

GANZ NOTES - TFS 9, 1 - Biblical Poetry (13 February 2023)

FABER SESSIONS, SERIES 9

The Faber Sessions are always about the releasing of our culturally "colonized" Imagination (one of the traditional "powers of soul"), for the sake of opening access to the divine gift of HOPE. They are always about releasing the bondage of our Intellect (another of the traditional "powers of soul") by presenting to it more beautiful images (e.g., in poems) about which to think. They are always about the cultivation of our Will (another of the traditional "powers of soul"), by which is meant the cultivation of a rich affective life, becoming a more "refined" person. Series 9 is again about poems, and how to read them, so that we might be startled, surprised, moved, and delighted.

In a wonderful work by Edward Hirsch, *How to Read a Poem: And Fall in Love with Poetry* (1999), he writes:

"My idea is to present certain emblematic poems I care about deeply and to offer strategies for reading these poems. My readings are meant to be instructive and suggestive, not definitive, since poems are endlessly interpretable. There is always something about them that evades the understanding, and I have tried to remain aware that, as Paul Valéry has put it, 'The power of verse is derived from an indefinable harmony between what it says and what it is. Indefinable is essential to the definition.' ... I have focused on the act of reading itself, on letting poems inhabit the reader's consciousness, the reader's body."

ON POETRY

Dana Gioia, "Can Poetry Matter?" (May 1991)

[About this famous essay, the Poetry Foundation notes: "Also a noted critic, Gioia has authored some influential and widely referenced essays on American poetry. In particular, his 1991 *Atlantic Monthly* essay, "Can Poetry Matter?," argues that poetry has lost its central status in contemporary culture. The essay generated so much feedback that he later turned it into a book of the same title, which was a finalist for a National Book Critics Circle Award."]

"Today Walt Whitman's challenge "To have great poets, there must be great audiences, too" reads like an indictment.... As Wallace Stevens once observed,

"The purpose of poetry is to contribute to man's happiness." Children know this essential truth when they ask to hear their favorite nursery rhymes again and again. Aesthetic pleasure needs no justification, because a life without such pleasure is one not worth living.... There are at least two reasons why the situation of poetry matters to the entire intellectual community. The first involves the role of language in a free society. *Poetry is the art of using words charged with their utmost meaning.* A society whose intellectual leaders lose the skill to shape, appreciate, and understand the power of language will become the slaves of those who retain it—be they politicians, preachers, copywriters, or newscasters. The public responsibility of poetry has been pointed out repeatedly by modern writers. Even the arch-symbolist Stephane Mallarme praised the poet's central mission to "purify the words of the tribe." Or, as George Orwell wrote after the Second World War, "One ought to recognize that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language..." Poetry needs to be liberated from literary criticism. Poems should be memorized, recited, and performed. The sheer joy of the art must be emphasized. The pleasure of performance is what first attracts children to poetry, the sensual excitement of speaking and hearing the words of the poem. Performance was also the teaching technique that kept poetry vital for centuries. Maybe it also holds the key to poetry's future."

[Dana Gioia is an internationally acclaimed poet and writer. Former California Poet laureate and Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, Gioia was born in Los Angeles of Italian and Mexican descent. The first person in his family to attend college, he received a B.A. and M.B.A. from Stanford and an M.A. from Harvard in Comparative Literature. For fifteen years he worked as a businessman before quitting at forty-one to become a full-time writer. His surname is pronounced Joy-a. See: <https://danagioia.com/about-dana-gioia/>].

Fred W. Dobbs-Allsopp, "[Poetry, Hebrew,](#)" *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006–2009) 550.

Roughly a third of the OT is verse (i.e., set in lines). This poetic corpus includes the three books of Job, Proverbs, and Psalms, and the several festival songs embedded in prose texts (Exod 15; Deut 32; Judg 5; 2 Sam 22) for which the Masoretes provided a distinct accentual system and/or special page layouts - the latter convention is now in evidence in (much earlier) manuscripts of most of these works from Qumran (Tov); Lamentations and Song of Songs; other poems or poetic fragments embedded within blocks of prose (e.g., Gen 4:23–24); and much of the Latter Prophets. Any reading of this material, however motivated (theologically, literarily, historically), will need to accommodate its poetic medium. The corpus as a whole remains centrally a part of the scriptural heritage of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and has been a foundational source for poetry throughout history and throughout the world, and especially for all later (post-

biblical) traditions of Hebrew verse (Carmi).

Micah Mattix, "The Integrity of Poetry" in First Things (February 2023)

To value it primarily for **what** it says rather than **how** it says it is to undermine its integrity. This leads sooner or later to the subjugation of poetry to politics or theology (or psychology), which, in turn, renders it useless to society as poetry. Poetry is an essential part of society—but only as itself and not as a vehicle for something else.

For Oakeshott, regaining the voice of poetry as poetry is a step toward reviving civilization. What are the characteristics of the voice of poetry? For Oakeshott, the poetic voice is distinguished by the beauty of its language and images, which produce a contemplative delight. Poetic language is not **mimetic**, but generative: It "begins and ends as language."

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "**mimetic**" - "Relating to, characterized by, or of the nature of imitation; *spec.* representing, picturing, or presenting the real world (esp. in literature, art, etc.); (in *Literary Criticism*) (now frequently) realist."

Edward Hirsch, *How to Read a Poem: And Fall in Love with Poetry* (1999)

"My idea is to present certain emblematic poems I care about deeply and to offer strategies for reading these poems. My readings are meant to be instructive and suggestive, not definitive, since poems are endlessly interpretable. There is always something about them that evades the understanding, and I have tried to remain aware that, as Paul Valéry has put it, 'The power of verse is derived from an indefinable harmony between what it says and what it is. Indefinable is essential to the definition.' ... I have focused on the act of reading itself, on letting poems inhabit the reader's consciousness, the reader's body."

Billy Collins, "The Effort"

The Effort
by [Billy Collins](#)

Would anyone care to join me
in flicking a few pebbles in the direction
of teachers who are fond of asking the question:
"What is the poet trying to say?"

as if Thomas Hardy and Emily Dickinson
had struggled but ultimately failed in their efforts—

inarticulate wretches that they were,
biting their pens and staring out the window for a clue.

Yes, it seems that Whitman, Amy Lowell
and the rest could only try and fail
but we in Mrs. Parker's third-period English class
here at Springfield High will succeed

with the help of these study questions
in saying what the poor poet could not,
and we will get all this done before
that orgy of egg salad and tuna fish known as lunch.

Tonight, however, I am the one trying
to say what it is this absence means,
the two of us sleeping and waking under different roofs.
The image of this vase of cut flowers,

not from our garden, is no help.
And the same goes for the single plate,
the solitary lamp, and the weather that presses its face
against these new windows--the drizzle and the
morning frost.

So I will leave it up to Mrs. Parker,
who is tapping a piece of chalk against the blackboard,
and her students—a few with their hands up,
others slouching with their caps on backwards—

to figure out what it is I am trying to say
about this place where I find myself
and to do it before the noon bell rings
and that whirlwind of meatloaf is unleashed.

"The Effort" by Billy Collins, from *Ballistics*. © Random House, 2008. Reprinted
with permission. ([buy now](#))

TEXTS

Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. Revised and updated. New York: Basic Books, 2011 (original edition published 1985).

STEVIE WONDER - "I WISH" (1976)

Micah Mattix (February 2023) –

To value it [Poetry] primarily for *what* it says rather than *how* it says it is to undermine its integrity. This leads sooner or later to the subjugation of poetry to politics or theology (or psychology), which, in turn, renders it useless to society as poetry. Poetry is an essential part of society—but only as itself and not as a vehicle for something else.

Education, which used to be understood as *an induction into the conversation that is civilization*, now understands itself primarily as a problem-solving and knowledge-acquiring enterprise. It trains students in the use of a single voice. Such an education is barbaric, no matter how developed it may be. An increasingly monopolized discourse, Oakeshott writes, "will not only make it difficult for another voice to be heard, but it will also make it seem proper that it should not be heard." For Oakeshott, regaining the voice of poetry as poetry is a step toward reviving civilization. What are the characteristics of the voice of poetry? **For Oakeshott, the poetic voice is distinguished by the beauty of its language and images, which produce a contemplative delight.**

I want to use this as an example of how **music causes us to experience lyrics/ words** in contrast to what we get from just reading the words. Much of the psalmic/poetic texts of the Scriptures were sung, or they were spoken within a musical background. **We have no idea what that sounded like.**

Stevie Wonder, *Songs in the Key of Life* (1976)

Wikipedia – "I Wish" is a song by American singer Stevie Wonder. It was released in late 1976 as the lead single from his eighteenth album, *Songs in the Key of Life* (1976). Written and produced by Wonder, the song focuses on his childhood from the 1950s into the early 1960s about how he wished he could go back and relive it. The single hit number one on the Billboard Hot 100 and Soul singles chart. At the 19th Grammy Awards, Stevie Wonder won the Best R&B Vocal Performance, Male for this song.

"Stevie Wonder whose real name is Stevland Hardaway Morris, was not born blind, contrary to popular belief. **The iconic soul singer, who was born six weeks premature, lost his sight when he was six weeks old due to a condition called retinopathy of prematurity,** according to Biography. ROP primarily affects premature infants weighing about 2¾ pounds, according to the National Eye Institute."

But I also want to acknowledge how sometimes it is *the music that comes first*, not the words first that one then “puts to music”. The music, the effects on the songwriter, “edits” the words he or she writes. See the note in *Wikipedia* concerning this song:

The lyrics came with more difficulty. The lyrics that wound up in the song deal with childhood and teenage experiences. But originally Wonder wanted to address broader topics. Wonder said he originally tried to incorporate "a lot of cosmic type stuff, spiritual stuff. But I couldn't do that 'cause the music was too much fun — the words didn't have the fun of the track," and that he "couldn't come up with anything stronger than the chorus, 'I wish those days [claps] would [claps] come back once more.' Thank goodness we didn't change that."

FIRST THREE STANZAS OF “I WISH”

Looking back on when I was a little nappy headed **boy**
Then my only worry was for Christmas, what would be my **toy**?
Even though we sometimes would not get a **thing**
We were happy with the joy the day would **bring**

Sneaking out the back door to hang out with those hoodlum friends of **mine**
Greeted at the back door with "Boy, I thought I told you not to go **outside!**"
Tryin' your best to bring the water to your **eyes**
Thinkin' it might stop her from whoopin' your **behind**

I wish those days could come back once more
Why did those days ever have to go?
I wish those days could come back once more
Why did those days ever have to go?
'Cause I love them so

NIGHTBIRDE, “IT’S OK” (2020)

Kugel, James L. *The Great Poems of the Bible: A Reader's Companion with New Translations*. Free Press. Kindle Edition.

ASIN: B00710P1E2

Publisher: Free Press; Reissue edition (April 24, 2012)

Publication date: April 24, 2012

Language: English

The idea of translating the texts afresh was also intriguing. Many great translations already exist, yet I confess **I was drawn to the prospect of trying to establish a somewhat different tone in my translations, one that might strike the contemporary reader's ear a bit more closely to the way, I imagined, these texts had originally sounded to their first audiences.**

And so, in commenting on one or another topic associated with the passages selected for this book, **I have tried to understand *the way of seeing* that underlies each passage, to enter (with, I admit, a great deal of trepidation) the spiritual world in which biblical Israelites lived.**

By "way of seeing" I mean to suggest something more than simply another point of view; **perhaps people were actually enabled by this way of seeing to observe things that we no longer observe nowadays.** It is difficult for one who reads the Bible carefully, and takes its words seriously, not to arrive at such a conclusion: ***something, a certain way of perceiving, has gradually closed inside of us, so that nowadays most people simply do not register, or do not have access to, what had been visible in an earlier age.*** What we have—all we have—are those texts of the Bible that bear witness to that other way of seeing (and perhaps invite us, with ***the use of some spiritual imagination***, to try to enter into it, open our eyes, and look).

Repetition is widely appearing in biblical poetry. Watch how it works in this poem, put to song, by Nightbirde. Notice how repetition in such a poetic setting is **not merely repeating**, but invites the reader **to focus on** that central message - "It's OK" and **to slow down** and stay with that central point - "It IS ok."

Things to which to pay attention in this example from America's Got Talent: (1) What do we conclude about this woman when first she walks out on the stage? What is it that we see before ever she speaks a word? Notice how "blind" we really are to who this woman really is and the depths she carries within unseen. (2) Notice how our first encounter with her and her voice is in her responses to questions asked her: Who are you? Why are you here? Consider how superficial those questions will turn out to be? (3) Though the Judges behind the table are in the same position in relation to her as is the entire audience, it is understood that the Judges are they who will "judge" her quality – it is an audition. Notice how it is THEY who will be judged by the nature of her performance/gift and how she reveals herself. (4) What is it that Nightbirde says that instantly changes the nature of this "conversation" on national television? Notice the transition from being a "performer" to being ... what? (5) As she sings, to whom is she singing, to what "Judge" is she presenting herself? What is that her "performance" makes us see?

America's Got Talent audition in 2021 -

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=nightbirde+agt+audition&docid=607988398434817313&mid=9A6C8E0EE0C26F98061E9A6C8E0EE0C26F98061E&view=detail&FORM=VIRE>

It's OK

I MOVED TO CALIFORNIA IN THE SUMMER TIME
I CHANGED MY NAME THINKING THAT IT WOULD CHANGE MY MIND
I THOUGHT THAT ALL MY PROBLEMS THEY WOULD STAY BEHIND
I WAS A STICK OF DYNAMITE AND IT WAS JUST A MATTER OF TIME, YEAH
OH DANG, OH MY, NOW I CAN'T HIDE
SAID I KNEW MYSELF BUT I GUESS I LIED
IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY
IF YOU'RE LOST, WE'RE ALL A LITTLE LOST AND IT'S ALRIGHT
IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY
IF YOU'RE LOST, WE'RE ALL A LITTLE LOST AND IT'S ALRIGHT
IT'S ALRIGHT, IT'S ALRIGHT, IT'S ALRIGHT, IT'S ALRIGHT
I WROTE A HUNDRED PAGES BUT I BURNED THEM ALL
(YEAH, I BURNED THEM ALL)
I DROVE THROUGH YELLOW LIGHTS AND DON'T LOOK BACK AT ALL
I DON'T LOOK BACK AT ALL
YEAH, YOU CAN CALL ME RECKLESS, I'M A CANNONBALL (UH, I'M A CANNONBALL)
DON'T KNOW WHY I TAKE THE TIGHTROPE AND CRY WHEN I FALL
OH DANG, OH MY, NOW I CAN'T HIDE
SAID I KNEW WHAT I WANTED BUT I GUESS I LIED
IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY
IF YOU'RE LOST, WE'RE ALL A LITTLE LOST AND IT'S ALRIGHT
IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY
IF YOU'RE LOST, WE'RE ALL A LITTLE LOST AND IT'S ALRIGHT
IT'S ALRIGHT, IT'S ALRIGHT, IT'S ALRIGHT, IT'S ALRIGHT
IT'S ALRIGHT, IT'S ALRIGHT, IT'S ALRIGHT, IT'S ALRIGHT
OH-OH-OH-OH, IT'S ALRIGHT
OH-OH-OH-OH, IT'S ALRIGHT
OH-OH-OH-OH, IT'S ALRIGHT
OH-OH-OH-OH, IT'S ALRIGHT
TO BE LOST SOMETIMES
IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY
IF YOU'RE LOST, WE'RE ALL A LITTLE LOST AND IT'S ALRIGHT
IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY
IF YOU'RE LOST, WE'RE ALL A LITTLE LOST AND IT'S ALRIGHT
IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY
IF YOU'RE LOST, WE'RE ALL A LITTLE LOST AND IT'S ALRIGHT
IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY, IT'S OKAY
IF YOU'RE LOST, WE'RE ALL A LITTLE LOST AND IT'S ALRIGHT

Dana Gioia (1991): There are at least two reasons why the situation of poetry matters to the entire intellectual community. The first involves the role of language in a free society. **Poetry is the art of using words charged with their utmost meaning. A society whose intellectual leaders lose the skill to shape, appreciate, and understand the power of language will become the slaves of those who retain it—be they politicians, preachers, copywriters, or newscasters.** The public responsibility of poetry has been pointed out repeatedly by modern writers. Even the arch-symbolist Stephane Mallarme praised the poet's central mission to "purify the words of the tribe."

Or, as George Orwell wrote after the Second World War, "One ought to recognize that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language..."

BIBLICAL POETRY

Roughly a third of the OT is verse (i.e., set in lines). This poetic corpus includes the three books of Job, Proverbs, and Psalms, and the several festival songs embedded in prose texts (Exod 15; Deut 32; Judg 5; 2 Sam 22) for which the Masoretes provided a distinct accentual system and/or special page layouts – the latter convention is now in evidence in (much earlier) manuscripts of most of these works from Qumran (Tov); Lamentations and Song of Songs; other poems or poetic fragments embedded within blocks of prose (e.g., Gen 4:23–24); and much of the Latter Prophets. **Any reading of this material, however motivated (theologically, literarily, historically), will need to accommodate its poetic medium.** The corpus as a whole remains centrally a part of the scriptural heritage of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and has been a foundational source for poetry throughout history and throughout the world, and especially for all later (post-biblical) traditions of Hebrew verse (Carmi).^[1]

PATTERNS

Parallelism. Perhaps the most persistent poetic feature of the psalms is parallelism. While several of the psalms' poetic features cannot readily be captured in translation, parallelism can be, and even a casual reader is likely to notice that the second half of a typical poetic line is often related somehow to the first half of the line. Earlier generations of scholars categorized parallelism as either synonymous (the second part of the line echoes the first), antithetical (the second part of the line states opposition to the first), or synthetic (which is a catch-all category and often really meant that no parallelism could be detected). **In these terms, the most frequent type of parallelism is synonymous; however, recent scholars have pointed out that the echoing involved is only rarely precisely synonymous. Rather, the second part of the poetic line usually has the effect of intensifying or specifying or concretizing the thought expressed in the first part of the line.**²¹ While there are far too many instances of parallelism for it to be noted regularly, the commentary will point out particularly striking instances of parallelism (see Commentary on Psalms 1; 3; 13; 90; see also the article entitled "Introduction to Hebrew Poetry," 301–15).^[2]

Repetition. Another very common, and probably the most important, poetic feature of the psalms is repetition. **While it is often considered bad writing style to use the same word repeatedly, such apparently was not the case in Hebrew.** Consequently, repetition occurs frequently in a variety of patterns and for a variety of purposes. For instance, the same word will occur several times in a psalm in order to draw the reader's attention to a key word or concept, such as salvation/deliverance (Psalm 3), righteousness (Psalms 71; 85), justice/judgment

(Psalm 82), or steadfast love (Psalms 103; 109; 136). **Unfortunately, both the NIV and the NRSV sometimes obscure the Hebrew repetition by choosing different English words to translate the same Hebrew word.** In the commentary, such instances will be identified, and such instances will often serve as a primary clue to the theological significance of the psalm. ^[3]

[1] Fred W. Dobbs-Allsopp, "[Poetry, Hebrew](#)," *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006–2009) 550.

*21 See James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985). For a more technical discussion that proposes a broader understanding of parallelism, see Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

[2] J. Clinton McCann Jr., "[The Book of Psalms](#)," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), 652–653.

NIV New International Version of the Bible
NRSV New Revised Standard Version

[3] J. Clinton McCann Jr., "[The Book of Psalms](#)," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), 653.

QUOTES

Robert Alter (2011) – "The lines of biblical poetry are informed by an often fierce or mesmerizing energy of assertion that sweeps from one part of the line to its parallel member and, frequently, from the line to a whole sequence within the poem. But, as I argue here in a variety of ways, there is subtlety as well as insistence in these seeming repetitions: utterances develop and change, miniature stories unfold. **In great works of literature, almost always more is going on than one initially realizes, and this is especially true of the Bible, to which readers are likely to come with a baggage of preconceptions and habits of automated or inappropriate response.** What I try to convey in these pages is an educated sense of the satisfying complexity and the sheer excitement of biblical poetry." [Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. Basic Books. Kindle Edition.]

Clinton McCann - Hammarskjöld apparently understood—quite correctly—that the book of Psalms presents nothing short of God's claim upon the whole world and that it articulates God's will for justice, righteousness, and peace among all

peoples and all nations. It is the purpose of this commentary to elucidate that claim and to enable the reader to hear the Word of God as it comes to us in the psalms. I write as a Christian biblical scholar and theologian, and, like Hammarskjöld, I consciously and constantly hold side by side the psalms and the New Testament. **A careful reading of each reveal that the psalms anticipate Jesus' bold presentation of God's claim upon the whole world ("the kingdom of God has come near" [Mark 1:15 NRSV]) and that Jesus embodied the psalter's articulation of God's will for justice, righteousness, and peace among all peoples and all nations.** In other words, the approach to the psalms in this commentary is explicitly *theological*, and it takes seriously the canonical shape of the book of Psalms itself as well as the psalter's place in the larger canon of Scripture.^[1]

NRSV New Revised Standard Version

[1] J. Clinton McCann Jr., "[The Book of Psalms](#)," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), 641–642.