On the Poetic Achievement of the Book of Job

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The Book of Job is regarded as one of the most significant works of world literature, easily standing comparison with Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and Goethe’s *Faust*.¹

Such estimations could readily be multiplied, from the writings of both biblical scholars and literary authors. And yet I think that there is still something to be said on this topic. The textbooks and commentaries all focus on the intellectual and theological achievement of the book. The ideas are in the forefront of 99% of what is written about the book, the poetry is only a vehicle for the ideas.²

Is this not a pity? Is there anything with can say in general about the poetry of the book? Something more, surely, than accounts of its strophic structures and its art of parallelism. Something more, too, than rapt apostrophes to its art.³ How does it work as a poem, what are the poet’s strategies for creating it as a work of art? Little of any value, though, can be said about the work as a poem without somehow alluding to its content; so all I can hope to achieve myself is to speak of the work without ever forgetting that it is a poem.

In this paper I will signal: (1) The poetic achievement of a author of Job in both prose and verse. (2) The structure and organization of the book as a poetic achievement. (3) The perpetual striving toward closure, which is never effected. (4) The triumph of the lyrical over the didactic.

‘Poetic achievement’, I should say by way of preface, is of course a far from unproblematic concept. However it is defined, it embodies a set of values that seem

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² It is no different for Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, I should hasten to add, and it is not a matter for criticism.

³ Among such, that of August Dillmann, *Hiob* (KEH, 2; Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 4th edn, 1891), p. xxiii has worn well (it is cited by Georg Fohrer, *Das Buch Hiob* [KAT, 16; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1963], pp. 53-54, though arty with the wrong page reference): ‘In the freshness and power of the poetic insight and feeling, in the wealth and splendour of the images, in the inexhaustible abundance of the ideas, in the delicacy of the psychological perception and observation of nature, in the depiction of the immensely manifold processes of nature and of the world of humans, in the capacity to represent such matters in ever new garb, in the art of changing tone and colour for the different speaking voices, so that melancholy and lament, wrath and passion, scorn and bitterness, longing and hope, repose and satisfaction, are represented aright, and especially to depict so aptly the majesty, dignity, power and clarity of the God who speaks, and finally in the mastery of language, in the beauty, force and sturdiness of expression, the poet shows himself the equal of the finest models of antiquity’ (Wirklich in Frische und Kraft dichterischer Anschauung und Empfindung, in Reichthum und Pracht der Bilder, in unerschöpflicher Fülle der Gedanken, in Feinheit der psychologischen Auffassung und der Naturbeobachtung, in der Malerei der mannigfaltesten Vorgänge der Natur oder Menschenwelt, in Fähigkeit dieselbe Sache in immer neuen Kleid vorzuführen, in der Kunst, je nach verschiedenen Stimmungen der Redenden Ton und Farbe zu wechseln, der Wehmuth und Klage, dem Zorn und der Leidenschaft, dem Höhn und der Bitterkeit, dem Sehnen und Hoffen, der Ruhe und Befriedigung auf gleiche Weise gerecht zu werden, ganz besonders auch die Majestät, Würde, Kraft und Klarheit des redenden Gottes treffend zu zeichnen, endlich in Herrschaft über die Sprache, in Schönheit, Wucht und Gedrungenheit des Ausdrucks stellet er sich als Dichter den besten Mustern alter Zeiten ebenbürtig zur Seite).
obvious to one critic and not to another, to one culture and not to another. While I can have no objective standard of poetic achievement to invoke in this essay, I hope to have minimized the purely personal and arbitrary by (a) focussing on formal poetic aspects of the work, and (b) by prescinding from evaluative remarks as far as possible.4

1. Poetic Achievement in Prose and Verse

Unlike most of the other weeks of world literature with which it is routinely compared, the Book of Job is not a verse work through and through, but is an unusual combination of prose and verse. This self-evident fact points of course to the author’s outstanding artistry in both media, but its significance goes deeper than that. The prose and the verse are two different modes of representation, suggesting different ways of being in the world. There are no neat labels for these modes; we could name their singularities those of the exterior vs. the interior, or of action vs. thought and feeling, or of event vs. word, or of surface vs. depth. Though they form a pair, they are not oppositional, and neither mode is privileged by the poet. Modern intellectuals may prefer the artful poetry to the (apparently) artless prose, the psychological intensity of the poetry to the (apparent) simplicism of the folktale-like prologue and epilogue. But the poet has no favourites: prose and verse are his two lenses. The prose tale, though it surrounds the poem, is not a frame like the frame of an oil painting; it is more the framework, the structural frame that stretches out the canvas. The destiny of the poem, which owes its origins to the prose prologue, is to issue in the prose epilogue; and no reading of the book will ever satisfy that does not concentrate on both lenses until a stereoscopic vision emerges.

Imagine, as a countertext, an alternative Book of Job in which the roles of the prose and the verse were reversed. The prologue and epilogue would so well suit an epic poem. I think of the Nala story, a self-contained episode in the Mahābhārata, which begins:

There was a king by the name of Nala, the mighty son of Virasena, endowed with all good virtues, handsome and a connoisseur of horses, who like the lord of the Gods stood at the head of all the kings of men … This hero, a friend to the Brahmins and learned in the Vedas, was king of Niṣada; he loved to gamble, spoke the truth, and was a great commander of armies.5

Or take another sample, much nearer to Uz, from the eighteenth-century Daniel Baker:6

In Idumea’s fair and fruitful Land,
There dwelt a Prince, on whom the lib’ral Hand
Of Heav’n its Blessings had profusely thrown:
So Great, so Good in all the East was none.
Alike for Wealth and Piety renown’d,
With Peace encompass’d, and with Glory crown’d.
Religious was his Mind, and bright his Fame;
His Name was Job, illustrious Job, a Name
By Angels lov’d, by good Men gladly heard,

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4 I have found helpful in this connection Charles Altieri, Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), esp. chap. 1.
And ev’n the Bad its awful Sound rever’d.

Or here is a verse rendering of Job’s response to his sufferings by William Langhorne (1760): ⁷

Immortal Job, resign’d to Heav’n’s Command,
Bless’d, as the giving, the resuming Hand.
No Stoic Pride the Pow’r of Mis’ry spurn’d,
As Man he suffer’d, and as Man he mourn’d;
His Fate, submissive to his God, deplor’d,
And Grief complain’d, while Piety ador’d.

However well or ill it is done, the Prologue and Epilogue to Job could be the stuff of a grand epic poem. The dialogues, for their part, might well have been constructed as an exchange in prose, like the Dialogues of Plato or the prose repartee in the plays of Shakespeare. Inasmuch as they are a debate about theology, one might have guessed that they would be more suitable for presentation in prose.

Nevertheless, things are as they are, and it is for us to recognize the effect of the author’s choices. The verse vehicle for the dialogues has the effect of turning the theological debate, with all its potentiality for sterility, into an artwork. The prose vehicle for the prologue and epilogue turn the frame into an archaic folktale, apparently naïve, but only falsely so. ⁸ Above all, the seam where prose joins to verse for the first time becomes a momentous disjunction: compared with the deliberateness and placidity of the prologue (perhaps it is only a patina), Job’s first speech in verse is like opening the door on a gale. After his saintly blessing of God (in the prose) for stealing all that was precious to him—a speech that verges on the incredible, if not the inauthentic—his raw ‘Cursed be the day I was born’, a retrospective rejection of his entire existence (in the verse), strikes a note of elemental violence. In an instant, the transition from prose to verse transports us from outer to inner, from surface to depth, from word to feeling—almost as if the poet’s decision to write both in prose and verse had been determined upon precisely for this moment of disjunction between the two.

At the end, at the transition between the divine speeches and Job’s response on the one hand and the Epilogue on the other, the disjunction between verse and prose is less dramatic, but equally rewarding to ruminate on. Yhwh and Job talk to one another in verse, as if this were the proper mode for cosmic matters, self-revelations, and the quiddity of ostriches and crocodiles. But to Eliphaz he speaks in prose, as the mode for quotidian business, negotiations and directions—as it had been in the Prologue. And as for Job, when once he has discussed the universe with God in verse, he never speaks a line of prose again as long as he lives, as if he had lost the facility for any language but that of depth and of the interior. He has laid his hand on his mouth, spoken once but will not answer, twice but will proceed no further (40.4-5).

2. Structure and Organization

The structural organization of the Book of Job is quite complex and shows a

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sophisticated artistic talent at work. But what I want to stress is not so much the quality of the structural design of the book as its achievement in creating meaning for the book as a whole.

a. Structure and drama
   Structurally, the Book of Job is very formal. At the level of first-order structure, it shows a tripartite configuration: prologue, dialogues, epilogue. In second-order structure, there is the arrangement of the dialogues in a set of three cycles, in which each of Job’s friends speaks and is answered in turn by Job. From chapter 3 to chapter 28 at least, or perhaps 31, the structure is entirely predictable.9 The problem for the poet is how to create and sustain dramatic tension and movement given this extremely formalized structure in which Auden saw

   Eliphaz, Zophar, Bildad rise together,
   Begin to creak a wooden sarabande.10

   He does so in two main ways.
   (1) On the macro level, two major unexpected developments disturb the evenness and harmony. The intrusion of the young Elihu, who has been unheard of in the prologue, creates a dramatic moment, extending the debate beyond expectation. If one intruder can give voice, can even critique all the previous speakers, the friends and Job alike, and bring new thoughts into the conversation, are there perhaps yet more interlocutors waiting in the wings, and is the debate destined to continue forever? Secondly, the appearance of Yahweh, though so earnestly desired by Job, has never been foreshadowed in the text, so that when he does speak the poet achieves a truly dramatic coup de théâtre. The world of Job has not, we have been led to assume, a world where there is much in the way of communication between the divine and the human realms. The friends know of God speaking through dreams (Eliphaz, 4.12-17; Elihu, 33.14-18) or through suffering (Elihu, 33.14, 19-28), but that God should speak in clear words out of the sky, with or without a theophanic thunderstorm, that has been no part of the arrangements.
   (2) On the micro level, despite the formalism of the dialogue cycles, there is hidden within them a dramatic gathering of energies—at least on the part of Job. While the friends rehearse the same arguments in each of their speeches, never changing their theological opinions or positions11—and the unwary reader may think this is sign that nothing is happening in these cycles—Job is changing all the time, always experimenting with doubts, ideas, proposals, wishes, summonses. In every speech he adopts a different intellectual position (so I have argued12), and the crescendo of his demands is all the more insistent against the ground bass of the friend’s inflexibility. Everywhere, then, there is a tension between formal structure and developing drama.

b. Structure and the rule of three

9 I assume that the third cycle was originally complete, and that its disorganization towards it end is simply the result of faults in transmission of the text. It may well be that the materials of all the speeches of the third cycle are still more or less present and have merely been wrongly assigned and arranged.
10 W.H. Auden, Thomas Epilogises.
One of the poet’s key structuring principles is what I call the ‘rule of three’. We can find
threeness in the overall division of the book into Prologue, Dialogue and Epilogue.
There are the three cycles of speeches. There are the three friends who come to ‘comfort’
Job and become his interlocutors for more than half the book. There is, again, for
example, the threefold structure of a poem like chapter 3: first, Job wishes that he had
never been born (vv. 3-10), then, if he had to be born, that he had not died at birth (vv.
11-19), and then, since he has had to survive, that he might die right now (vv. 20-26).
There is the threefold structure of Job’s last speech: (1) chapter 29, the former days, (2)
chapter 30, the present distress, (3) chapter 31, oath of innocence.

The poetic achievement of the book, however, lies not in the poet’s adoption of some
simple structuring device of such a kind, but in the unexpected uses he turns it to, the
deformations of the convention he has adopted. Sometimes we are surprised by an
unexpected surplus to the three; sometimes by an unprepared twist in the third
element.

We see the first deformation in the number of the friends: there are three, but there
are not three. Everything to chapter 31 has lulled us into taking for granted the rule of
three when it comes to the friends; the appearance of Elihu surprises us for it breaks the
rule, suggesting that there may be no bound to the number of possible interventions, for
if Friend 4 supervenes upon Friends 1-3, why not Friend 5, and 6, and so on in an
interminable and forever inconclusive debate? Think too of the Prologue: there are three
scenes: one on earth, one in heaven, one on earth. The narrative is concluded, is it not?
Job’s piety has been tested, and he has passed with flying colours. ‘In all this Job did not
sin or charge God with wrong-doing’ (1.22). What more needs to be done or said? The
rule of three bids us settle for closure. Yet turn the page and you find that you have not
at all arrived at the end of the Prologue. Against our expectations, scenes 2 and 3 will be
played out again, and the hurt to Job will deepen, the temptation of Job will strengthen
(2.9), and space will be opened up for a doubt of Job to cross our minds: he did not sin
with his lips (2.10); what then, in his heart?, do we not wonder?

The second deformation is when it is the third element of the three that thwarts
expectations. Take the final speech of Job. In the first element he looks back at the idyllic
life he led before disaster struck. In the second element he pictures his present unhappy
lot, the butt of jokes and satire, like a politician unmasked in a fraud. If there is to be a
third element, what shall it be? Where can the speech go from there? If the first is the
past and the second is the present, will not the third be the future? But what future has
Job? What can he hope for, what desire, now that his words are about to reach their end
(31.40) without any response from heaven? The rule of three must be overturned. In an
unprepared and unanticipated move, Job supplants the God who will not answer. God
will not declare Job innocent, so Job himself will declare himself innocent and
undeserving of all that has befallen him. Point by point, as if answering a series of
indictments, he judges himself beyond reproach. If he is not answered by God, he
answered by himself—and the divine speech becomes to that extent all the more
unexpected when it does burst out from the whirlwind.

3. A Striving toward Closure

The narrative of the book sets up a dramatic problem that requires a solution. The
ostensible question is whether Job serves God ‘for naught’, but the more real question in
the minds of readers is how Job will react to the suffering imposed upon him. At what
point will readers be satisfied with the solution that is proffered? … [perhaps I will not
There is perhaps an unnecessarily confrontational edge in this phrase. I mean to say only that, whereas most critics would happily label the poem of Job didactic, and whereas the greater part of it is indeed sustained argument, its climax, its conclusion, its end is purely lyrical. Perhaps the lyrical is a natural issue from the didactic, perhaps it was all the time the intention of the didactic.

Exhibit A of Joban lyricism must inevitably be the poem in praise of Leviathan, of which I quote only these lines:

18 Its sneezes flash forth light,  
and its eyes are like the eyelids of the dawn.  
19 From its mouth go flaming torches;  
sparks of fire leap out.  
20 Out of its nostrils comes smoke,  
as from a boiling pot and burning rushes.  
21 Its breath kindles coals,  
and a flame comes out of its mouth.  
22 In its neck abides strength,  
and terror dances before it.  
23 The folds of its flesh cling together;  
it is firmly cast and immovable.  
24 Its heart is as hard as stone,  
as hard as the lower millstone.  
25 When it raises itself up the gods are afraid;  
at the crashing they are beside themselves.

(41.18-25 NRSV; MT 41.10-17)

No one has yet called this a walf to Leviathan, but that is the manner of it.

It is far from being one of those extended similes we meet with often enough in the poem, for it has no reference beyond itself. If Leviathan means anything, stands for anything, it is perhaps some cosmic principle far beyond the text itself. As far as the text is concerned, as far as Job is concerned, all that is asked for is entire concentration on, absorption in, this amazing creature.

Structurally, this poem is the climax of the whole work. If everything has been tending towards it, its significance has to be more than crocodiles, its ostensible subject matter. In finally settling for the lyrical over the didactic the poem proffers a wholly conscious realignment of the issue under debate in the book: it changes the discourse from that of rationality and argument to that of delight and praise. From a more intellectual point of view, the divine speeches have refused the categories of the dialogues, and in particular the complaints of Job that the world is not being governed with justice. What they have left in their place is the suggestion that God does not put himself forward as world governor, and that his acts toward his creation are not to be judged in the scales of justice. Such a perception could no doubt have been expressed in didactic poetry—it can be stated quite prosaically, in fact—but it is the achievement of the poet that he handles it by means of a major shift in the poetic form, from the
didactic to the lyrical. Job himself is won over, acknowledging the two things that had been lacking from the realm of the didactic: understanding and wonder:

I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know (42.3).

In the didactic, there had been no room for wonder, since everything was already known; but also, ironically, the knowledge with which the dialogues abounded had left no space for understanding either. Job now recognizes an understanding that comes through indirection, a worldview that arises from a wondering (rather than an analytical) contemplation of reality.

I chose as an intertext, a sonnet, a lyrical poem, one that is almost wholly lyrical, where nevertheless the didactic, however delicately expressed, triumphs over the lyrical:

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dáwn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rólling level ûndernéath him steady áir, & stríding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl & gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, -- the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty & valour & act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, o my chevalier!
No wónder of it: shéer plóð makes plóugh down síllion
Shine, & blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gáll themsélves, & gásh góld-vermílion.

Gerard Manley Hopkins,
The Windhover (1877)

The kestrel or windhover appears to be the ostensible subject, and yet there is no doubt, there is no indirection, that the real subject is other. That subject is addressed in the poem (o my chevalier, ah my dear) and signalled in the sub-title (The Windhover: To Christ our Lord). The windhover that stirs the poet’s heart is no more than a billionth of the real subject in beauty and valour and act and fire, and that is what the poet most wants to say, what he has to teach.

Leviathan, on the other hand, is all the poet wants to say. Whatever thoughts Leviathan provokes in us his readers is for us to say, but for the poet the lyrical is everything. His Leviathan is the triumph of the lyrical over the didactic, and at the same time the ground of the conviction that we should never read the Book of Job except as a poem.
The Book of Job’s artful construction accounts for much of its impact. The poetic disputations are set within the prose framework of an ancient legend that originated outside Israel. This legend concerns Job, a prosperous man of outstanding piety. Satan acts as an agent provocateur to test whether or not Job’s piety is rooted merely in his prosperity. But faced with the appalling loss of his possessions, his children, and finally his own health, Job still refuses to curse God. Three of his friends then arrive to comfort him, and at this point the poetic dialogue begins. The poetic discourses The poetic section of the Book of Job, which makes up the majority of the text (Job 3-42), is much more theologically ambiguous. This portion is written as a series of impassioned speeches delivered entirely in verse. It presents a hero who is not nearly so resigned to his fate. Instead, Job tenaciously insists on the unfairness of his suffering and repeatedly challenges God to show cause for why this is happening to him. He exclaims, “God has wronged me. He has besieged me. I cry out, but get no response. I shout out, but can get no justice” (Job 19:6-7). Much of the drama in this section comes from Job’s protests and challenges to God. The Book of Job placed in the Kingdom era even though many parts were written during other eras? Written down during Kingdom era; passed on orally before then. Why were the Psalms placed in the Kingdom era even though many parts were written during other eras? Most were written during the Kingdom era; though some were written during the Nation, Exile and Return eras. The Book of Job is a book of the Hebrew Bible. It addresses the problem of theodicy, meaning why God permits evil in the world, through the experiences of the eponymous protagonist. The book is found in the Ketuvim (“Writings”) section of the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh), and is the first poetic book in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. Scholars are generally agreed that it was written between the 7th and 4th centuries BCE.