

III

Structures of Intensification

THERE IS a certain affinity, let me suggest, between the formal properties of any given prosodic system or poetic genre and the kinds of meaning most readily expressed through that system or genre. I have, of course, triply hedged my bets in this formulation with the evasive "affinity," the qualifying "certain," and the limiting "most readily," but such caution is called for because original poets in most eras often devise ways, whether quietly or ostentatiously, to work successfully against the grain of inherited form. Nevertheless, given form does tend to invite a particular orientation in the poetic ordering of the world. The Shakespearean sonnet can lend itself to love poetry, reflections on life's transience, celebrations of the power of art, and a good deal else, but whatever the topic or mood, a writer using this form can scarcely avoid organizing his statement in a sequence of three equal and balanced blocks, usually with an implied progression from one to the next, and concluding in a pithy summary or witty antithesis embodied in the couplet that follows the three quatrains. The artifice of form, in other words, becomes a particular way of conceiving relations and defining linkages, sequence, and hierarchies in the reality to which the poet addresses himself. A poet who felt moved, let us say, to celebrate the teeming variety and vastness of the human and natural landscape would not get very far with the sonnet form, would need a kind of poetic vehicle that was more expansive, allowing for free-flowing catalogues and effects of asymmetry and improvisation—would need, in short, something like Whitmanesque free verse.

In the case of biblical poetry, the two basic operations of specification and heightening within the parallelistic line lead to an incipiently

narrative structure of minute concatenations, on the one hand, and to a climactic structure of thematic intensifications, on the other hand. The astute reader will perceive that in point of poetic fact these two hands are sometimes tightly clasped, especially because, as we have seen, narrative progression in biblical verse often moves up a scale of increasing intensity, and because in practice it is sometimes hard to distinguish between a "focusing" that specifies and implies temporal sequence and one that is chiefly a stepping-up of assertion. There is no special reason to insist on simon-pure categories—one rarely encounters them in literature—but I do think the general distinction between the two different generative principles in biblical poetry is useful. There are, that is, 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, to translate that static image back into the sequential mode in which the literary text works, 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, but not to the aphoristic poise and the sense of cunning interrelation that are at home in the sonnet or to the rhapsodic feeling for the lovely heterogeneity of things that is readily expressed in Whitmanesque verse.

As an initial illustration of the structure of intensification, let us consider a brief and very simple psalm—powerful in its simplicity in a way we may understand better if we try to follow closely the operation of thematic focusing in the text. Psalm 13, in six compact lines, offers a strong model of the supplication—intoned "in straits" or "out of the depths"—that is one of the important genres of psalm.

To the leader, a psalm of David.

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| 1 | How long, Lord, will You forget
me perpetually, | how long will You hide Your
face from me? |
| 2 | How long will I cast about schemes
in my mind, | grief in my heart all day? |
| | | How long will my enemy be over me? |
| 3 | Look, answer me, Lord my God,
lest I sleep death. | give light to my eyes, |

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|---|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 4 | Lest my enemy say, "I have him," | my foes exult when I slip. |
| 5 | But I trust in Your kindness, | my heart exults in Your saving might. |
| 6 | I will sing to the Lord | for He has requited me. |

In discussing narrative verse, I drew attention to the importance of incremental repetition and of ways of advancing meaning that may ultimately be derived from incremental repetition. Psalm 13, like many of the psalms of supplication, uses a very different mode of repetition—anaphora, which is to say, the rhetorically emphatic reiteration of a single word or brief phrase, in itself not a syntactically complete unit. In incremental repetition the restatement, with an addition, of a clause in itself complete as a unit of syntax and meaning often produces an overlap effect where we perceive an action flowing into a related and subsequent action: "Between her legs he kneeled and fell, / where he kneeled, he fell, destroyed." Anaphora, on the other hand, shifts the center of attention from the repeated element to the material that is introduced by the repetition, at once inviting us to see all the new utterances as locked into the same structure of assertion and to look for strong differences or elements of development in the new material. There is, in other words, a productive tension between sameness and difference, reiteration and development, in the use of anaphora.

If we are rigorous about the way poems articulate meanings, we will have to conclude that the repeated word or phrase in anaphora never means exactly the same thing twice, that in each occurrence it takes on a certain coloration from the surrounding semantic material and from its position in the series. This general point about repetition has been nicely formulated by the Russian semiotician Jurij Lotman:

Strictly speaking, unconditional repetition is impossible in poetry. The repetition of a word in a text, as a rule, does not mean the mechanical repetition of a concept. Most often it points to a more complex, albeit unified, semantic context.

The reader accustomed to the graphic perception of a text sees the repeated outlines of a word on paper and assumes that he is looking at the mere duplication of a concept. In fact he is usually dealing with another, more complex concept, that is related to the given word, but whose complication is by no means quantitative.¹

Lotman goes on to offer a telling illustration of the principle, an instance of emphatic repetition. When one encounters a line of verse like "Soldier, bid her farewell, bid her farewell," every reader realizes that the second "bid her farewell" could not be identical in meaning with

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the first. For the soldier is not being urged to say goodbye twice to his girl but, obviously, is being reminded of the poignancy of the leave-taking, the dearness of his beloved, the possibility he may never see her again, the dreadful imminence of the departure, or any combination of such implications. Let me propose that in our psalm the anaphoric series of four times "how long," while clearly informed by what Lotman calls a "unified semantic context," reflects an ascent on a scale of intensity, the note of desperate urgency pitched slightly higher with each repetition. Heightening, as in many other instances, is in part associated with a movement from cause to effect and from general to specific statement, but here without any real development of narrative momentum.

The rising movement is clear, compact, and, as I have suggested, exemplary of the supplication as a form of Hebrew verse. Initially, the speaker complains of being perpetually forgotten (or "neglected") by God; in the parallel verset this plight of neglect is imagined more personally and concretely—in a way, more terribly—as God's hiding His face from the supplicant. The second, triadic line translates the general condition of abandonment into the inward experience of the speaker, who flounders devising futile schemes and, what is more, is in the constant grip of grief—because, as we finally learn in the third verset, his enemy is winning out against him. It is worth noting that this last "how long" in the anaphoric series ("How long will my enemy be over me?") not only introduces a specification barely hinted at in the preceding statements but also has a virtual causal force absent in the previous occurrences of the self-same syllables (that is, How long is my distress to continue?—for this is the reason for it). It thus nicely illustrates how verbatim repetition in a poetic text is not to be equated with total identity of meaning.

At this climactic point of desperation (at the end of line 3), the speaker breaks away from the anaphora and pronounces three imperative verbs—the only such verbs in the poem—addressed to God: "Look, answer me, Lord my God, / give light to my eyes, / lest I sleep death." The looking, which is heightened in the second verset into giving light to the eyes—presumably the effect of God's gaze—is obviously a prayer for the reversal of that awful hiding of the divine face invoked in line 1. The third verset, a subordinate clause, is linked to the second verset by an association of thematic and causal antithesis: either You make my eyes shine by turning toward me at once or they will close forever in the sleep of death. At this point, the poet complements the initial anaphora of "how long," which stressed his persisting anguish, with an anaphoric

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insistence on "lest," which stresses the critical precariousness of his present condition. The "lest" at the beginning of line 4 unfolds the meaning of its counterpart in the last verset of line 3: "lest I sleep death"—which is to say, lest my enemy, who has long had the upper hand over me, be granted his final triumph (to cry out *yekholtiv*, "I have him" or, more literally, "I have prevailed over him"). This picture of defeat is then emphatically rounded out in the second verset of line 4, with the representation of the foes exulting as they behold the speaker tottering, about to topple.

The general complaint, then, of being forgotten by God with which the poem began has been brought to a painfully vivid culmination in which the speaker imagines his own death both as a subjective state—sleeping the sleep of death, where God's gaze will never be able to light up his eyes—and as a dramatic scene—going down for the last time, with his enemies crowing in triumph. This is the white-hot point to which the magnifying glass of the structure of intensification has concentrated the assertions of desperate need. At the moment of the imaginative enactment of death, the speaker swings away sharply into a concluding affirmation of faith, introduced by a strongly contrastive "but I," *va'ani* (in the Hebrew, all the previous occurrences of "I" and "me" are by way of suffixes and prefixes in declined or conjugated forms, and this is the sole instance of the pronoun proper). He trusts in God's kindness, or faithfulness (*hesed*), and, what is more, his heart exults in God's deliverance, in a precise antithetical response to the enemies who were imagined exulting over his death. The poem that began in a cry of distress to a neglectful God ends (line 6) in a song of praise to God, Whose deliverance of those who trust in Him is already considered an accomplished fact.

Structurally, the countermovement of the last two lines functions differently from the concluding couplet of a Shakespearian sonnet, which reflects a tendency of the speaker to stand back contemplatively from his own preceding assertions and, even when an antithesis to them is proffered, to tie up the meanings of the poem with a certain sense of neat resolution. In the psalm, there is less resolution than surprising emotional reversal impelled by the motor force of faith. In this respect, the uses that later religious tradition made of Psalms are very much in keeping with the spirit of the original poems, even though the psalmist conceived being "saved" in more concrete and literal terms than have most postbiblical readers. (In our text, it is not altogether clear whether the battle imagery is literal or figurative, but in any case the supplicant

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is complaining of tottering on the brink of death in a world of human action, not of spiritual symbolism.) The speaker, that is, finds himself plunged into a fierce reality where things seem to go from bad to worse to the worst of all. There is no "logical" way out of this predicament—it is an image in miniature of the general biblical predicament of threatened national existence in the dangerous midst of history—as there is no discursive means in verse to imagine anything but its ominous intensification, except for the sudden, unaccountable, paradoxical swing of faith that enables the speaker at the nadir of terror to affirm that God will sustain him, indeed has sustained him. Generically, the supplication has been transformed in a single stroke into a psalm of thanksgiving.²

Perhaps the most brilliant elucidation ever written of this psalmodic structure of concluding antithesis is in the Sea Poems of the twelfth-century Hebrew poet Judah Halevi, which are among the most remarkable lyric achievements of the Middle Ages. Halevi, a virtuoso stylist who had profoundly assimilated, along with other antecedent Hebrew texts, the poetic dynamic of Psalms, conjures up in these poems about his voyage to the Land of Israel the roiling chaos of the sea about to engulf him; and, typically, he effects a sharp turn of faith at the end of each poem in affirming his trust in the God Who will pluck him from the wave-tossed plank to which he clings and set him down in the courts of Jerusalem. Transposed into another, more intricately elegant poetic mode, Halevi's Sea Poems perfectly capture the underlying movement of our psalm and of a good many like it. One chief reason for the success of Psalm 13 in giving such a resonant voice to a soul in distress—in its own time and for posterity—is that its spare, compact assertions of critical need, which at first glance may seem merely a series of equivalent statements, in fact generate a rising line of tension, reaching the pitch of ultimate disaster that then triggers the sudden turn and resolution of the believer's trust at the end.

While biblical poets often prefer this strong linear development of the structure of intensification, even for longer poems, there are also many instances of more intricate variations of the structure. Psalm 39 is a particularly instructive text in this regard because it offers three different patterns of thematic development, which are cunningly interwoven.

To the leader, to Jeduthun, a psalm of David.

- 1 I said: let me keep my way from let me keep a muzzle on my mouth,
offending with my tongue,
as long as the wicked is before me.

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- 2 I was mute, in stillness, I was dumb, cut off from good,
and my pain was stirred.
- 3 My heart was hot within me, in my thoughts a flame burned,
I spoke with my tongue.
- 4 Let me know, Lord, my end, and what is the measure of my
days,
that I may know how fleeting I am.
- 5 Bare handbreadths You made my existence is nothing to You,
my days,
mere breath each man stands.*
- 6 In but shadow man walks about, mere breath his bustlings,
he stores up, knowing not who will gather.
- 7 And so what can I expect, O My hope is in You.
God?
- 8 From all my transgressions make me not the scorn of the fool.
deliver me,
- 9 I was mute, did not open my mouth,
for Yours was the doing.
- 10 Take away from me Your plague,
from Your blows I perish.
- 11 In chastisement for sin You afflict a man,
melting like a moth what he
treasures.
Mere breath are all men. Selah.
- 12 Hear my prayer, O Lord, give ear to my cry,
to my tears be not silent.
- 13 For I am an alien with You, a resident like all my forefathers.
- 14 Look away from me so I may recover,*
before I go off and am not.

This, too, is a psalm of supplication, but the speaker's definition of his own plight and of his relation to God is manifestly more complicated than what we encountered in Psalm 13. He, too, is in great straits, but except for the rather oblique reference to the presence of the wicked at the end of the first line, this situation of acute distress is not spelled out in the poem until lines 8–11, and considerable space is first devoted to an introspective meditation on the transience of human life. Moreover, here there is no sharp turning point of faith after the cry of anguish. The speaker introduces the idea that God is his only hope almost as a logical conclusion of desperation, at the exact middle of the poem (line 7). But then he must try to argue God into having compassion on him, using language and ideas strikingly reminiscent of Job as he has just used language reminiscent of Ecclesiastes in lines 5–6 (whether these are anticipations or echoes of Job and Ecclesiastes there is no way of knowing) and ending on a disquieting note in an evocation of his own imminent extinction. The supplicant of Psalm 13 wants God to turn

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toward him; the supplicant of Psalm 39 wants Him to have mercy and turn away.

In order to follow these complications of meaning more clearly, we will have to attend to the formal articulations of the poem. It is worth noting at the outset that triadic lines are not merely interspersed, as in other texts we have examined, but actually predominate here. The first six lines of the poem are all triadic, the first dyadic line occurring only when the speaker arrives at the crucial statement that God is his sole hope (line 7), and two more triads appear in the second half of the poem. In most of the triadic lines, moreover, there is an element of imbalance in the semantic parallelism, and one suspects that is precisely why the triads are used. This imbalance is especially clear in the first three lines (in my schematic paraphrase, I will indicate the three versets as *a*, *b*, and *c*):

- 1 (*a*) resolution to keep silent; (*b*) more concretely worded resolution to keep silent; (*c*) presence of the wicked
- 2 (*a*) report of having been silent; (*b*) amplified report of having been silent; (*c*) confession of pain
- 3 (*a*) report of heated thoughts; (*b*) more metaphorically vivid report of heated thoughts; (*c*) report of the fact of speech

In each of these three lines the third verset stands in some relation of tension to the two preceding versets, retrospectively casting a new light on them, and in the case of line 3 also following consequentially from them in a way that involves an element of surprise. In Psalm 13 the speaker's world is desperate but stable: the movement of intensification focuses in and in from being forgotten by God to the image of the supplicant's death, and then is displaced by the concluding affirmation of trust. In Psalm 39, on the other hand, the speaker flounders in a world of radical ambiguities where the antithetical values of speech and silence, existence and extinction, perhaps even innocence and transgression, have been brought dangerously close together. I do not want to propose, in the manner of one fashionable school of contemporary criticism, that we should uncover in the text a covert or unwitting reversal of its own hierarchical oppositions; or more specifically, that silence is affirmed and then abandoned in consequence of the poet's intuition that all speech is a lie masquerading as truth because of the inevitably arbitrary junction between signifier and signified, language and reality. On the contrary, the ancient Hebrew literary imagination reverts again and again to a bedrock assumption about the efficacy of

speech, cosmogonically demonstrated by the Lord (in Genesis 1) Who is emulated by man. In our poem, the speaker's final plea that God hear his cry presupposes the efficacy of speech, the truth-telling power with which language has been used to expose the supplicant's plight. The rapid swings between oppositions in the poem are dictated not by an epistemological quandary but by a psychological dialectic in the speaker. Let me try to explain how this dialectic movement unfolds by tracing the three thematic patterns that together constitute the poem's complex structure of intensification.

The speaker begins by saying that he had intended—the initial *'amarti* can mean either "say" or "think"—to keep his mouth shut, and this because of a very specific circumstance: he is within earshot of the malicious, and if he audibly complains he will become a target for their gibes, a point made explicit in line 8. The actual exposition of the speaker's particular predicament is postponed until the middle of the poem (lines 8–11), which has the effect of blurring his special fate of suffering—line 10 indicates that the specific affliction is physical illness—into the general vulnerability of the human condition evoked in lines 4–6. At the beginning there is an indication, in the last verset of line 2, that he is in pain, but this might be construed in immediate context as the pain of pent-up complaints. Similarly, the speaker begins by professing a desire to avoid "offending" (or "sinning," *ḥat'o*) but in immediate context this seems to refer merely to an offense in the realm of public relations in giving the wicked something to crow about. The first two lines present a clear development of intensification of the theme of silence—from a resolution not to offend by speech, to muzzling the mouth, to preserving (in a chain of three consecutive synonyms) absolute muteness. The realized focal point of silence produces inward fire, a state of acute distress that compels a reversal of the initial resolution and issues in speech. But the content of the speech is something of a surprise. Instead of the formulaic "How long, O Lord" that we might expect, and that might play into the hands of the malicious eavesdropper, the speaker undertakes a meditation on the transience of human life, asking God to give him the profound inner knowledge of his own brief span. This meditation on transience is a second movement of intensification in the poem, beginning with the general "my end," moving on to the "measure of my days," to the speaker's "fleeting" nature, then from "handbreadths" to mere "nothing," to empty "breath" (*hevel*, the reiterated key-word in Ecclesiastes traditionally rendered as "vanity"). The center of this intensifying movement is nicely defined by a shrewd piece of wordplay: in

the last verset of line 4, the speaker wants to understand how "fleeting," *ḥadel*, he is; in the middle verset of line 5, his "existence," *ḥeled*, is as nothing in the eyes of God.

Once the transience theme has been brought to its white-hot point—man is nothing, he can hang on to nothing, can truly know only his own nothingness—the climax compels a reversal, as we have seen elsewhere, and the speaker affirms his hope in God. This in turn leads him to admit to having sinned and to speak of the suffering that has visited him because of it (lines 8–11). The sin-suffering conjunction, however, is less confession than simple admission, and, unlike the themes of silence and transience, it is not developed in a pattern of intensification. The reason for this difference is clear: suffering-because-of-sin is what the speaker begs to be rescued from, not anything he wants to conjure up as an intensifying process; he does, however, want to put heavy stress both on his quandary as a person who needs at once to be silent and to cry out and on the sobering perspective of man's terrible transience. The poet nicely subsumes the whole sin-suffering segment under the two more salient themes by paradoxically reaffirming silence at the beginning of the segment (line 9, first verset) and by reintroducing the theme of transience at the end of the segment (the last word of line 10, the last two versets of line 11). By now it would appear also that silence means something different from what might have been supposed at the beginning: "I was mute, did not open my mouth"—that is, I did not give the "fool" (of the preceding line) a chance to deride me: I did not complain about Your justice, only asked to understand the ephemerality of my own existence, a condition that might be taken as grounds (the next line) for Your withdrawing the terrible weight of Your hand from the melting mortal stuff of which I am made.

The last three lines of the poem begin with what momentarily looks like the formulaic conclusion of a supplication—"Hear my prayer . . . , give ear to my cry"—but the third verset of the triadic line once more introduces an unexpected element: "to my tears be not silent." The poet's third synonym for "complaint" is a metonymy, "tears," which, unlike the two others, is mute, while God is asked not to listen or give ear or look but to be not silent—in perfect thematic counterpoint to the speaker himself, who emphatically pledged silence yet, under the sharp cutting edge of suffering, had no recourse except speech.

Having thus resumed the theme of silence and speech, the poet returns to the theme of transience in the last two lines, bringing it to a strategically telling culmination. The power of line 13 is more evident in

the Hebrew than in translation because the line turns on what is known in biblical scholarship as a "breakup pattern." That is, two words that are ordinarily a bound collocation, or more specifically a hendiadys (two words to indicate one concept, like "hue and cry" in English) are broken up and made into parallel terms in the two versets of a line of poetry. In this case, the hendiadys *ger vetoshav*, "resident alien," is split into *ger* in the first verset and *toshav* in the second, the effect being to defamiliarize the common idiom and bring to the fore the sense of temporary, tolerated presence of someone who doesn't really belong. "Like all my forefathers" reinforces this implication by placing the speaker in a rapidly moving chain of generations while aptly connecting his own transience with that of all humanity, in keeping with the generalizing perspective of lines 5-6. The poet then concludes, on a very Jobian note, by begging God to turn away from him while he still has his paltry moment to live. The last word of the poem, *'eyneni*, refers to the speaker's death not as a metaphoric idea (to sleep the sleep of death) or as a dramatic scene (my enemies exult as I fall) but as a flat fact of extinction—"I am not," like the "nothing," *'ayin*, to which he compared his existence before God, the two words in the Hebrew being ultimately the same word, *'eyneni* a declined form of *'ayin*. The final term of intensification, then, in the vision of human transience falls into place with the last word of the poem: what had been a strong metaphor ("mere breath") or simile ("My existence is *as* nothing before You") now becomes an unqualified statement in the first person singular of a fact about to be accomplished. The "I said" that was the first word of the poem terminates, in an ultimate convergence of the theme of silence and the theme of transience, in the irrevocable canceling-out of the sayer.

As with the other texts we are considering in this connection, my intention is not to offer an exhaustive analysis of the poem but to indicate certain underlying possibilities of poetic structure manifested in the poem. The impulse of semantic intensification, as we observe it working from verset to verset and from line to line, would lead us to expect a continuous linear development to a climax, or to a climax and reversal. Though that pattern is in fact extremely common in biblical poetry, Psalm 39 illustrates another possibility: two different lines of intensification are prominent in the poem; each is deployed intermittently, being interrupted and resumed; each qualifies and complicates the other; and the meaning of both patterns is not fully realized until they are brought together at the end. Obviously, I do not mean to suggest that the Hebrew poets consciously manipulated patterns of intensification as poets elsewhere have consciously

manipulated rhyme patterns. The orientation toward a stepping-up of meaning was, for reasons I have tried to make clear, built into the poetic system. It was in all likelihood quite knowingly perceived on the level of the line and in relatively brief sequences of lines. In regard to larger structural units, I would guess that the tendency to work one's way up a scale of intensity was intuited as a natural way to proceed from line to poem rather than explicitly recognized as a "device." In any event, given the prevalence of this particular mode of moving forward in a biblical poem, it is understandable that a poet might well choose to interarticulate two or more patterns of intensification if his aim was to express something more than usually ambiguous, more multifaceted, more contradictory, more fraught with dialectic tension, or whatever the case might be.

The complementary opposite to this strategy of complication is the way structures of intensification are typically used in the prophetic books. Because the prophets are so frequently concerned with delineating an inexorable process of retribution working itself out in history, ineluctable for its destined victims, staggering the imagination in its extremity, prophetic poems are often built on a single rising line of intensity, or a zooming-in of focus from the process of retribution to its human objects. This movement is easy enough to imagine, simply on the basis of our reading of Psalm 13 and of sundry strategies of intensification within single lines, so two brief illustrations should suffice. Both texts are from the Book of Amos; the second is a complete prophetic poem; the first is part of a longer prophecy of doom. The first text (Amos 8:9-10) is preceded by the words "And it shall come to pass on that day, says the Lord God," which is a prose formula of introduction, and so I have not set them out below with the lines of verse:

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| 1 I shall make the sun set at noon, | and bring darkness to earth on a bright day. |
| 2 I shall turn your festivals into mourning, | all your songs to dirge. |
| 3 I shall wrap every waist with sackcloth, | make every head shaven. |
| 4 I shall set her like the mourning for an only son, | and her end as a bitter day. |

The rapid swing inward from the process of retribution to its appointed victims is powerfully clear. The turning of light into darkness of the first line at once anticipates all the dire reversals of the subsequent lines and encompasses them. The movement from circumference to human center

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already begins between the versets of the initial line: first the cosmic catastrophe (or, depending on your viewpoint, hyperbole) of the noonday sun setting, then its effect on the realm of human habitation, darkness over the earth. Line 2 moves from the world to human institutions, first turning festivals into mourning, then, in a characteristic focusing procedure (substituting synecdoches for the general activities with which they are associated), turning song into dirge. Line 3 moves in from institutions to each individual person who has suddenly been given cause to mourn. Dressing in sackcloth and shaving the head are both ancient Near Eastern mourning practices, but the latter may be more shocking to the sensibilities, both because it is an act performed on the body, not just a change of garment, and because it is a pagan custom actually forbidden by Mosaic law. (This last point illustrates how the conservatism of poetic formulation, sometimes reflecting no-longer-current practices or beliefs, might be exploited for expressive effect.) The final line focuses in from the outward practices of mourning to the inward pain of bereavement: it is not an ordinary loss she—I would assume, the common prophetic personification in the feminine of Israel, though some take this as a reference to the Land—will feel but the sharp pain of losing an only son. The concluding verset, “and her end as a bitter day,” then summarizes the whole process of retribution, with a near-rhyming reference back to the “bright day” at the end of line 1 (*yom ’or*, which here becomes *yom mar*, “bitter day”), now projecting the intensification of suffering forward on a temporal axis: not only will she mourn bitterly but there will be no period of gradual consolation after this bereavement, for her ultimate end will be bitter as well.

In the second passage from Amos (9:1–4), the formal logic of focusing in and in is made thematically explicit, as it is in related passages—no matter where you flee, you cannot escape Me—in Psalm 139 and in Job. This poem, too, has a prose introduction, in this case a brief piece of narrative report, “I saw God standing on the altar and He said”:

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| 1 | Smite the capital, | let the pedestals shake. |
| 2 | Split all their heads open,* | their last by the sword I’ll kill. |
| 3 | No fleer of them will flee, | no survivor escape. |
| 4 | If they make off to Sheol, | from there My hand will take them. |
| 5 | If they ascend to heaven, | from there I’ll bring them down. |
| 6 | If they hide on the summit of
Carmel, | from there I’ll search them out and
take them. |
| 7 | If they’re concealed from My eyes
on the floor of the sea, | from there I will summon the
Serpent to bite them. |

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| 8 | If they go in captivity before their
enemies, | from there I will summon the sword
to kill them. |
| 9 | I shall set My eye on them | for evil and not for good. |

Here the process of decimation begins with the sanctuary at Beth El and immediately moves on to the people who worship there, the syntactically obscure first verset of line 2 perhaps serving as a punning marker of transition if, as I would venture to guess, “heads” refers both to the tops of the pillars and to the people (that is, either to “leaders” or to heads of bodies). The reference to people, in any case, would seem to be primary, and, like the use of eclipse imagery at the beginning of our previous example, the complementary parallelism of this line constitutes a kind of thematic “table of contents” for the rest of the poem: head and tail, beginning and end, I will kill all of them. After a final introductory line (line 3) of synonymous parallelism (flee/survivor), the poem proceeds to a series of concrete pictures of the desperate fugitives’ futile efforts to escape, almost as though they were trying vainly to run away from the inexorable focus of the very poetic structure in which they are caught. From this point to the end of the poem, semantic parallelism within the line is set aside (unless, that is, one chooses to regroup them as very long lines), to be compensated by a uniform pronounced pattern of interlinear parallelism.

As in Psalm 13, the movement of increasing emphasis is reinforced by the use of anaphora, the repetition of “from there” confirming the fact of God’s ineluctable presence in all conceivable corners of creation. Here, too, the meaning of the repeated term is colored by its changing contexts: “there” is heaven and hell (“Sheol”), mountaintop and sea bottom, and finally, in a shift from the cosmos to a concrete historical situation, the captive bands of Israelites trudging into exile; similarly, the taking for destruction is first by the sword, then by God’s own hand, then—as the fugitive seeks ultimate shelter in the floor of the sea—by the mythological agency of the Serpent, and, at the historically realistic conclusion of the series, once more by the sword. The second verset of line 8 is both the climax of the process and the closing of a formal envelope structure, echoing as it does the second verset of line 2 (“by the sword . . . kill,” “summon the sword to kill them”). The last line of the poem, then, “I shall set My eye on them / for evil and not for good,” stands after the process of intensification, summarizing its meaning: as the terrific to-and-fro sweep of the language has shown, when God sets His gaze on you, there is nowhere in the world to hide, and for the smug Israelite

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perverters of every value of justice and equity whom Amos has been denouncing, this will be no friendly gaze.

This text vividly illustrates why the Hebrew prophets so often chose to cast their urgent message in verse. It was not just for the memorability of poetic language or for the sense that poetry was a medium of elevated and perhaps solemn discourse but also because this poetic vehicle of parallelistic verse offered a particularly effective way of imaginatively realizing inevitability, of making powerfully manifest to the listener the idea that consequences he might choose not to contemplate could happen, would happen, would happen without fail.

In several ways the most profound development of the structure of intensification occurs in what is arguably the greatest achievement of all biblical poetry, the Book of Job. When we move from the prose frame-story in Chapters 1 and 2 to the beginning of the poetic argument in Chapter 3, we are plunged precipitously into a world of what must be called abysmal intensities. It is only through the most brilliant use of a system of poetic intensifications that the poet is able to take the full emotional measure and to intimate the full moral implications of Job's outrageous fate. The extraordinary poem that constitutes Chapter 3 is not merely a dramatically forceful way of beginning Job's complaint. More significantly, it establishes the terms, literally and figuratively, for the poetry Job will speak throughout; and, as I shall try to show in my next chapter, when God finally answers Job out of the whirlwind, the force of His response will be closely bound with a shift introduced by His speech in the terms of the poetic argument and the defining lines of poetic structure. What I am suggesting is that the exploration of the problem of theodicy in the Book of Job and the "answer" it proposes cannot be separated from the poetic vehicle of the book, and that one misses the real intent by reading the text, as has too often been done, as a paraphrasable philosophic argument merely embellished or made more arresting by poetic devices. For the moment, however, it will suffice to see how the poetry unfolds step by step in Job's first speech (Job 3:3-26):

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|---|---|--|
| 1 | Perish the day I was born, | the night that said, "A man has been conceived." |
| 2 | That day, let it be darkness, | let God above not seek it out, |
| | let no brightness shine on it. | |
| 3 | Let darkness and deep gloom claim it, | let a pall dwell over it, |
| | let what darkens the day cast terror on it. | |

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|----|---|--|
| 4 | That night, let blackness seize it, | let it not join with the days of the year, |
| | let it not come into the number of months. | |
| 5 | That night, let it be desolate, | let no sound of joy come into it. |
| 6 | Let the doomers of day curse it, | those destined to undo Leviathan. |
| 7 | Let its twilight stars stay dark, | let it hope for light and have none, |
| | let it see not the eyelids of dawn. | |
| 8 | For not blocking her belly's doors, | to hide suffering from my eyes. |
| 9 | Why did I not die from the womb, | out from the belly expire? |
| 10 | Why were there knees to receive me, | or breasts for me to suck? |
| 11 | For now would I lie, be at peace, | I would sleep and find rest, |
| 12 | With kings and counselors of the earth, | who build ruins for themselves, |
| 13 | Or with nobles who have gold, | who fill their houses with silver. |
| 14 | Or like a buried stillborn, I would be not, | like infants who never saw light. |
| 15 | There the wicked cease to trouble, | there the exhausted rest. |
| 16 | Prisoners are utterly tranquil, | no longer hear the taskmaster's voice. |
| 17 | Small and great are there, | the slave free of his master. |
| 18 | Why does He give to the sufferer light, | and life to the bitter of soul, |
| 19 | Who wait for death and it comes not, | who dig for it more than for treasure, |
| 20 | Who rejoice to exultation, | and are glad to find a grave, |
| 21 | To a man whose way is hidden, | whom God has hedged about? |
| 22 | In place of my bread my groaning comes, | my roars pour out like water. |
| 23 | For I feared a fear—it befell me, | and that which I dreaded came on me. |
| 24 | I was not quiet, was not at peace, | did not rest, and trouble came. |

Because the author of Job is one of those very rare poets, like Shakespeare, who combine awesome expressive power with dazzling stylistic virtuosity, the translation dilutes the original even more than for other biblical poems. The original has a muscular compactness that is extremely difficult to reproduce while finding honest equivalents for the Hebrew words in a Western language,³ and it makes repeated and sometimes highly significant use of sound-play and wordplay. Let me offer a transliteration of just the first line, which begins the poem with a

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strong alliterative pattern: *yóvad yom iváled bó / vehaláylah 'amár hórah gáver*; and let me just mention the rhymed antithesis of *'ananáh* ("pall," in line 3) and *renanáh* ("sound of joy," in line 5), and the weighted sequencing of *qéver*, "grave," and *géver*, "man," at the very end of line 20 and the very beginning of line 21. Nevertheless, since the development of the poem depends more on an intensification of semantic materials than on an elaboration of phonetic and syntactic patterns (however much the latter are tied in with meaning), much of the poetic movement is still perceptible in English, especially if the translation preserves (as mine, whatever its defects, has done) the same lexical equivalents for recurring words in the Hebrew.

The poem begins with an obvious and, so it momentarily seems, quite conventional complementary parallelism of day and night (there are abundant lines of biblical verse in which "day" appears in the first verset and "night" in the second). But this conventional pairing undergoes a startling development, both within the line and in what follows. If, as we have seen elsewhere, intensification between versets is often allied with temporal sequence, here Job, who wants to cancel out his own existence, goes *backward* in time, first cursing the day he was born, then, nine months previous, even the night he was conceived. This line is one of the most striking instances in biblical poetry of how the second verset in a line with a double-duty verb is emphatically not a "ballast variant" of the first. Since the initial verb, "perish," governs both clauses, the poet has the space in the second verset to invent a miniature dramatic scene, and one quite flagrantly founded on a fantastic hyperbole: that at the moment of conjugal consummation, the night or perhaps even the future father himself cried out in triumph, "A male [in the translation above, "man," *géver*, the same word that begins line 21] has been conceived." The "day" and "night" of the first and second versets, which are introduced as complementary terms on a scale of intensity defined by the difference between blotting out birth and blotting out conception, are then split into binary oppositions, and the interplay between those oppositions constitutes the entire first section of the poem, to the end of line 8.

This section might be described as a kind of "conjugation" of the semantic poles of light and darkness in the grammatical mode of imprecation, which means, of course, that every flicker of light invoked is wished into darkness, swallowed up by darkness, or canceled into nonbeing by the chain of "not's" and "none's" that runs down the poem. Let me stress that these lines reflect not a mere piling on of

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images of darkness engulfing light but rather as so often elsewhere in biblical poetry, a rising line of intensity in the articulation of such images.

The rising line is generally evident between versets, as for example in line 3, where in the first verset darkness and gloom merely "claim" (or, in another construal of the Hebrew verb, "besmirch") the day, and by the third verset "cast terror" over it. But the rising movement is still clearer from line to line. First Job wants the day of his birth to be totally swathed in darkness (lines 2-3); then he asks that the night of conception also be seized by blackness and desolation (lines 4-5), thus raising the inherent darkness of the night, one might say, to the second power, and that the fatal night be expunged from the very calendar. (By now, a sequence of day, night, months, and year has been worked into the poem, all to support Job's wish that he had never been brought into the cycle of time.) The "sound of joy" at the end of line 5 that is to be canceled out not only echoes the sound of the Hebrew for "pall" in line 3 but also takes us back to the second verset of line 1, where a joyous announcement of the conception of a male was made.

Having brought the scale of curses to this pitch, Job steps up his statement still further by invoking, in line 6, mythological and cosmogonic imagery: a mere human hex is not enough, and so those cosmic agents designated to disable the primordial sea beast Leviathan must be enlisted to curse the moment that saw Job into the world, and, implicitly, the initial movement backward in time now reaches across aeons to the world's beginnings. "Doomers of day," which I'm afraid I have made sound rather Anglo-Saxon in my translation, is a terrific piece of compressed wit in the Hebrew because "doomers" or "cursers," *'orerei*, puns on *'or*, "light," and so introduces a spectral echo of the thing being blotted out in the word indicating the agents of obliteration. Finally, line 7, which is the last moment in the series, conjures up an image of literally hopeless longing for light in a world where the first twilight star will never show, the dawn never begin to glimmer. This climax then leads to a summary and interim conclusion in line 8, which bracket the seven preceding lines: may all these curses fall on that day and night for not blocking up the womb in which I was to lie (an image that picks up the preceding images of being totally enveloped in darkness), for not hiding suffering (or "trouble") from my eyes. A newborn child sees light (compare line 14), but by this point Job has established a virtual equation between light or life and anguish, so the substitution of "suffering" for "light" at the end of the segment has a brilliantly concise recapitulative function.

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Now, all along I have been speaking of "structures" of intensification, as a concession to common critical usage and for want of a better metaphor, but structure suggests an image of static form extended in space, like a building, and I want to correct that implication by reminding readers that what we think of approximately as structure in literature is, by the serial nature of the medium, dynamic movement unfolding sequentially. If we try to imagine this for a moment not in terms of the finished product we experience in our reading but rather as the process the poet initiates in his making of the poem, we might well speak of a generative principle of intensification. The thematic-imagistic terms of "day" and "night," "light" and "darkness," are introduced, set in sharp opposition, and then the possibilities of that opposition are strongly developed from image to image and from line to line, until the speaker can imagine no more than the concrete picture of his own nonbirth, shut up forever within the dark doors of the womb. The momentum of intensifying this whole opposition, making the darkness more and more overwhelming in relation to the light, is what carries the poem forward step by step and what in some sense generates it, determining what will be said and what will be concluded.

The grimly comforting picture of enclosure in the womb in turn triggers a second major development in the poem, the evocation of the peace of the grave that runs from line 9 to line 21. This represents a transfer of the wish for extinction expressed in the first eight lines from a cosmic to a personal scale and so reflects the movement of specification or focusing that also operates within smaller compass in the poem. The blocked doors of the belly of line 8 lead to a more realistic image of stillbirth in line 9, and only now is the wish for extinction translated into explicit words for death, here repeated with synonymic emphasis ("die" and "expire"). Line 10 is then a further concretization of the birth that Job wishes never had been, moving along a temporal axis: he comes out of the womb, is greeted by knees (either the mother's knees parted in birth or, as some scholars have proposed, the father's knees, on which the newborn may have been placed in a ceremony of legitimation), and then is given the breast. Though womb and tomb are not a rhyme in Hebrew, they are at least an assonance (*réhem, qéver*), and in any case the archetypal connection between the two would seem to be perfectly evident to the imagination of the poet, who has Job go on from the womb he never wanted to leave to the grave where he would have found lasting rest. Perhaps because rest is intrinsically a condition of stasis, the development of this theme is cumulative rather than crescendo,

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proceeding through a series of near-synonyms: to lie, be at peace, sleep, rest, be tranquil.

Meanwhile, the catalogue of all those who find repose in the grave has the effect of locating Job's suffering as only one particularly acute instance of the common human condition. Old and young, the mighty and the oppressed, all end up in the grave, and all find respite from the "suffering" (*'amal*) of existence—an idea beautifully summarized in the last line of the catalogue, line 17, "Small and great are there, / the slave free of his master," where all verbs are suppressed ("are" being merely implied in the Hebrew), as befits the place where all actions and disturbances cease.

The picture of earthly existence implied by the catalogue of course confirms Job's vision of life as nothing but trouble. Kings and counselors rebuild ruins in the cycle of creation and destruction that is the life of men—or perhaps, since Hebrew has no "re" prefix, the phrase even suggests, more strikingly, that what they build at the very moment of completion is to be thought of as already turning into ruins. Because of the interlinear parallelism between lines 12 and 13, the houses storing silver and gold stand themselves under the shadow of ruin, an Ecclesiastean image of the futility of all gathering and getting. The catalogue, beginning at the top of the social hierarchy, evokes a world where men are set against men, poor against rich, criminal against law enforcer, slave against master, and where prisons, exhausting labor, and coercion are the characteristic institutions. The third of these six lines introduces the zero-degree instance of existence and hence, from Job's viewpoint, the happiest—the stillborn infant; this both defines the lower limit of the catalogue and pointedly links up with Job's personal wish in lines 11–13 that he had died at birth.

Lines 18–21 sum up the meaning of the catalogue and effect a transition from the general plight of man back to Job's individual case. The smoothness and strength of the transition are reflected in the fact that the four lines, unusual for biblical verse, constitute a single, continuous grammatical sentence. "Why does He give to the sufferer light, / and life to the bitter of soul . . . ?" Here two of the key-words of the poem, *'ameil* and *'or*, "sufferer" and "light," are placed side by side, perhaps even explicitly reminding us of that strategic substitution of *'amal* for *'or* at the very end of the first half of the poem. Now the equation between light and life that underlay the first half of the poem is unambiguously stated, and, appropriately, in the chiasmic shape of the line, "light" and "life" are the inside terms, boxed in by "sufferer" and "bitter of soul."

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The sufferers (line 19) waiting for a death that will not come, seeking it more than treasure, invite an ironic glance backward both to the night awaiting a dawn that will never come and to the nobles storing up actual treasure that will not avail them. Line 20, picking up the digging image at the end of the preceding line, focuses the just-stated longing for death in the concrete action of rejoicing over the grave. (This effect is still stronger if one makes a small emendation of *gal* for *gil* in the word I have rendered as "exultation," which would then yield: "Who rejoice over the gravemound [or, pile of ruined stones], / who are glad to find a grave.") Line 21 then slides from the plural to the singular, as Job, in a concluding maneuver of focusing, inserts himself in the general category of the embittered who long for death, and prepares to enunciate three final, summarizing lines in the first person singular.

There are several verbal clues in this line that connect its still rather generalized third-person utterance to Job's predicament as articulated both in the poem and in the frame-story before the poem: "To a man whose way is hidden, / whom God has hedged about." Job calls himself "man," *géver*, the same word he imagined in line 1 being cried out on the night of his conception. (The fondness of biblical writers for this sort of closure of literary units through envelope structures hardly needs to be demonstrated.) He would have wanted trouble to be hidden from his eyes, to remain himself hidden in the darkness of the womb/tomb, but instead his own way has been hidden from him; he is lost in the darkness of life. The Adversary in the frame-story had complained that God showed favoritism by setting up a protective "hedge" around Job and his household (Job 1:10); here the very same idiom is used to suggest entrapment, the setting up of dire obstacles. With its echo of the frame-story, this line is also the first and only time that God is mentioned by name in the poem, as if Job found it almost too painful to refer to or address the resented source of his sufferings (the pronominal presence of God at the beginning of line 18 is indicated in the Hebrew by nothing more than the conjugated form of the verb "to give" in the third person singular).

With the final move of the transition from general to personal effected by line 21, Job now speaks out again in the first person, as he did both at the beginning of the poem (line 1) and at the beginning of the second half of the poem (lines 9–11). The form of these three concluding lines, as we would expect at the end of a large movement of intensification, is powerfully emphatic. In line 22, while "bread" and "water" are complementary terms, "groaning" is stepped up into "roaring" and "comes"

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into "pours out." The obvious emphasis of the next line is in its heavy insistence on the lexicon of fear: "For I feared a fear—it befell me, / and that which I dreaded came on me." The climactic power of the line, however, is less in its formal configuration than in its location as a psychological revelation just before the end of the poem. From the start, Job had made clear that he was in great anguish, but only now does he reveal that he has been living in a state of dread—dread before the catastrophes, dread that bitter experience has made into a virtual equivalent of life. The final line then completes a strong closural effect by doubling semantic parallelism, each verset internally as well as the line as a whole being built on the bracketing of equivalent terms: "I was not quiet, was not at peace, / did not rest, and trouble came." All these terms, of course, recapitulatively take us back by way of contrast to the tranquillity and repose of the grave evoked in lines 11–17. The last word in the line and the poem in the Hebrew is *rógez*, "trouble," breaking the pattern of the three first-person-singular verbs that preceded it and reminding us of that from which even the wicked cease in the grave (line 15).

And finally, the simple verb "to come" at the end ties up in this image of turbulence a developmental thread that has been running through the poem. "To come" in biblical idiom, depending on both context and the preposition with which it is linked, has a wide variety of meanings. The ones reflected in our poem are: to be included or counted (line 4), to enter (line 5), to substitute or serve as (line 22), to overtake (line 23), and to arrive or simply to come (line 24). In a cunning use of the technique of *Leitwort*, this seemingly innocuous word becomes a sinuous hide-and-seek presence in the poem, first attached to subjects Job tries to control verbally in his curse, then to Job's own groaning, and, climactically, to the dreaded disaster that overtakes him, and to the state of unremitting turbulence that comes to him inwardly in place of the tranquillity for which he yearns. This fine verbal thread, then, is a formal realization of the sense of terrible inexorability upon which Job's complaint is founded.

In everything I have said about this fundamental generative principle of intensification in biblical poetry, I have not intended to claim that this is a feature of poetics entirely unique to ancient Hebrew verse. The fact is that poetry in general involves, necessarily, a linear development of meaning, which means that in one respect it is a linear form of thinking or imagining. "Those images that yet / fresh images beget," Yeats wrote in one of his most famous poems about art and the imagination, and

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that, approximately, is the way most poems would seem to work: one image suggests a related one, or a further manifestation of the same underlying image; one idea leads to a cognate or consequent one; one pattern of sound, interinvolved with a particular semantic direction, leads to a similar pattern that reinforces some underlying similarity or suggestive antithesis of meaning. Since we tend to expect development of meaning in the specially significant form of discourse that is poetry, it is hardly surprising that poems in many literary traditions will begin with some general notion or image and by stages bring it to a pitch of intensity, or into a sharp focus. Having cited the sonnet at the outset of this discussion as a counterexample to biblical verse, I should add now that one can certainly find sonnets—in English, some of those of Gerard Manley Hopkins come to mind—that evince something like a structure of intensification. There are, however, important differences of degree in the way poets in different traditions may exploit this structure, and differences in what I referred to earlier as the orientation toward reality encouraged by a particular poetic system. Because, as we have abundantly seen, the very prosodic conventions on which the lines of biblical poetry were shaped led poets to a focusing of statement and a heightening of emphasis, they were repeatedly drawn to articulating whole poems and segments within poems as pronounced, often continuous progressions of mounting intensities.

This is, however, a generalization about the system as a whole that needs nuanced qualification. The movement of intensification in Job is by no means identical with that in the Prophets; and, even within a single genre, careful scrutiny may reveal that, for example, Jeremiah and Deutero-Isaiah respectively use the general orientation toward progressive heightening in rather different ways. One should not conclude, moreover, that either intensification or narrative focusing invariably dictates a single rising line of development in the structure of a biblical poem. Particularly in Psalms, one encounters many poems that show elaborate formal patterning that is not at all linear and that serves other expressive purposes than those of intensification and specification. But if we now have some general sense of the distinctive poetics of biblical verse, the time has come to see how the poetry works specifically in some of the major texts, and what links there may be between the various refractions of the biblical vision embodied in these texts and the forms of poetry through which that vision was realized.

IV

Truth and Poetry in the Book of Job

THE POWER of Job's unflinching argument, in the biblical book that bears his name, has rarely failed to move readers, but the structure of the book has been a perennial puzzle. It begins, as we all recall, with a seemingly naïve tale: Job is an impeccably God-fearing man, happy in his children and in his abundant possessions. Unbeknownst to him, in the celestial assembly the Adversary—despite the translations, not yet a mythological Satan—challenges God to test the disinterestedness of Job's piety by afflicting him. When Job, in rapid succession, has been bereft of all his various flocks and servants and then of all his children, and is stricken from head to foot with itching sores, he refuses his wife's urging that he curse God and die but instead sits down in the dust in mournful resignation.

At this point, the prose of the frame-story switches into altogether remarkable poetry. The poetic Job begins by wishing he had never been born. Then, in three long rounds of debate, he confronts the three friends who have come with all the assurance of conventional wisdom to inform him that his suffering is certain evidence of his having done evil. Job consistently refuses to compromise the honesty of his own life, and in refuting the friends' charges he repeatedly inveighs against God's crushing unfairness. Eventually, the Lord answers Job out of a whirlwind, mainly to show how presumptuous this human critic of divine justice has been. Job concedes; the prose frame-story then clicks shut by restoring to Job