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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Forming the imagination: Reading the Psalms with poets

Ethan C. Jones

New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, New Orleans, LA, USA
Email: ejones@nobts.edu

Abstract

Genre, parallelism and canonical shaping have long been important to Psalms studies. Scholarly advances on these fronts are easily observed. Instead of working the same ground once more, this article sets off on a different path. It aims to read Hebrew poetry, especially the Psalter, with poets. It intends to listen carefully to three influential voices: George Herbert (1593–1633), R. S. Thomas (1913–2000) and Malcolm Guite (1957–). These poets help shape our imagination and prepare us to read the Psalms as poetry. Specifically, this results in sounds, repetitions, the constraining and freeing possibilities of forms, and theological themes taking centre stage in experiencing the poetry of Psalms.

Keywords: Malcolm Guite; George Herbert; poetry; Psalms; theology; R. S. Thomas

> So all my best is dressing old words new,
> Spending again what is already spent.
> (Shakespeare, Sonnet 76)

Gunkel, Lowth and Childs – these are the voices that have dominated Psalms studies.[1] Put differently, form criticism, parallelism and canon have overshadowed all else. One would search in vain to find a recent introduction to Psalms that does not primarily (or exclusively) explicate the Psalter in these ways.[2] It has become standard that publications on Psalms repeat previous introductions with only minor adjustments made to sub-genres, types of parallelism and the state of the canonical readings.[3]

[1]E.g. Crenshaw claims 'Modern study of Psalms owes more to the insights of Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932) than to any other scholar'. James L. Crenshaw, *The Psalms: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), p. 80.

[2]Jacobson and Jacobson introduce and explicate the poetry of Psalms almost exclusively by way of parallelism. Rolf A. Jacobson and Karl N. Jacobson, *Invitation to the Psalms: A Reader's Guide for Discovery and Engagement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), pp. 9–20.

[3]I limit myself here to literature on Psalms, and not Hebrew poetry writ large, for two reasons. First, this literature, particularly introductions to Psalms, gives us a clearer picture of what scholars consider as the main features of the poetry of Psalms. Second, I have begun to anticipate less familiarity with key scholarship on Hebrew poetry among those in biblical studies and beyond. In a previous article I introduced my topic by quoting Robert Alter. An anonymous reviewer suggested I remove the quotation and replace it

Yet we need to be quite clear: the Psalms, simply put, are poetry.[4] Crucially, poetry is more than parallelism. More to the point, though, *biblical* poetry is more than parallelism.[5] This claim, unfortunately, appears oblique in the eyes of some biblical scholars. Examples are all too easy to cull.[6]

As such, this paper calls for biblical scholars and theologians to attune their ears and set their sights on the *poetry* of Psalms. This is not to the exclusion of other currents of research, however. Rather, it is a recentring of Psalms literature. It is a pounding of a path that is old and overgrown, not treading on the recent tracks of others. In other words, I am not arguing for (yet) another finely nuanced category of parallelism or genre. To advance this realignment, I proceed with an intentionally indirect argument; I claim that we can become better readers of Psalms via English poetry. This assertion is not novel. New, however, is that my contention does not hinge primarily on the question of metre.[7]

To shine a light on poetry, I offer the writings of three priest-poets over the centuries: George Herbert (1593–1633), R. S. Thomas (1913–2000) and Malcolm Guite (1957-). In doing so, I highlight what is both obvious and common to these poems, such as sounds, structure and images. This particular selection of priest-poets has several advantages. First, these poets, as experts of their craft, give us some of the best of the so-called religious poetry.[8] Second, they deal both directly and indirectly with Psalms in their reflections.[9] In the remainder of the article, I take these meaningful aesthetic

with a commentator, as the reviewer was unaware of the work of Alter on poetry. So, in such reality (however frustrating), I will not discuss the finer points in the excellent scholarship of Geller, Watson, Alter, Berlin, O'Connor and Dobbs-Allsopp, but rather keep the conversation within Psalms scholarship only.

[4]F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, 'Poetry of the Psalms', in *The Oxford Handbook on the Psalms* (Oxford: OUP, 2014), p. 80. Though cf. Jerome Creach, *Discovering Psalms: Content, Interpretation, Reception* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2020), p. 28.

[5]In *The Bible as Literature*, for example, the authors dedicate their discussion of poetry solely to the tradition of Lowth, by which they have in mind parallelism (see Johan Gabel, Charles Wheeler and Anthony York, *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction*, 3rd edn (Oxford: OUP, 1996), p. 42). For a richer reading of Lowth in contrast to much of the history of reception, see F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry* (Oxford: OUP, 2015). Cf. Robert Holmstedt, 'Hebrew Poetry and the Appositive Style: Parallelism, *Requiescat in pace*', *Vetus Testamentum* 69 (2019), pp. 617–48.

[6]The following is a list of scholars who introduce the *poetry* of Psalms with near exclusivity to parallelism: Jacobson and Jacobson, *Invitation to the Psalms*; Creach, *Discovering Psalms*; Mark Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2007); C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: Poetic Books* (Chicago: Moody, 1988); Crenshaw, *The Psalms*; W. H. Bellinger, *Psalms: A Guide to Studying the Psalter*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012). This is not to say that they are unaware of the other features of poetry. Their choice of presentation is nevertheless telling.

[7]The idea of metre in Hebrew poetry has on the whole been a closed case (see esp. Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry*). Though to belabour the point once more, see Michael W. Martin, 'Does Ancient Hebrew Poetry Have Meter?' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 140 (2021), pp. 503–29.

[8]It must be said, however, that Thomas' 'successes are only barely audible in the United States'. Jeffery Alan Triggs, 'Halo upon the Bones: R.S. Thomas's Journey to the Interior', *The Literary Review* 32 (1989), p. 141.

[9]Wilcox calls Herbert's biblical inspiration 'subterranean' and 'hidden . . . deep within the workings of the text' (Helen Wilcox, *The English Poems of George Herbert* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), p. xxvii). Herbert e.g. 'reveals his indebtedness to David the poet at the same time that he realizes his intention to write beautiful poems of his own' (ibid.). Herbert does write '*as if* he were a psalmist' (Alastair G. Hunter, *An Introduction to the Psalms* [London: T&T Clark, 2008), p. 69). In fact, David Jeffrey finds Herbert's poetry a commentary on 'the *totum integrum* of the Word of God': *Scripture and the English Poetic Imagination*

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trends and contemplate possible analogues in the Psalms. We begin with the most basic (sounds) and conclude with theology and themes within poetry.

Sounding poetry

As a way of warding off any similarity between English poetry and Psalms, tropes of rhyme triumph.[10] English typically rhymes, and Hebrew does not.[11] Therefore, eschew any thought of rhyme in the Bible; read the lines as *A and what's more B*. So, the treatments go. This, however, is a reduction of both English and Hebrew.

Poetry presupposes sound – an observation that is both trite and true.[12] Yet the poet can (and does) leverage sound to serve their purpose.[13] For example, Malcolm Guite, a poet adept in the music of words, opines, 'poets are always enchanted by the sound of the language they use'.[14] He demonstrates his expertise in 'Whoever Welcomes':[15]

> *Welcome,* the *word* is always on your lips,
> Each *welcome warms* another one inside,
> An open door where arms are open *wide*.

The alliterative 'w' appears throughout. These words swirl joyously in the ear. Yet sound serves not only pleasure (or memory), but stresses the imagery. The reader/listener who is pondering the 'welcoming' feels invited by picturing the invitation as anything but cold and narrow.[16] We also consider Guite's poem, 'First and Last' (ll. 9–14):[17]

> What is *this, then*, we say to one another,
> Planning careers and doling status out,
> Ranging *ourselves* and *others on* the ladder,

(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), p. 125. Cf. Chana Bloch, *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985). On Guite's clear use of scripture in his poetry, see *David's Crown: Sounding the Psalms* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2021).

[10]Futato e.g. defines Hebrew poetry as parallel and imaged, in contrast to the rhymed and metred English poetry, stating flatly that rhyme 'is not a feature of Hebrew poetry' (*Psalms*, pp. 24–5). Similarly, Bellinger begins his presentation of poetry of the Psalter by comparing the rhyme of English and the parallelism of Hebrew (Bellinger, *Psalms,* p. 12). However, he does rightly observe 'repetition, alliteration, and assonance' in the Psalms, though these are not at all regarded as primary (ibid., p. 14).

[11]E.g. I may agree with Grant, who writes, 'psalms do not rhyme in Hebrew (at least not often). While rhyme is often found in English-language poetry, the key dynamic of Hebrew poetry is parallelism.' This unfortunately juxtaposes rhyme (as if it were the key feature of English poetry) with parallelism. David Firth and Jamie Grant, *Words and the Word: Explorations in Biblical Interpretation and Literary Theory* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), p. 212.

[12]The poet and critic Robert Pinsky states that it 'is the nature of poetry to emphasize constantly that the physical sounds of words come from a particular body, one at a time, in a certain order'. Robert Pinsky, 'Responsibilities of the Poet', *Critical Inquiry* 13 (1987), p. 422.

[13]See Ethan C. Jones, 'Sound and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible: Implications for Exegesis', *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 47 (2021), pp. 19–36, and the literature cited therein.

[14]From his *Comment* magazine interview, https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/from-imagination-to-incarnation/.

[15]Malcolm Guite, 'Whoever Welcomes', in *Parable and Paradox: Sonnets on the Sayings of Jesus and Other Poems* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2016), p. 37, ll. 1–3; emphasis added.

[16]There are certainly more sounds doing work here; the consonance 'l' and end rhyme are just two examples.

[17]Malcolm Guite, 'First and Last', in *Parable and Paradox*, p. 72, ll. 9–14; emphasis added.

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With fanfares for the *climber* and the *clout*?
Best drop our trumpet, still our *banging drums*
And listen for your *welcome*, *when* it comes.

Each line above has alliteration within it. Perhaps most powerful are the objects of *ranging* (l. 11) as well as the pair *climber* and *clout* (l. 12). In the former, the poet imagines the inane objectifying of people. In the latter, the image of ascending coheres with status, and then both are questioned. The upward metaphor of the ladder is aurally arrested in line 13 with the *dropping* of the trumpet. The frivolous music connects via sound: *best drop* our trumpet – still our *banging drums*. Sounds here are not merely building blocks of words, but part and parcel of poetic rhetoric.

Guite employs sounds that do more than hint at imagery and meaning in 'Reversed Thunder' (ll. 1–4, 13–14):[18]

This light is *muffled*, *muted*, *murky*, dense,
Thick with a *threat* of *thunder* unreleased.
The *clouds* are darkening, the air grows tense,
The *coming* storm is lowering in the east…

But even as the skies are *rent* and *riven*
I find that lightening *rod* is earthed in heaven.

These sounds help anticipate, propel and colour the poem and its meaning. The poem moves from the bilabial nasal 'm', giving a clouded image through sonics, to the striking 'r' sound that connects heaven and earth.

Bringing us back to biblical studies, Dobbs-Allsopp observes, 'the play of sound remains an underappreciated dimension of biblical poetics'.[19] Below is but a sample of how sounds reach rhetorical heights in the Psalms.[20] Psalm 31:6 reads:

bĕyādĕkā ʾapqîd rûḥî
pādîtâ ʾôtî yhwh ʾêl ʾĕmet

In your hand I cast my spirit
You redeemed me, O YHWH, God of truth

The A line intertwines with the B logically and sonically. The psalmist offers the self over to YHWH (A line), in part, because YHWH has redeemed him (B line). The *peh* and *dalet* of the *hifil yiqtol* (*ʾapqîd*), which is stressing either a continual or future act, corresponds with the *peh* and *dalet* of the *qal qatal* (*pādîtâ*), which I find as a completed past-time action of YHWH.[21] In Psalm 33:10, we read:

[18]Malcolm Guite, 'Reversed Thunder', in *After Prayer: New Sonnets and Other Poems* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2019), p. 12, ll. 1–4, 13–14. Notably, this poem is inspired by one image from George Herbert's famous 'Prayer (I)'. See George Herbert, *The Complete Poetry*, ed. John Drury and Victoria Moul (Milton Keynes: Penguin Random House UK, 2015), pp. 48–9.

[19]Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry*, p. 150.

[20]Pss 22:5a; 52:8; 128:5, 6; 131:1a, 2c, 2d; 142:7a, 7c, 8a; 143:10c, 11b.

[21]That is, *p* and *d* in transliteration, respectively.

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yhwh hēpîr ʿăṣat-gôyim
hēnîʾ maḥšĕbôt ʿammîm

YHWH broke the counsel of nations
He frustrated the thoughts of peoples

The sonic symmetry is easy to hear in this verse. Aside from the vocative (YHWH), both lines begin with *hifil qatal* (*hēpîr*; *hēnîʾ*), signalled consonantally with *heh* prefix and *yod*.[22] It moves then to feminine nouns in construct, both having final *tav* (*ʿăṣat*; *maḥšĕbôt*), and finally to plural nouns, with final *mem* (*gôyim*; *ʿammîm*).[23] The completeness of thought in the verse is achieved by parallelism *and sound*.

Moving now to the ninth and tenth verses of Psalm 141:

šomrēnî mîdê paḥ yāqĕšû lî
ûmôqĕšôt pōʿălê ʾāwen
yippĕlû bĕmakmōrāyw rĕšāʿîm
yaḥad ʾānōkî ʿad-ʾeʿĕbôr

Keep me from the hands of the trap the set for me
And from the lures – doers of iniquity.
The wicked will fall in their nets
Yet I alone pass them by.

The A line above is scattered with *yods*.[24] While one might dismiss that observation, the sonic movement of the next two lines challenges us to see intent in the poetic choices. The use of *qof* and *sheen* in the *qatal* (*yāqĕšû*) finds symmetry in the noun (*ûmôqĕšôt*) in the B line.[25] More telling, however, is the appearance of *peh* and *lamed* in the construct phrase (*pōʿălê ʾāwen*) and the *yiqtol* (*yippĕlû*) of the following line.[26] Such sounds tie together the thought: the iniquitous shall not succeed. Such a summary, however reductive, arises from the sonic cohesion of the poem. This brief survey from both English poetry and the Psalms shows that poets throughout the millennia leverage sound to shape not only words, but rhetoric.

On repetition

The use of repetition touches on sound, structure and the craft of poetry. It can help the listener/reader appreciate the cohesive nature of a poem. It may also be a tool to set up expectations for the poet either to resolve the poem or challenge the reader. An example appears in Herbert's poet 'The Banquet'. In it, he repeats the word 'sweet' and its derivatives, beginning with line 1: [27]

Welcome *sweet* and sacred cheer
Welcome dear…. (ll. 1–2)

[22]*Heh* appears as *h* and *yod* as *î* and *y* in transliteration.
[23]*Tav* is *t*, and *mem* is *m*.
[24]In transliteration as *y*, *ê* and *î*.
[25]The transliteration of these is *q* and *š*, respectively.
[26]That is, *p* and *l* in transliteration.
[27]George Herbert, 'The Banquet', in *The Complete Poetry*, pp. 173–4; emphasis added.

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O what *sweetness* from the bowel [7]
Fills my soul …. (ll. 7–8)
Or hat *sweetness* in the bread
Made a head
To subdue the smell of sin…. (ll. 13–15)
Such a *sweetness* to impart:
Only God, who gives perfumes,
Flesh assumes, (ll. 21–3)
Sweetly he doth meet my taste (l. 39)

The poem saunters through the literal and metaphorical taste of sweets. Tempted by the materials of the world, Herbert contrasts this with his experience with God.

Repetition appears frequently in the Psalter. One well-known example is the opening and closing lines of Psalm 8 (vv. 2, 10) both of which read:[28]

yhwh ʾădōnênû mâ-ʾadîr šimkā bĕkol-hāʾāreṣ
O YHWH, our lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.

Psalm 29 has consistent and significant repetition. The first is (Ps 29:1–2a):

hābû layhwh bĕnê ʾēlîm
hābû layhwh kābôd wāʿōz
hābû layhwh kĕbôd šĕmô

Ascribe to YHWH, sons of God!
Ascribe to YHWH glory and honor!
Ascribe to YHWH the glory of his name!

The repetition above is obvious. Yet, it is possible that the repetition is doing something more than simply repeating. Consider the phrase *qôl yhwh* in the same psalm:[29]

qôl yhwh ʿal-hammāyim
qôl-yhwh bakōaḥ
qôl yhwh behādār
qôl yhwh šōbēr ʾărāzîm
qôl-yhwh ḥōṣēb lahăbôt ʾēš
qôl yhwh yāḥîl midbār
qôl yhwh yĕḥôlēl ʾayyālôt

The *voice of YHWH* is over the waters
The *voice of YHWH* in strength
The *voice of YHWH* in honor
The *voice of YHWH* breaks cedars
The *voice of YHWH* hews flames of fire

[28]See also Pss 120 (*what*), 123 (*eyes of*), 124 (*if / then*), 126 (*return / exiles*), 127 (*unless / then*), 134 (*bless*), 139 (*O Yhwh*), 148–50 (*praise Yhwh*).

[29]See also Guite's own poem as reflection on Ps 29. Malcolm Guite, 'Psalm 29: XXIX *Afferte Domino*', in *David's Crown*, p. 29.

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The *voice of YHWH* shakes the wilderness
The *voice of YHWH* causes the deer to give birth
(Ps 29:3a, 4a, 4b, 5a, 7, 8a, 9a)

There is no doubt about the topic of Psalm 29; the poet's choice covers the spectrum: *YHWH's voice* has power over the trees as well as the animals. Repetition drives the point home in a way that an all-encompassing statement (e.g. the *voice of YHWH* is over 'everything') cannot.

The reverberation of vocabulary is also present in the opening two verses of Psalm 136:

hôdû layhwh kî-ṭôb kî lĕʿôlām ḥasdô
hôdû lēʾlōhê hāʾĕlōhîm kî-ṭôb kî lĕʿôlām ḥasdô

Give thanks to YHWH for he is good, *for his steadfast love endures forever*.
Give thanks to the God of gods, *for his steadfast love endures forever*.

Similarly, Psalm 121 repeats its keyword, *šmr* 'to keep':

ʾal-yānûm šōmĕrekā
hinnēh lōʾ-yānûm wĕlōʾ yîšān
šômēr yiśrāʾēl
yhwh šōmĕrekā
yhwh yišmorkā mikkol-rāʿ
yišmōr ʾet-napšekā
yhwh yišmor-ṣēʾtĕkā ûbôʾekā

Your *keeper* will not *slumber*
Look, he will not *slumber*, and not sleep
The *keeper* of Israel
YHWH is your *keeper*
YHWH will *keep* you from all harm
He will *keep* your life
YHWH will *keep* your coming and your going.
(Ps 121:3b, 4a, b, 5a, 7a, b, 8a)

Repeating a word or phrase is one tool that poets have used throughout the ages. As mentioned, the mere service to memory is an anaemic supposition for its presence. The poems, while not essays or epistles, are nonetheless making arguments. Repetition aids the speaker in achieving the intended rhetorical end, be it a prayer heard and answered, or the community (the audience) re-establishing their worship to YHWH (e.g. Pss 29, 121, 136).

Shapes of poetry

George Herbert is well known for his artistry of shaping a poem physically.[30] Yet beyond such poetic architecture, we should observe an oft-used structure of his poetry –

[30]A particularly beautiful illustration is 'Easter-wings'. See Herbert, *The Complete Poetry*, p. 46.

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the sonnet. This form varies in length, but typically comprises some fourteen lines, often with lines ending in rhyme. The sonnet sustains a number of virtues, including 'brevity, clarity, concentration, and capacity for paradox'.[31] Don Paterson, a Scottish poet, states, 'a sonnet is a paradox, a little squared circle, a mandala that invites our meditation'.[32] One such example is 'Peace' by Malcolm Guite:[33]

> Not as the world gives, not the victor's peace
> Not to be fought for, hard-won, or achieved,
> Just grace and mercy, gratefully received:
> An undeserved and unforeseen release,
> As the cold chains of memory and wrath
> Fall from our hearts before we are aware,
> Their rusty locks all picked by patient prayer,
> Till closed doors open, and we see a path
> Descending from a source we cannot see;
> A path that must be taken, hand in hand,
> Only by those, forgiving and forgiven,
> Who see their saviour in their enemy.
> So reach for me. We'll cross our broken land,
> And make each other bridges back to heaven.

The pattern of the lines (ABBA), the overall structure (fourteen lines) and end rhyme are all stock-in-trade of the Italian sonnet.[34] The form constrains the poet, while being pliable to their prowess. Indeed, Guite explores the concept of constraints in his poem 'Emily Dickinson's Desk'.[35] It begins:

> Perhaps the limits of this desk –
> Its strict restraint of space –
> Informed the poet's take and task
> And turned restraint to grace.

On the sonnet form proper, Guite, like many poets, breaks or has a turn (*volta*) at line 8 (again, usually of fourteen lines).[36] This *volta* is a 'change in feel or mood, a new stage or development in thought and feeling'.[37] Returning to 'Peace' above, we

[31]Malcolm Guite, *Sounding in Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year* (Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2012), p. xi.

[32]Don Paterson, *101 Sonnets from Shakespeare to Heaney* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), p. xiii; quoted in Guite, *Sounding the Seasons*, p. xii.

[33]Guite, *After Prayer*, p. 17.

[34]Other forms of the sonnet are Occitan, Spenserian and Shakespearean.

[35]Guite, *After Prayer*, p. 53, ll. 5–8.

[36]For Herbert's use of turns, Wilcox observes a key one in 'The Holdfast'. See Wilcox, *The English Poems of George Herbert*, p. xxix.

[37]Guite, *Sounding the Seasons*, p. xii. Elizabeth Clarke notes that 'Some shifts of mood or perspective are enshrined within the disciplines of form itself', namely, the sonnet. Clarke also highlights the ability of the last couplet to reverse the previous twelve lines, seen most effectively seen in Herbert's 'Sinne (i)'. Elizabeth Clarke, *Theory and Theology in George Herbert's Poetry: 'Divinitie, and Poesie, Met'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 156.

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find such a turn in the line: *till closed doors open*. This move by Guite opens doors linguistically and theologically to consider the path of peace that God provides. Such consideration is made possible by the sonnet, a form that is 'always ancient, always new'.[38]

Turns in the Psalms

Voltas in sonnets should, at the very least, give us pause when reading the Psalms.[39] To be sure, scholars are prone to make mention of the change in voice and tone in lament psalms. Much debate has been had, for example, on whether it is the psalmists themselves speaking or the priests. Yet turns, in my reading, are much more pervasive in the Psalter. For example, in Psalm 20, a royal psalm (*not* a lament proper), the speaker makes a turn in verse 7:

> *ʿattâ yādaʿtî kî hôšiaʿ yhwh měšîḥô*
> Now I know that YHWH has delivered his anointed.

In the following psalm, another royal psalm, the whole of the poem turns on the last line (v. 14), the first occurrence of an imperative:

> *rûmâ yhwh běʿuzzekā*
> Arise, O YHWH, in your strength!

Psalm 73:13 may be the most well-known turn in the Psalter. Seeing the flourishing of the wicked, the psalmist questions the benefit of his integrity:

> *ʾak-rîq zikkîtî lĕbābî*
> *wāʾerḥaṣ bĕniqqāyôn kappāy*
>
> Surely in vain I have kept my heart clean,
> I wash my hands in innocence.

Everything changes, however, in verse 17:

> *ʿad-ʾābôʾ ʾel-miqdĕšê-ʾēl*
> *ʾābînâ lĕʾaḥărîtâm*
>
> Until I came to the sanctuary of God
> I discerned their end.[40]

[38]Guite, *Sounding the Seasons*, p. xiii.

[39]Jacobson and Jacobson, *Invitation to the Psalms*, p. 27, rightly bring out the 'turning point' in a psalm. They credit Patrick Miller, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994) for this insight. The key difference between my discussion and theirs is that they reference psalms that are 'structured around a central turning point', whereas I am more broadly and more generously considering how a psalmist might incorporate a turning point – not necessarily building a psalm from it.

[40]Cf. Pss 49, 55.

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Psalms physically structured

Beyond finding an analogy to *voltas*, the structure of Herbert's poems and the sonnet form mastered by Guite prompts awareness of possible structures in the Psalms. Unlike the sonnet, we have no clear evidence of a precise and repeated form in the Psalter. We do find in Psalms, however, poems that adhere to an artistic edifice, namely, the acrostic psalms.[41]

The absence of attention to acrostics in Psalms studies is startling. True, form, broadly put, receives a heft of comment, but not acrostics.[42] Objectively, this is odd. Introductions to the biblical book major on forms (e.g. Gunkel) by way of structure and content, including, for example, lament, praise and thanksgiving. The numbers here are telling. Thanksgiving psalms tally up to seven.[43] Wisdom psalms amount to approximately nine.[44] Kingship (or royal) psalms account for ten psalms.[45] Very much in the same vein, acrostics number seven in the Psalter.[46] Yet, scholars give little to no attention to this clearly structured form as such.[47]

The reason for such an omission remains unclear. Worse still, when acrostics do make the discussion, the form is often reduced to a memory device.[48] Such an inference, while partially correct, misses what is all too apparent in the English poetry above: structured constraints encourage creative freedom and skill that aid in memory *and* enhance the content.

Psalm 111 affords us opportunity to consider how form and meaning coalesce in poetry. The psalm is a complete acrostic, in which every line begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet in sequential order. In terms of content, it is a thanksgiving song (or hymn). This becomes clear from the first line:

> *ʾôdeh yhwh bĕkol-lēbāb*
> I will give thanks, O YHWH, with all heart
> (Ps 111:1)

[41]Fantuzzo rightly claims the acrostic 'is not merely ornamental; it is part of the communicative process'. C. J. Fantuzzo, 'Acrostic', in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), p. 3.

[42]See e.g. Bullock, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 158; Jacobson and Jacobson, *Invitation to the Psalms*; Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms*; Bellinger, *Psalms*; W. Dennis Tucker, Jr, 'Psalms 1: The Book of', in *Dictionary of the Old Testament*.

[43]Pss 30, 32, 34, 73, 92, 103, 116.

[44]Pss 1, 25, 34, 37, 49, 73, 111, 112, 128.

[45]Pss 2, 20, 21, 28, 45, 72, 101, 110, 132, 144.

[46]Complete alphabetic acrostics are Psalms 145 (hymn of praise); 111 (hymn of thanksgiving); 112 (wisdom psalm); 37 (wisdom psalm); 119 (didactic wisdom poem). Incomplete alphabetic acrostics are Psalms 25 (lament); 34 (hymn of thanksgiving).

[47]I am aware that a number of acrostic psalms appear in other so-called content genres, such as wisdom and royal. That, however, does not lessen my argument, but rather gives it more weight. In such presentations, the structure of the psalms is ignored, implying that the structure of the poetry is merely decorative.

[48]Reasons typically given for the use of the acrostic format tend to miss the point; yes, the acrostic may indeed be a mnemonic aid, display the poet's skill and bring a sense of completeness (see Fantuzzo, 'Acrostic', p. 4). The last reason is typically the one most cited in the literature: cf. N. K. Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations*, rev. edn (London: SCM, 1962). For a more technical discussion, see Klaus Seybold, 'Akrostichie im Psalter', in *Studien zu Sprache und Stil der Psalmen* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), pp. 245–58.

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These alphabetic lines are led by grammatical subjects (v. 3b), objects (v. 4a) and verbs (v. 5b). One could say that the acrostic helps provide a fullness to the thanksgiving song. Yet the short lines, the content and descriptions bespeak more. One example comes in the relation of the *waw* line (v. 3b) to the *tav* line (v. 10c):

wĕṣidqātô ʿōmedet lāʿad
And his righteousness stands eternal

The final, *tav*, line changes the subject to 'his praise':

tĕhillātô ʿōmedet lāʿad
And his praise stands eternal

The placement of this latter line (v. 10c) brings weight to its content. The reader/listener expects *tav* to lead the last line. The combination of *tav* with *ʿōmedet lāʿad* gives opportunity. For the last line, the last word, as it were, the topic is *praise*. The poem's conclusion, while truth-bearing, is also didactic.[49] The ways in which that statement could bolster the faith of the speaker as well as the audience (the people listening) are innumerable (and beyond our current scope). Nevertheless, it needs to be underscored that the acrostic form has more significance than a memory aid or thoroughness. It constrains the poet and provokes imagination; as Guite argues, 'restrictions are precisely what bring out creativity', and these limits push back against the creator (the poet).[50]

Imaging the imagination

Scholars are apt to note images and metaphors in the Psalms.[51] Often they place the emphasis on extracting the meaning from a historically distanced metaphor. Such a focus, while appropriate, can still miss the potential of an image extending, its emotional freight and its latent multivalent nature. To illustrate these in non-biblical poetry, I turn to the 'poet of counterpoint', R. S. Thomas.[52] I begin with 'The Cone':[53]

Simple in your designs,
infinite in your variations

[49]For more on poetry's potential to be truth-bearing and its tumultuous relationship with the Enlightenment, see Malcolm Guite, *Faith, Hope, and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

[50]Friday Night Chats: Psalms with English Poet Malcolm Guite, 19 Mar. 2021, The Village Chapel. A similar observation has been made by the poet Jeanne Murray Walker in her essay 'Sandals on the Ground: My Pilgrimage with the Sonnet' (*Image* 98), in which she explores how the sonnet form, with its limits and boundaries, moved her past her writer's block.

[51]William Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

[52]Mark Oakely, *The Splash of Words: Believing in Poetry* (Norwich: Canterbury, 2016), p. 87. Oakley elsewhere describes Thomas as a poet of counterpoint. By that he means 'a poet in which sounds of two possible readings meet, where two distinct melodies create texture'. Mark Oakely, 'R. S. Thomas and the Hiddenness of God' (paper presented at The Severn Forum, Cheltenham, University of Gloucestershire, 27 April 2017), p. 10.

[53]R. S. Thomas, 'Cones', in *Etched by Silence: A Pilgrimage through the Poems of R. S. Thomas*, ed. Jim Cotter, rev. edn (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2013), p. 22. Reprinted with the kind permission of Canterbury Press.

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upon them: the leaf's veins,
the shell's helix, the stars themselves
gyring down to a point
in the mind; the mind also
from the same point spiraling
outward to take in space.

The artistry of God is on display in Thomas' poem. Simplicity is not mistaken for profundity, however. From the image to the mind, from the mind to the imagination, the symbol of a cone captures the human experience. Thomas brings the image out for inspection in the last stanza:

God, it is not your reflections
we seek, wonderful as they are
in the live fibre; it is the possibility
of your presence at the cone's
point towards which we soar
in hope to arrive at the still
centre, where love operates
on all those frequencies
that are set up by the spinning
of two minds, the one on the other.

The thought that God created nature does not suffice for Thomas. No, the imprint reifying the Creator will not service. Rather, the image of the cone commends the reader to ponder the living maker at the other side. The cone, now in the sense of soundwaves, curates love – a two-way communication.

One of the most evocative images of Thomas' appears in 'Raptor':[54]

You have made God small,
setting him astride
a pipette or a retort
studying the bubbles,
absorbed in an experiment
that will come to nothing.

I think of him rather
as an enormous owl
abroad in the shadows,
brushing me sometimes
with his wing so the blood
in my veins freezes …

those feathered overtones
in love's rafters, I have heard
him scream, too, fastening

[54]Thomas, 'Raptor', in *Etched*, p. 84, stanzas 1, 2 and 4. Reprinted with the kind permission of Canterbury Press.

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his talons in his great
adversary, or in some lesser
denizen, maybe, like you or me.

This poem is not for the faint of heart. Thomas combats warped modern imaginations of the God of the Bible. In Thomas' poem, God is imaged as a combatant, a predator whose flight is lovely. Most abrasively, the prey here may well be the pray-er.

Images incite the imagination. Metaphors are not merely slides under the microscope. They are worthy of inspection; yet, they burst beyond the bounds of scientific inquiry. Perhaps no poem better illustrates that fact than Herbert's 'Prayer (I)'. The first four lines read:[55]

PRAYER the Churches banquet, Angels age,
Gods breath in man returning to his birth,
The Soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth;

Each image is compact and multivalent. David Jeffrey calls the poem 'a veritable concordance of biblical images'.[56] Here in Herbert's poem, scientific specificity is on notice. For instance, Helen Vendler finds that last line of 'Prayer (I)' ('something understood') 'abolishes or expunges the need for explanatory metaphors. Metaphor, Hebert seems to say, is after all only an approximation.'[57]

In the Psalms, there are numerous texts that imagine YHWH in concrete and metaphorical spaces. It is noteworthy that these images are not always positive for the psalmist. Thus, it is rather infelicitous when a scholar presents metaphors (e.g. Psalms 23, 33, 47, 74, 138) that contain only protection and blessing for the psalmist.[58] For the Psalter also speaks of YHWH's power directly *against* the psalmist:

kî-ḥiṣṣeykā niḥătû bî
wattinḥat ʿālay yādekā

For your arrows have penetrated me;
your hand has sunk against me (Ps 38:3)

And even in YHWH's protection of the psalmist, the imagery is far from gentle:

ḥiṣṣeykā šĕnûnîm
Your arrows are sharp (Ps 45:6)

[55]Herbert, 'Prayer (I)', in *The Complete Poetry*, pp. 48–9. Guite says of Herbert's 'Prayer (I)': it 'gives us twenty-six different images of prayer, which I believe he intended to correspond to the letters of the alphabet, as a kind of alphabet of what prayer is. It is one of the world's greatest poems, and it ends very modestly: "Something understood".' Malcolm Guite in https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/from-imagination-to-incarnation/.

[56]Jeffrey, *Scripture and Poetic Imagination*, p. 122.

[57]Helen Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 39. Cf. Herbert's 'The Collar', in *The Complete Poetry*, p. 146; and Jeffrey, *Scripture and Poetic Imagination*, p. 126.

[58]Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms*, pp. 42–7.

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wayyōrēm ʾĕlōhîm ḥēṣ
pitʾôm hāyû makkôtām

God shot them with (his) arrow
Suddenly they were wounded (Ps 64:8)

kî-hikkîtā ʾet-kol-ʾōyĕbay leḥî
šinnê rĕšāʿîm šibbartā

For you strike all my enemies on the cheek;
you break the teeth of the wicked. (Ps 3:8)

This kind of metaphorical language is not infrequent in the Psalms. Reading poets alongside Psalms catechises our attention to the rich complexities of metaphor.

Theology and themes

The Psalms are thoroughly theocentric and therefore theological. Thankfully, theology of (or within) Psalms appears in a number of scholarly introductions.[59] It is my supposition, however, that theology is more salient than often seen.[60]

The theocentricity of Psalms sharpens the tension between divine presence and absence throughout the poems.[61] This tension is held tightly by our priest-poets. Unlike modern scientific proclivities, symmetry is not sought. Thomas' 'I Think That Maybe' serves as a case in point:[62]

I think that maybe
I will be a little surer
Of being a little nearer.
That's all. Eternity
Is in the understanding that that little is more than enough.

Sobering themes are perpetual in Thomas' poetry.[63] We look in full at his 'The Absence':[64]

It is this great absence
that is like a presence, that compels
me to address it without hope
of a reply. It is a room I enter

from which someone has just
gone, the vestibule for the arrival

[59]Hunter, *An Introduction to the Psalms*; Jacobson and Jacobson, *Invitation to the Psalms*; Creach, *Discovering Psalms*; Crenshaw, *The Psalms*.

[60]Cf. Herbert, 'A Paradox', in *The Complete Poetry*, p. 199.

[61]I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

[62]Thomas, 'I Think That Maybe', in *Etched*, p. 102.

[63]See Triggs, 'The Halo upon the Bones'. See also William Davis, *R. S. Thomas: Poetry and Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007).

[64]Thomas, 'The Absence', in *Etched*, p. 4.

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of one who has not yet come.
I modernize the anachronism

of my language, but he is no more here
than before. Genes and molecules
have no more power to call
him up than the incense of the Hebrews

at their altars. My equations fail
as my words do. What resource have I
other than the emptiness without him of my whole
being, a vacuum he may not abhor?

Prayer, absence, presence and the modern – these are everywhere in Thomas' poetry. Lest he be deemed one in a modern existential crisis, untethered to the biblical tradition, let us turn to the Psalms:

ʿad-ʾānâ yhwh tiškāḥēnî neṣaḥ
ʿad-ʾānâ tastîr ʾet-pāneykā mimmennî

How long, O YHWH, will you forget forever?
How long will you hide your face from me. (Ps 13:2)

It is this reality of Psalm 13 that requires divine help:

habbîtâ ʿănēnî yhwh ʾĕlōhāy
hāʾîrâ ʿênay pen-ʾîšan hammāwet

Look; answer me, O YHWH, my God
Give light to my eyes, lest *I sleep the death.* (Ps 13:4)[65]

We again find the hidden God in Psalm 43:

kî-ʾattâ ʾĕlōhê māʿu(w)zzî
lāmâ zĕnaḥtānî
lāmâ-qōdēr ʾethallēk
bĕlaḥaṣ ʾôyēb

For you are the God of my refuge,
Why have you forsaken me?
Why do I walk back and forth mourning
Because of the enemy's oppression? (Ps 43:2)

Though it begins with common ground, the psalmist wants explanation for his plight.

[65]I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for their suggestion on this translation.

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The theme of prayer and evading answers is perennial in poetry. Guite demonstrates this in his 'Engine Against Th' Almightie' (ll. 1–5, 9–14):[66]

> Here is this shadowed valley, dark and bleak,
> We lay a bitter siege against the one
> Who was our heart's desire, but now withdraws
> Behind his battlements. Our prayers just break
> Against what seem like walls of silent stone.
>
> The catapult of our catastrophes
> Hurls up its heavy load, and flights of arrows
> Clatter against his walls, fall back and fail.
> How can we make him feel our miseries?
> We fling back famine at him, torture, cancer,
> Is he almighty then? Has he no answer?

Guite strikes the note with his questions, and leaves it reverberating. His poem is akin to Psalm 88, which, as is well known, does not end with praise, trust or sacrifice.

> *hirḥaqtā mimmennî ʾōhēb wārēaʿ*
> *měyuddāʿay maḥšāk*
>
> You put distance from me, beloved and friend
> My companions you put in darkness. (Ps 88:19)

Beyond the endurance of prayer, the contrasting themes of grace and wrath are regular in poetry. Let us take Thomas' poem, 'You Show Me Two Faces':[67]

> You show me two faces
> that of a flower opening
> and of a fist contracting like the gripping of ice.
>
> … Mild and dire,
> Now and absent, like us but
> wholly other – which side
> of you am I to believe?

This is also found in the Psalter:

> *yhwh ʾal-bĕʾappĕkā tôkîḥēnî*
> *wĕʾal-baḥămātĕkā tĕyassĕrēnî*
>
> O YHWH, do not in your anger rebuke me
> And not in your wrath discipline me (Ps 6:2)

[66]Malcolm Guite, 'Engine Against Th' Almightie', in *After Prayer*, p. 10. This is a poetic reflection on one image from Herbert's poem 'Prayer (I)' (in *The Complete Collection*, pp. 48–9).

[67]Thomas, 'You show me two faces', in *Etched*, p. 78, first and fourth stanzas.

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The interconnection of pain and YHWH's presence occurs in Thomas, Herbert and the Psalms.[68] Consider Herbert's, 'Bitter-Sweet':[69]

> Ah my dear angry Lord,
> Since thou dost love, yet strike;
> Cast down, yet help afford;
> Sure I will do the like.
>
> I will complain, yet praise;
> I will bewail, approve:
> And all my sour-sweet days
> I will lament, and love.

Similar themes run throughout the Psalms. One example is:

> *ʾĕlōhîm zĕnaḥtānû pĕraṣtānû*
> *ʾānaptā tĕšôbēb lānû*
> *hirʿaštâ ʾereṣ pĕṣamtāh*
> *rĕpâ šĕbāreyhā kî-mātâ*
>
> O God, *you have forsaken us*; you have broken through us.
> You have been angry; restore us.
> You have caused the land to quake; you tore it open.
> Repair its breaks, for it has shaken. (Ps 60:3–4)

The psalmist recognises the anger applied to the community. Yet he calls for restoration and repair.

Conclusion

We began with the claim that the Psalms are poetry, a fact which can be decentred in much of scholarly literature on the Psalms. In attempting to engage Psalms as poetry, we have read expert poets. This allowed us to skate across the surface of poetry. We felt the ice reverberate through our blades. What is more, these poets privileged us an elevated post where we were able to take in the topography. The landscape of poetry at large was observed. This practice shaped our imagination.

Having grown expectant of the power of sound in poetry, we are now ready to be grabbed and guided by the sonics of Psalms. We have begun to acquire a taste for repetition. We have apprehended an appreciation for architecture, the shape of poetry as purposed content, not merely casing. We have learned to turn where the psalmist turns; we widen our vision and strengthen our neck for shifts to our sensibilities. Our eyes have been practised in seeing the complexities of images. These images have given instruction in the central subject matter of the Psalms, namely, God. In short, we have become acquainted with the creativity and constraints of poets, both modern and ancient. Thus, we can now enter a psalm with poetic expectations.

[68]See e.g. Thomas 'The Island', in *Collected Poems, 1945–1990* (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 223.
[69]Herbert, 'Bitter-Sweet', in *The Complete Poetry*, p. 164.

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'Most emphatically the Psalms must be read *as poems*', C. S. Lewis famously opined.[70] That has in fact been the present project. The typical scientific presentations of Psalms are not wrong. Neither are they right. Lowthian parallelism, Gunkelian genres and Childsian canonical readings simply do not reach the riches of these biblical poems. Poetry is potent and pregnant.

Reading the *poetry* of Psalms as such is not new. My arguments and observations are merely the grabbing of new garments from the wardrobe. This has been but a practice of Shakespeare's wisdom, 'So all my best is dressing old words new / Spending again what is already spent'.[71]

[70]Quoted in Leland Ryken, *Literary Introductions to the Books of the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), p. 198; emphasis added.

[71]William Shakespeare, *Sonnet 76*, in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 262. I would like to thank Malcolm Guite and David Jeffrey for their comments on this article. I benefited much from their expertise in English poetry. In addition, I am grateful to Dan Estes, who has been a constant encouragement in my reading Psalms *as poetry*.

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