Eagle Nebula
they call *The Pillars of Creation*, so like rock,
yet so like light, possessing a rainbow-body
the way metaphor possesses a poem
without ever disclosing how it did so.

II

What held her up into the night
was Plate XV of Blake's illustrations,
looking to see if her estranged husband
had still got the boils, or whether they'd healed,
asking herself why his gaze

wanders off out of the frame
whilst his body, in all its compressed
rigour, like a heaped cairn,
crouches in the cold tabernacle
of Yahweh's dark saying.

She realised that "curse God and die"
had in fact added a sub-zero to the already
negative equation, so no wonder
he hadn't once looked her in the eye.
And now he was miles away.

III

Perhaps what he needed was not a second skin
in case the first was too thin. Nor a strategy
for mornings when his eyes, watering
in their rimy sockets, would appear
to have stayed open all night.

Thinking this, she remembers them,
starry as Antares, red eye of Scorpius,
and how he said they would fire back
what they'd stared at into his bad dreams:
rings of paint on the ceiling

uncoiling into shapes of angels,
armed and opening a sky-path
to the calmest place in the storm –
which, on waking, promptly sealed over again.
Filled with remorse she opens the car door.

IV

What's needed he thought of first,
a new angle that broke the old code:
discomfort is like a corrosive melting apparent
surfaces away, until one last question remains –
how to suffer without feeling you've lost out on anything.

So what was I good for? she laments,
Heaven only knows.
But then, how did he think of that?
did it not come of necessity, making him
the truly upright man he'd only thought

he was before? which means – in all –
I was supposed to be unhelpful.
I hear him now: *dear, you're such a bad driver,*
just keep track of the white stripe,
let it reason with you these last few miles.

V

Some things that don't happen,
Elihu had told her, in a moment of wisdom,
stop disasters from happening –
though Job has said that disaster
meant being 'out of sync with the stars'.

Who to believe when Yahweh doesn't appear?
not that he'd give a straight answer
to any of the questions that now have her mind
working in over-drive, such as,
why does the heart furl like a winter rose,

withdraw when it means to disclose?
why do we hurt with words when we mean
to atone? why did he leave before the end
and does he not see how hard a part
I've had to play in this fiasco?

VI

Such hardness only widened the distance
between them until love's density
collapsed in on itself right inside her torso –
that weight that drops in the chest,
drops like a falling pendulum, must nevertheless

be carried lightly, or else fall further.
He was so like Flammarion's pilgrim
with his head stuck slightly out of the real,
he made her laugh, so like one taken by the power
of strangeness – that shining wake left behind

after Leviathan has whipped out of sight,
as if to say the mind is most fecund when taken
to the edge of all it can sense but not encompass –
which is rather like how she now follows
after him, thinking, *well, you never know...*

VII

There is no other place from which empathy
can begin but in negative space.
And perhaps that's what it means to go the extra mile,
getting the right amount of distance between
how you started out and where you arrive.

Driving back from the airport, she admired
the moon's shadow caught in the briars, then lying
across the road. Although vowed to silence,
she started thinking out loud, wondering if the reason
Blake gave Behemoth such a remarkably human ear

was to say only we know that creation is a brilliant atrocity.
Yes, says Job, glancing over at her, *the point being,*
when the body in pain remembers this, something'll give –
time, most likely – a torn veil which uneclipses
the heavenly bodies, cures the navel gaze.

I Half Expected

Seeing fellow passenger deflected, out there, riding in the night on the same blue-stripped chair that I myself sit on, courtesy of Scotrail, I half expected, given how much white there was to her eyes, that she'd start taking her face off – an arresting but uncomplicated operation, possible with the use of only one hand – like the way some people might make a sweeping bow. Then she'd no longer annoy me by looking over so frequently, seeing as, no longer in the habit of looking, her looking would have looked through itself and vanished. She wears, I notice, a pale blue jacket of thin polyester and has over-done it on the face powder. Every time I move my arm she looks over, turns away, rubs her eyes, takes them out, and shows me the entire illusion played back through the reflection of a reflection. She gets off at Cupar, oblivious of her soft, impertinent optic, forgetting me as soon as she hits concrete.

The Alchemist's Foible

After pressing my indiscretion
like luck, like loose change,
deep in your palm, I left the room
rather than see you spin my coin.

Or pocket it. With one eye on sidereal time
and the other shut tight
I contemplated the art of devaluing
love's inflation by invoking its stark contrast:

the sober fact that wish rests on wish.
Then, I asked, what currency
should wishes have with me?
So far, so good. The well water's metals

tortured my sleep, luminous green
at their starless smelted hilt.
They were looking for my face
which was wretched from night's extenuation.

By morning I was rich, for the formula was this:
We cannot transform what we condemn
May all the coins you've ever dropped
Reverse their long descents

A View of Canaletto's Venice

For John Rohde

'Never trust a man with a sword who can't dance'

Precision draws your eye along the Grand Canal
as along the length of a foil

rising and falling with its flippant weight,
its back-drift and accurate intent.

From the watermark of mottled buildings
on either side, closing in to the dome

of Santa Maria della Salute, you are, at the same time,
foregrounded in broad awareness,

broad enough to imagine that in the middle distance
your sudden cry is like a gondola rolling on echoes.

So much so, you arrive into everywhere at once.
And this is your skill: faced one way,

then another, your wits remain sharp,
you measure yourself, as shadow measures the sun.

And this is mine. *Passata sotto:* draw your eye
along my lines, complete in their letdown and uplift.

Bed Time

Swimming out to sea under music's epileptic rip-curl,
under the sign of the sweat-bead, the heartbeat,
Brian's version of the Psalms, the spare chin of song
that covers the four phases of the moon for a year's *rotacio*
with no surplus and every note golden,
until the time comes to put aside your maracas,
fold back the surf's lyric sheet down over my head
and use your hands to pull me out.

After Akhmatova

I am busy *what with* the empty house,
the empty nest, save me. *And*

and with the safety net I have strung out
between one unanswered letter and the next.

I have fallen into a world of inverted liberation
why because I cannot rest, cannot rest,

in the empty house, the empty nest
where grief has broken me with her dead weight.

Why not let her spark her vital spark run
from Aleph to Tav? yes, that's what he said

when, like you, he thought to give me good advice,
drank my wine and bruised my leg

with his teeth. *Why would he* to ensure that when he left
the Muse of weeping stayed with me;

Muse of austerity, Muse of the moment
before sleep sets in *my lips are sealed*

so they should be. And that's what it means to create,
drowsing in the complete alphabet of grief

like a stray dog in a white street
until you wake and find your life has changed

and there is nothing in the way – no empty nest,
no dead weight. Just a letter that never came.

Already someone's set their dogs among the swans

'Here then, form is no other than emptiness,
emptiness no other than form'. The Heart Sutra

It's a promising start, this unleashing
of a splay of wings, a hiss of ante-grace.
By the time I stop swearing under my breath
something's different: the loch looks up
at the crags of Holyrood Park
as the landscape turns witness to all,
that one day, I'd be surprised to think of as myself.

My tongue slumps in my mouth again,
soft as a bastard feather,
reluctant to comment
on the patterns of change from attraction
to aversion and back again,
or how the moon, wearing
her off-the-shoulder number, slips

those bare shadows down to my feet –
my ghost preceding me, like a magnet.
The swans begin to nest, or snorting water
turn like hefty lanterns
gazing around themselves
as headlights of late traffic, brash crescendos,
rally for expiring destinations.

For nothing withstands this coolness
closing in, so constantly remote.
Say you'd live the night out with me
on the dark, hymnal lake, to hear it talking
towards the edges of itself – that voice of the waters
so completely unbothered,
syllabic and out for the count.

II

Sidereal

A desire for a house with a glass roof
made me get up and walk the streets
at four in the morning. The moon was looking
as if she'd passed a surprising comment
at some conference that was drawing to a close.

It seems strange for the world to have turned
and be facing the other way again.
Why sleep through these great rotations?
The night sky sometimes likes a good conversation,
and gives me plenty of time to speak before thinking.

Tentsmuir

For Canon Brendan Clover

I

Behind the house the dark roams
in a shape called forest.
Alert like a battalion
it's camped as close as possible
to the sea. Fast becoming
its new recruit, I'm caught
at magnetic north
where Tentsmuir tells itself by name,
is nature replete in her skirt
of scrag and sand.
In the *apothēkē* of a northerly landscape,
the road here is purposeful,
must be taken like medicine –
a whim will not do it.

II

Forget the idea of a cure – what's needed
is more like time-breaking allegiance,
which perhaps means endurance,
or kneeling by the fire to probe an old saying –
'therefore can I lack nothing'.
This green acre – the space – the yield of it –
makes light work of a burden
a moon's rainbow magnifies
(I've felt my lips thicken, beak-like,
my eyes become almost lidless
as the land enters me, rooting for resonance).
They say the poison is the promise,
so I must carry my complaint
to the high court of silence, and rest it there.

III

Words returned to … with the stub
of a pencil. First light.
Then dark. The drawn curtain
hides the moon and stars,
hides the moon and stars. *Selah.*
Like the beaver, I've built
my burrow with more than one way
in and out. Happier in water
but not without land in sight.
First forest, consonant with dense reserve,
or store-house, say, like Hebraic text.
So much volume to such small weight.
Heavy lightness…feather of lead…
dust of gold darkens overhead.

IV

Losing my way, I'm haunted
from the inside by owl eyes,
glide and down-sight
of deft sparrowhawk.
I've grown used to things unknown,
have come to expect them,
like the body's shock, its lyric lightning,
the vigil in the paradox,
meaning, there's no need
to leave a light on all night.
Be grateful for the way the rural
surprises with memory of raised host,
the bright intelligence of trance,
like snow on water in real time.

V

To stay under cover
then open out from cleared
ground. It's 'skin for skin'
in this part of the world –
the wind is full of teeth
and works us hard.
Be sustained by the night-speak
of birds, their sounding-out
from the unguent, listening dark.
Not the obstacle removed
but the journey through –
blessed *in absentia*
by a light touch,
or something written in sand.

VI

Outgoing in an incoming way,
Tentsmuir washes off on me, absolves
the bearing of past place
with a more-from-less saltiness.
And slowly, with loose change
for old rope, let the boat out, let it go;
un-mended but amenable,
unwinding from the taught length.
The bones in the braes have blossomed
by dew of light leaked into them.
I recall conduits of solace. The sub-croft
with a stellate niche, like star of thorn.
And the hands that covered me were as word
for word, warm and broad as palm leaves.

VII

Lungs grow back their forests,
rich in iron and lichen.
I am, I am, is all that remains –
the old call-notes fail.
To break down and build
from cleared ground a new life,
Vita Nuova, neither circle nor spiral,
heaven nor hell, is this what's called for?
I will pick no bones with the buzzards.
Hast thou considered…?
don't start that, tell me only
what I should make from these potsherds,
a mock mosaic cathedral floor?
a path through the trees?

VIII

Light Meter

His letters come typed, referring me to Shelley
on Keats, that water might be better
for writing in than sand. And I see
that he is somehow like water, still
flowing around my insistence like water.
I've looked into his rippling skim
of thought-print, a dark fixative –
and what develops is the image of Ezekiel,
that look on the prophet's face
as the waters flowed out
from under the threshold of the Temple.
Is he smiling? Are his eyebrows raised?
There are limits to the taking of measurements
and then, *it goes over your shoulders*.

IX

‘Firebrand’, a handsome man with silver-blue eyes,
motions toward ‘Ana’s Highway’ –
which turns out to be submerged fields
and a way of stepping on small rocks
encircled by hard water.
As the water recedes it turns out to be
all about home – the Suffolk coastline,
flint and furrow, and paths I didn’t know
were there. But I’m deflected out of sleep
before I can walk them, left with a cut-dry
absence where oat grass would be.
Steps are stricken and uneven until
I think to look for some other path –
the easy sand, say, at the cuff of the sea.

X

For ‘Leuchars’, read
‘place of the rushes’.
Say love is scar and tincture,
driftwood, a long wait
for a song played back
from the everlasting –
read *and darkness*
covered the land. It drank up the sea.
The heart is tempted back
to its hiding place.
Ecclesiastes says, ‘Much study
is weariness of the flesh’.
For ‘moon’, read:
close the book, and look up.

XI

You arrived part way
into the hour. There was something
of the falling of rain
about you, a rook's glossy
mischief slipping through
inchoate dark. You leaned over,
asked what I was writing,
a light sweat above your lips,
then I let you fill out the name
of a place to pass through
where bird's feet
are like clusters of keys
I could reach for but never grasp.
And that's the whole gravity of the task.

XII

To walk out of the sea
is to make a sound close
to the seal's bark – that bubble-
swallowing, well-rounded sum
of dive and deep. A gulp against
my shins, heels winged with water,
I push towards the glint
and glean of the strewn shore
where my shoes wait side by side,
dog-sniffed in sunlight.
And I remember a voice
heard that one time – neither wave
nor siren, but the sea herself –
or was it Venus being born again.

XIII

Revision

And so I agree to write in water,
the nib of my pen dipped
in the darkness as far out
as Polaris, withdrawn
and notating in cuneiform –
if you will allow, for how else
am I to credit you who'll take no credit?
And what develops is the image of —,
rivers flowing from his shoulders.
Little did I know
that out of the corner of my eye,
and so late in the day,
I would see him arrive,
intent to replenish with lustral humour.

XIV

Past the murmured liturgy of corn fields
and into your dark tent of listening:
bird call like click of dripping rain
or, 'heard in our land', turtle doves saying
their cloud-shush night-night,
summer airs bred from deep
in the density of breast-bone.
How can you not have stayed me?
I will spring from you like an orchid.
You have fed back into yourself the steps
I sought to retrace, bled from me like resin.
My nadir, root-place,
lone vocabulary of homestead.

A View of Christ in the House of Martha and Mary

(Diego Velázquez)

And within the house, beyond the space
for sitting and eating, beyond
the plate of peeled eggs,
the white paper glove of the undressed clove,

the fish-wet table, the wet, unflinching fish eyes,
the slowly shriveling chilli,
there is the otherness of a lit room.
Martha's heart troubles her –

despite all counsel, she would seem
the least blessed, unnourished
in the simple foreground of exclusion,

yet, to our eyes, she is closest,
should we wish to savour what is close;
she is the cynosure, the painting's open invitation.

Two Roses

To compliment Edinburgh's vertiginous
stonework, I get so high on coffee
my heart becomes a hot bloom,
its one muscle pushing against the fire-proof door
of a compartment it is best *not* to try and leave,
pushing for the dark expression
of your arms; how they'd balloon me up
to view this city from the February rooftops!

But my legs pace up and down the Canongate
past the statue of Robert Fergusson
strolling out of his grave,
one button missing from his brittle-grey coat.
And so I'll leave the smaller rose with him,
before its furled heat grows too much on me.

Saturn in Cancer, Waning Moon in Scorpio

In the twelve star hotel the holiday makers are unnerved by the guest with high cheekbones who comes down for dinner with a strange fetish object around her neck. She's wearing more and more black these days. Her companion has a reservation – *The Suite of the Crab*, strictly for newly-weds. He doesn't like it much. They only serve seafood. Constantly checking his watch, he grumbles that it's not in his nature to sleep on a waterbed, but he'll do his best. He's holding something in his hands that catches the light. She snatches it back. They argue their way across the threshold, until, after the considerable give and take, he turns retrograde and beds-down on the floor.

Antibiotic

(Isle of Skye Music Festival)

And as there is no chance of sleep
you spend the hours considering all the sounds
rain could be against the fabric of the tent:
the tuning of a radio, the static of a zillion midges,
applause, cellular warfare, crumpled foil, the barking of a dog
who wants sometimes just to stop and not have to go on.

You'll seek your own addition to the consensus
of the audible, until the river you're pitched by
learns to recognize your tread,
your unfinished sentences, your deep breaths,
takes your inhibition as its own
wanting sometimes just to stop and not have to go on.

The worsening of the braes confounds you.
They blacken, faceless, and you can't figure out
how to look at them, or how ignore them,
whether they are beautiful, or terrible, or if they could cure you.
And so you lie there sighing like a slide guitar
wanting sometimes just to stop and not have to go on.

Moonlight on the Dial of the Day

"It's not the opium, Southey, it's my mind.
I spend each day trying not to think."

No one would wish a train journey on a budgerigar,
so just as well it turns out to be someone's mobile.
But now I'll be needing my portion of window
thank you through which to stare at the silent world –

sea villages, and fields hemmed with pink lights,
all of Nature replete in her time-trapped
opiate moment. Morning, noon and night
she's like this, a world we can never quite reach.

Administered in small doses, your messages,
barren and soundless, lunate a cold comfort.
Even our two names are reduced to a single letter,

the same letter that marks the spot where,
if I have to, I'd bury with branny hands
this excellent habit of love under the earth.

The Canal at Claverton

(Job 13:4)

Imagine the false comforters waving us off
still eloquently stammering from their moral maze,
those *physicians of no value* who rant
about the dangers of sleeping on water,

and we'll park up, climb aboard and absorb
this perspective on its articulate clearing,
its gloss and uplift around the prow.
I've said it before, but consider the Fates are with us,

or rather how they look out from our eyes,
or better still are nothing but the light
that lives inside our looking, and the trees
that double down towards reed beds

will double down in parallel with the timing
we're just beginning to reach
between your clock and mine.
Say this, and they'll bind us side by side.

But it's not hypnosis we've fallen under
nor an invocation to a god of grapes and litany;
words are just words,
and you've heard this once already.

Falls of Inversnaid

I doubt we could say now
that the water thunders down,

but rather, beginning at some spot
of rockrose, moss and bracken,

it *believes*, cannot do other
than turn towards its larger cause

and, from scintillate wit and flaunt
around the dark roll of rock,

come to serve the steadier life of the loch,
bringing the over and above back down

to where they have meaning
for us – cloud and mountain mood

made equable in the same calm mirror –
until we lose ourselves again

in the lift and fall of the water,
its let-be and lintel of light.

Balquhidder Firs

Trooping the colour green,
they've reached the shores of the loch.

The first among them bend
as if, in a shimmer of silver, fish

give oracle on how to proceed,
when to advance, and when to retreat.

They've taken the high hill,
they speak with low cloud in low voices,

it's not clear how many of them there are.
Yet this we have in common:

unable to continue, we might,
at least, stand to attention –

we are confronted with silence, a sheer drop.
There is no way round it.

A Right Angle

Down to the level of stone,
to the wrought core of the city,
the sun sets off aqua-oxide
against a soft, palpable
bruise of cloud,
gold-leafed and edging away.

You watch the bobbing heads outside
turn into the dress and fuss
of coffee drinkers,
their faces coronal around raised cups,
and push yourself upright
in your furry chair:

to us the sun is silent
yet it roars in the unsettled
heart of its furnace, stoked
by its own self-wounding
self-hallowed chorus.
Sipping a strong roast, you decide

it's best to bear with these dissonances,
outwit them even, expect every dusk
to be heartbreaking when *Artus* appears
asleep on the ground.
Pull the buttons off his high-
collared coat, and run.

After Ruan Ji

sit up, sleepless
down-tuning the strings

the moon,
        strongest of all
allegiances, holds itself up
to my mirror
        gives me a tilted smile:
don't say anything about the sky

bats circling
        a white-washed house
and fan-tailed fish
in a silent loch
        cannot – surrounded by darkness –
fit any outlines together

yet still – they've seen me –
        and on their loom of echoes
play back
the eternal moment
        of sorrow
until I am wide awake,

the wine,
bruising the glass.

Sandpipers

How easy it is to imitate
the sandpipers,
their breasts the same colour
as the breaking waves –
so you'll not see
how I've done this,
but consider it the outcome
of my being off-set
against the same mirrored
cuff of the North Sea
where once you threw your first cries
back to the absolute –
it all happens so quickly
and to watch these creatures
who without consciousness of self
inhabit eternity is as close
to *agape* as we'll ever get –
so when I've left, remember me
by how light they are
on their legs,
how they look at you
with a tilted head.

Rainbow Weather

Incanting a sound unfathomably of this world
the boats, low in the harbour,
said all there was to say about ups and downs.
I liked the fact that such a sound is what comes
of a little buffeting, and thought it true to life,
like the rise and fall of blood sugar
I'd call the body's rainbow weather.
It was always one thing after another –
and the only way we could be in the world, you and I,
was to invent metaphor out of the real, consolidate it,
thereby seeming to make the real less mutable.
Yet for you that sound which inhabited
the long afternoon the way salt inhabits air
was more than true to life: boat, wind
and the music the two made together exemplified
the *pneuma*, or *Paraclete*, or something, something
not seen, not visibly created – like dark matter;
and this only proved that metaphor, far from
fixing the real, makes it even more nebulous.
Your thought, that is to say, seemed always
to brood above the face of the waters.

We stepped across the causeway for the better part
of the beach. The gulls you said were like quavers
detaching from an invisible stave
sweeping in on us with their horrid recital
which copied the exact same message
sent by your nerve-endings to your synapses.
The only way, I said, of dealing with this is –
if you can imagine it – to upturn each crescent moon
that governs the swing of your moods
into a crucible, and start from there, quite scientifically;
study your charts and watch your compass
and say to yourself there is no stain
that cannot dissolve in water,
no clinker of habit, no fixed residue.

By this time we'd drunk the last of the ale
and you'd ditched the cigarettes in a bin by the car park.
As you rolled the empty bottle across the tarmac
it curved inertly on the path of its own barmy ecliptic.
We were done with talking, except to amuse ourselves

by making up names for boats in the harbour:
Antares, The Sea Ghost, The Mazzaroth;
names suddenly real in the slurring rain.
Arcturus, Cygnus, The God Help Us;
their hulls like cupped hands, hands of oblation.
Kyrie, The Magdalene, The Chimay Blue;
and that was quite enough, by then I had to shush you.

Appendix A

PABLO NERUDA: From 'The Book of Questions', trans William O'Daly

LXVI

Do the *o*'s of the locomotive
cast smoke, fire and steam?

In which language does rain fall
over tormented cities?

At dawn, which smooth syllables
does the ocean air repeat?

Is there a star more wide open
than the word *poppy*?

Are there two fangs sharper
than the syllables of *jackal*?

LXVII

Can you love me, syllabary,
and give me a meaningful kiss?

Is a dictionary a sepulchre
or a sealed honeycomb?

In which window did I remain
watching buried time?

Or is what I see afar
what I have not yet lived?

LXVIII

When does the butterfly read
what flies written on its wings?

So it can understand its itinerary,
which letters does the bee know?

And with which numbers does the ant
subtract its dead soldiers?

What are the cyclones called
when they stand still?

LXIX

Do thoughts of love fall
into extinct volcanoes?

Is a crater an act of vengeance
or a punishment of the earth?

With which stars do they go on speaking,
the rivers that never reach the sea? [208]

[208] Pablo Neruda, *The Book of Questions / El libro de las preguntas,* trans. William O'Daly (Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2001), pp.66-69.

Appendix B

W.H. AUDEN : From, 'In Memory of W.B Yeats'

III

Earth, receive an honoured guest:
William Yeats is laid to rest.
Let the Irish vessel lie
Emptied of its poetry.

[Auden later deleted the next three stanzas.]

Time that is intolerant
Of the brave and the innocent,
And indifferent in a week
To a beautiful physique,

Worships language and forgives
Everyone by whom it lives;
Pardons cowardice, conceit,
Lays its honours at their feet.

Time that with this strange excuse
Pardoned Kipling and his views,
And will pardon Paul Claudel,
Pardons him for writing well.

In the nightmare of the dark
All the dogs of Europe bark,
And the living nations wait,
Each sequestered in its hate;

Intellectual disgrace
Stares from every human face,
And the seas of pity lie
Locked and frozen in each eye.

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice.

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress.

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountains start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise. [209]

[209] W.H. Auden, *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957* (London: Faber, 1966), pp.141-142.

Appendix C

ROBIN ROBERTSON: 'The Eel', from *Swithering*

The eel, siren
of the coldest seas, leaves behind the Baltic
for our warmer waters,
reaching our estuaries, our rivers,
and lancing upstream hard against the current
from branch to branch,
vein to vein, narrowing
ever inward, ever deeper
into the heart of the sandstone,
threading the thick, channelling mud until
– one morning – a dart of light, loosed
through the chestnut trees,
ignites her glimmer, her muscle,
there in the dead pools
in the pleated grooves that stream the sides
of the Apennines down to Romagna;
the eel: firebrand, whiplash, shot
bolt of the earth's desire,
aimed, by these dried-up gullies and river-beds,
at the dark paradise of her spawning;
she is the green spirit looking for life
in the tight jaw of drought and desolation,
she is the spark which says
that all begins where all appears to end,
here, with this charred, half-buried stick;
the quick rainbow
a twin to your own bright eyes:
shining out
among a generation mired in mud –
can you not see
that she is your sister? [210]

[210] Robin Robertson, *Swithering* (London: Picador, 2006), pp.10-11

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