with those terms and that habitat, but also because this vocabulary carries us back to the cosmogonic beginning of God's speech (see in particular 38:16). Job's merely human vision could not penetrate the secrets of the deep, and now at the end we have before our mind's eye the magnificent, ungraspable beast who lives in the deep, who is master of all creatures of land and sea, who from his own, quite unimaginable perspective "sees" all that is lofty. Leviathan is nature mythologized, for that is the poet's way of conveying the truly uncanny, the truly inscrutable, in nature; but he remains part of nature, for if he did not it would make little sense for the poem to conclude, "he is king over all proud beasts."[9]

By now, I would hope it has become clear what on earth descriptions of a hippopotamus and a crocodile are doing at the end of the Book of Job. Obviously, there can be no direct answer to Job's question as to why, having been a decent and God-fearing man, he should have lost all his sons and daughters, his wealth, and his health. Job's poetry was an instrument for probing, against the stream of the Friends' platitudes, the depths of his own understandable sense of outrage over what befell him. God's poetry enables Job to glimpse beyond his human plight an immense world of power and beauty and awesome warring forces. This world is permeated with God's ordering concern, but as the vividness of the verse makes clear, it presents to the human eye a welter of contradictions, dizzying variety, energies and entities that man cannot take in. Job surely does not have the sort of answer he expected, but he has a strong answer of another kind. Now at the end he will no longer presume to want to judge the Creator, having been brought through God's tremendous poetry to realize that creation can perhaps be sensed but not encompassed by the mind—like that final image of the crocodile already whipping away from our field of vision, leaving behind only a shining wake for us to see. If Job in his first response to the Lord (40:2, 4–5) merely confessed that he could not hope to contend with God and would henceforth hold his peace, in his second response (42:2–6), after the conclusion of the second divine speech, he humbly admits that he has been presumptuous, has in fact "obscured counsel" about things he did not understand. Referring more specifically to the impact of God's visionary poem, he announces that he has been vouchsafed a gift of sight—the glimpse of an ungraspable creation surging with the power of its Creator: "By what the ear hears I had heard You, / but now my eyes have seen You."

V

Forms of Faith in Psalms

OF ALL the books of the Bible in which poetry plays a role, Psalms is the one set of texts whose poetic status has been most strongly felt throughout the generations, regardless of the vagaries of translation, typographical arrangement of verses, and notions about biblical literary form. This unwavering perception that the psalms were formal poems—even in ages, for example, when most readers imagined that the prophets spoke nothing but emphatic figurative prose—was no doubt reinforced by the musical indications in the texts themselves. Many of the psalms, that is, are explicitly presented as liturgical songs to be intoned to the accompaniment of the lyre, the ten-stringed instrument, cymbals, drums, and whatever else was once used to fill the temple courts with melody. The name of the book in Western languages, from the Greek *psalmos*, a song sung to a plucked instrument, stresses this musical character, as does the full Hebrew title, *mizmorei tehillim*, "songs of praise." It is symptomatic of the general response to these poems that so many poets in Renaissance England, though equally innocent of Hebrew and of an understanding of biblical poetic structure, should have tried their hand at producing metrical English versions of Psalms. In whatever way biblical versification was thought to work, it was almost universally assumed that the psalms exhibited the rhythmic regularity, the symmetries, the cadenced repetitions, of artful poems.

A countervailing assumption, however, has also enjoyed a great deal

of currency down to our own times: that if the Book of Psalms is poetry, it is quintessentially a "poetry of the heart," a spontaneous outpouring of feeling expressed with directness and simplicity, almost without the intervention of artifice, its poignancy and universal appeal deriving from this very lack of conscious artifice. An extreme but by no means uncharacteristic instance of this view is an effusion by the Israeli *littérateur,* Yeshurun Keshet, written in 1954: "In the Book of Psalms everything is said in a primary fashion, without any 'literariness.' What characterizes the poetic expression of Psalms is that the poet allows objects and nature to speak for themselves without explaining them to us as modern poets often do. . . ."[1] This statement strikes me as fundamentally misconceived in imagining that any kind of literary expression can really escape "literariness," but one of course sees the features of Psalms that the writer has in mind. Whereas in Job, for example, one encounters daring leaps of invention in the imagery or, in the Prophets, intricate elaborations of rhetorical figures, the psalms do generally stick to something more "primary"—which does not mean something less literary but, on the contrary, a greater reliance on the conventional, the familiar, in imagery, in the sequence of ideas, in the structure of the poem. Such a reliance on the conventional is perfectly understandable. For a text that is to be chanted by pilgrims in procession on their way up the temple mount, or recited by a supplicant at the altar or by someone recovered from grave illness offering a thanksgiving sacrifice, you don't want a lot of fancy footwork in the imagery and syntax; you want, in fact, an eloquent rehearsal of traditional materials and even traditional ways of ordering those materials in a certain sequence.

This conventionality of the psalms, linked as it is in so many instances to the liturgical function of the poems, has led to a pronounced stress on typologies in studies of the psalms, beginning with the form-critical categories proposed by the German scholar Hermann Gunkel early in our century.[2] I will not attempt to review or refine any of these typologies here, but I would like to observe that, though such classifications have a certain usefulness in making clearer the various genres of psalms, they tend to miss an essential point about literary convention in their search for the general formulas that define a genre. Convention gives writers of both verse and prose a solid framework in which to construct their own discourse, but good writers always exert a subtle pressure on convention, in certain ways remaking it as they build within it.

Our own post-Romantic predisposition to originality in literature may lead to a certain perplexity about how to think of a collection where in

any given genre a dozen or more poems seem to be saying the same thing, often with more or less the same metaphors and sometimes even with some of the same phrasing. What I think we need to be more attuned to as readers is the nuanced individual character—"originality" in fact may not be the relevant concept—of different poems reflecting the same genre and even many of the same formulaic devices. There are abundant instances in later poetic tradition, as in Arabic and Hebrew poetry of medieval Spain, Petrarchan love poetry, much English Augustan verse, where the power of the individual poem is meant to be felt precisely in such a fine recasting of the conventional, and that is what we ought to be able to discern more minutely in the psalms.

Let me state the question about the form of Psalms in the most basic fashion: apart from the obvious utility of versification for texts that in many instances were actually sung, what difference does it make to the content of the psalms that they are poems? At this point I must confess allegiance, repeatedly confirmed by my own experience as a reader, to a notion about the language of poetry that was central to the American New Critics a generation ago and that more recently has been corroborated from a very different perspective by the Soviet literary semioticians: that poetry, working through a system of complex linkages of sound, image, word, rhythm, syntax, theme, idea, is an instrument for conveying densely patterned meanings, and sometimes contradictory meanings, that are not readily conveyable through other kinds of discourse. To be sure, in any given text, some of the proposed linkages may turn out to be a product of the interpreter's ingenuity, and a poem may exhibit real disjunctures or inconsistencies where we look for intricate unities. Nevertheless, it need not be an act of "idolatry of the text" to claim, on the evidence of countless poems ancient and modern, that poetry is a way of using language strongly oriented toward the creation of minute, multiple, heterogeneous, and semantically fruitful interconnections in the text. As Jurij Lotman has put it, invoking contemporary notions of computer science, if we understood better how a poem achieved the astonishing degree of "information storage" that it does, our understanding of cybernetics in general might well be advanced.[3]

The psalms are of course poems written out of deep and often passionate faith. What I am proposing is that the poetic medium made it possible to articulate the emotional freight, the moral consequences, the altered perception of the world that flowed from this monotheistic belief, in compact verbal structures that could in some instances seem simplicity itself. Psalms, at least in the guise of cultic hymns, were a

common poetic genre throughout the ancient Near East, but as the form was adopted by Hebrew poets, it often became an instrument for expressing in a collective voice (whether first person plural or singular) a distinctive, sometimes radically new, sense of time, space, history, creation, and the character of individual destiny. In keeping with this complex expressive purpose, many psalms, on scrutiny, prove to have a finely tensile semantic weave that one would not expect from the seeming conventionality of the language.

An instructive case in point is the very first psalm in the traditional collection. The ancient editors must have felt, with considerable justice, that this was a characteristic psalm and thus fitting to set at the beginning of the collection, perhaps as a kind of introduction to the rest. The very formula with which it begins, "Happy the man," occurs in a whole series of psalms, as do its praise of God's teaching (*torah*) and its assured sense that the wicked will be requited with evil, the righteous with success. This poem has been described as a Wisdom psalm, that is, a psalm spelling out the practical consequences of the good and the evil life respectively. It works entirely in the third person as a series of factual assertions—there is no distraught or exultant "I" here addressing God. There is in fact not much that seems "poetic" about Psalm 1 and certainly nothing that looks original. The only figurative language occurs in the middle three of the poem's seven lines, and the agricultural similes that are invoked could scarcely be more conventional—fruit-bearing trees over against wind-driven chaff. In what, then, does the poem's power reside, and in what way might it be, for all its simplicity and conventionality, more than the versification of an ancient monotheistic moral cliché? In the translation that follows, the numeration is of poetic lines because there is one more line than there are verses in the traditional division. Also, perhaps a little eccentrically, I have set out the initial phrase as an introductory formula or virtual title before the first line, since otherwise line 1 would begin with an impossibly long rhythmic unit.

Happy the man:

1 Who has walked not in the council of the wicked, nor on the way of sinners has stood,
nor in the session of fools has sat.
2 Rather, in the Lord's teaching his delight, His teaching he murmurs day and night.
3 He shall be like a tree planted by streams of water, that gives its fruit in season,

4 Whose leaf does not wither and all it puts forth, prospers.
5 Not so the wicked: rather, like the chaff the wind blows.
6 Thus the wicked will not stand up in judgment, nor sinners in the council of the righteous.
7 For the Lord embraces the way of the righteous, and the way of the wicked is lost.

To begin with, we might note that this poem, which insists on a neat contrast between the wicked and the righteous, is fashioned with a tight logical structure of antithesis. In a manner rather uncharacteristic of biblical poetic style, the psalmist takes pains to place explicit indicators of logical transition at the head of four different versets: rather—not so—rather—thus (*ki-'im, l'o-ken, ki-'im, 'al-ken*). Reality is thus made to yield an exact moral calculus: there are things the just man will not do; indeed, there is something antithetical he does instead; the fate of the wicked is the contrary of the fate of the just; and there is a consequential generalizing summary ("thus") to be drawn from what has been asserted. The assertion itself, of course, is precisely what seems most dubious to the author of Job. The force of the poetic formulation of this idea of neatly retributive justice is that the language of the poem makes it seem built into the very structure of reality or, at any rate, is strongly felt by the speaker to be built into the structure of things, and as a result the didactic movement from "not so" to "thus" is in the poem something more than preaching insistence. Perhaps the best way to see this is to look closely at the use of verbs, which are important in regard to their denotation, sequence, and grammatical voice, and the way they support and define the images in lines 3–5.

The first line, and, emphatically, the only triadic one in the poem, defines the righteous man negatively (and thus simultaneously introduces his antithesis, the wicked) in a narrative sequence from one verset to the next of three verbs: walk, stand, sit. If he actually performed these actions, he would be on the constant move, headed toward the destination (third verset) of being ensconced in an assembly of fools (or of the insolent, the Hebrew *letz* embracing both these meanings). When in the first verset of line 2 the righteous man is characterized by what he actually does do, he initially is given no verb, then, in the second verset, a verb of contemplative activity or conning a text (the Hebrew *hagah* can mean both "to murmur" or "recite" and "to meditate on"). The image that describes him is then introduced (line 3) not with an active verb but with a past participle that denotes the opposite of movement—"planted."

It is from this firmly anchored location that the tree—not the man, verbal activity being displaced from the referent to the vehicle of the simile—can put forth fruit and grow unwithering leaves. The last verset of line 4 in the original is a kind of punning summation of the simile because the verbs there (Hebrew having no equivalent of "it") evidently refer to the tree but could as well refer to the man. When the wicked are finally introduced for direct characterization, in line 5, they are not the subject but rather the object of a verb, and one that denotes unstable motion, a scattering action.[4] The righteous man stands still—indeed, his righteousness may depend on his ability to stand still and reflect upon true things. The wicked are in constant motion, restless, without direction, carried hither and thither by forces over which they exert no control. This contrast is even reinforced quantitatively within the limits of the compact poem. At the poem's figurative center, lines 3–5, the rooted substantiality of the righteous is accorded two lines, four versets, while the fleeting insubstantiality of the wicked is given one line, and really only one verset.

The last two lines of the poem close it in the envelope structure (the end formally echoing the beginning) of which biblical writers in all genres are so fond. The poem began with sinners and the wicked; it ends with those same agents of wrongdoing, into whose midst, however, the righteous—mentioned explicitly as such for the first time—are now introduced in a neat chiastic pattern: wicked and sinners—righteous—righteous—wicked. The poem began by invoking evil councils and assemblies; it concludes by mentioning proper councils and legal sessions, in which the wicked cannot hope to prevail, or cannot presume to join. The movement attached through verbs to the wicked proceeds from being windblown to the negative not standing up (a different verb from "stand" in line 1) to being lost. But the syntax of the final line articulates this contrast between the just and the unjust with a further complication of meaning. The first verset of line 7 is the only point in the poem in which God appears as a grammatical subject: God "knows" (a verb implying special intimacy, as in its frequent sexual sense; hence my translation, "embraces") the way of the righteous. The second verset is then made pointedly to swerve from syntactic parallelism while it pursues an antithesis: and the way of the wicked is lost (or perishes). The very "way" of evildoers on which at the beginning of the poem the fortunate man did not stand is here at the end seen to lead nowhere, or to perdition. The wicked themselves are not even accorded the dignity of

being a proper grammatical subject of an active verb: windblown like chaff, whatever way they go on is trackless, directionless, doomed.

The effectiveness of the whole poem surely has a good deal to do, as many readers have recognized, with the archetypal simplicity of the contrasted images of tree and chaff. But the study in movement and stillness that underlies both the figurative and the nonfigurative lines gives the pious assertions a certain depth of perception. We may even wonder whether this evocation of impotent kinesis over against fruitful stasis may be conceived in terms of moral psychology—as, for example, precisely that contrast is conceived by Jane Austen in *Mansfield Park*—and not merely as a matter of reward and punishment. That is, the essence of wrongdoing is to miss the mark (that is etymologically what the Hebrew word for "sinners" means), to pursue foolish or unattainable objects of desire that will lead only to frustration, while the man whose delight is in the Lord's teaching knows the art of sitting still in the right place, of finding fulfillment within the limits of law and of his own human condition.

The morally symbolic use of agricultural imagery in Psalm 1 points to a general feature of the collection: there is no real nature poetry in Psalms, because there is in the psalmist's view no independent realm of nature, but there is creation poetry, which is to say, evocations of the natural world as the embodiment of the Creator's ordering power and quickening presence. The justly celebrated Psalm 8 is a luminous instance of how poetic structure was made to yield a picture of the world that eloquently integrated underlying elements of Israelite belief. The poem might be described as a kind of summarizing paraphrase of the account of creation in Genesis 1, more or less following the same order of things created and stressing, as does Genesis 1, man's God-given dominion over the created world. The difference in form, however, between the two texts is crucial, and instructive. Genesis 1, being narrative, reports creation as a sequence of acts—indeed, as a kind of regulated procession moving from the dividing of light and darkness and the making of heaven, earth, and sea to God's rest on the seventh day after the creation of the animal kingdom and of man. It is all forward movement, from origins through time to a fulfillment. Psalm 8 assumes as a background this narrative process, but takes it up after its completion, and like many lyric poems it is the complex realization of one moment of perception: the speaker looking around at the created world and marveling at it, and at man's place in it. All literary texts are of course serial, unrolling in

time like the scrolls on which they were once written. A narrative may to some extent qualify this temporal thrust by inviting us through its deployment of repetition and analogy to shuttle mentally back and forth along the text continuum as we read. It is the short lyric poem, however, that has the greatest potential for neutralizing the temporal movement inherent in verbal artworks. Within a small compass, through the use of intricate and closely clustered devices of linkage and repetition, it can create the illusion of actual simultaneity, offering to the mind's eye a single panorama with multiple elements held nicely together. Let us see how this is done in Psalm 8.

For the leader on the *gittit*, a psalm of David.

1	O Lord, our master,	how majestic Your name in all the earth.
2	You, whose splendor was told[5] over the heavens,	from the mouth of babes and sucklings.
3	You have founded strength because of Your foes,	to put an end to enemy and avenger.
4	When I see Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,	the moon and stars You established,
5	What is man that You should note him,	human creature, that You pay him heed?
6	You have set him little less than the angels,	with honor and glory You have crowned him.
7	You have made him rule over the work of Your hands,	all, You have placed at his feet.
8	Sheep and oxen, all of them,	and beasts of the field as well.
9	Bird of the heavens and fish of the sea,	what passes over the paths of the seas.
10	O Lord, our master,	how majestic Your name in all the earth.

Let me hasten to say that what I have laid out as lines 2 and 3 (I will explain in a moment the reasons for my lineation) is not very intelligible in the Hebrew text that has been passed down to us. Though "from the mouth of babes and sucklings" has become a proverbial phrase, it is far from clear what these infants are doing in our poem, and the relevance to the context of the following line about foes and avengers is equally obscure. Even so, something can be discerned about the place of these initial utterances in the structure of the poem, and our concern is that structure, not the solution of the textual crux at the beginning.

Psalm 8 gives us the extreme instance of envelope structure—the repetition in a refrain of the first line as the last. That, of course, is a

common ending device in many bodies of poetry, but it is used only occasionally in biblical verse. The appropriateness of a refrain for our poem is clear enough. A perfect circle is closed: the majesty of God, affirmed at the beginning, is restated verbatim at the end, but with the sense accrued through the intervening eight lines of what concretely it means for His name to be majestic throughout the earth. The Hebrew says specifically "all" the earth, thus framing the whole poem with two symmetrical "all's", and that monosyllable, a mere grammatical particle, becomes the chief thematic key-word of the psalm. His dominion is over all, heaven and earth, angels and men and creatures of the field and air and sea, and He places "all" at the feet of man.

After this resounding formula of introduction and address to God in line 1, we may be able, tentatively, to rescue a few fragments from the enigma of lines 2–3. The heavens telling God's glory (as in Psalm 19) is intelligible enough, and leads directly to the assertion of line 4 about the awe-inspiring sight of heaven and moon and stars. "Heavens" in the first verset of line 2 also links up with "earth" at the end of line 1, thus recalling the creation story and reinforcing the idea of allness, "heaven and earth" being good biblical idiom for "all of creation." I have made a hesitant guess that "from the mouth of babes . . ." is a parallel verset to the one in which the heavens tell God's splendor because it would also seem to be an indication of praise—that is, Your magnificence is borne witness to by the whole range of creation, from the beauty of the heavens to the prattle of infants. Any construal of the following line is bound to be conjectural. I would propose that the notion of laying low enemies and "founding" something strong, in the context of a creation story, looks like an elliptic allusion to the mythic imagery of cosmogony often borrowed from the Canaanite tradition, in which God, like Baal, is said to have subdued a primordial sea beast in order to secure the world on dry land.[6] If my guess is right, this would also introduce the sea at the beginning of the poem to make a cosmogonic triptych with heaven and earth. At any rate, "founded" at the beginning of line 3 would seem to be linked with "established" at the end of line 4, both pointing to the completed work of solid creation, whose perfection the speaker now beholds.

The only verb in the poem attached to a human action is "see" at the beginning of line 4. The speaker, having begun with a cosmic perspective and a perhaps not yet personal address to God in the first three lines, now introduces himself explicitly into the frame of the poem, and we are invited to stand with him, an individual human being looking up at

the splendor of the night sky and marveling over man's place in the intricate scheme of things. This sequence of six lines before the final refrain constitutes a special adaptation of the focusing impulse of biblical verse, being a vertical metonymic descent down the scale of creation. First the speaker beholds the heavens, then, in the second verset, according to a pattern we have seen elsewhere, what is contained within them—the moon and the stars. The heavens are "the work of Your fingers," apparently as an elegant variant of the standard locution, "the work of Your hands" (line 7), but especially since this particular construct form appears only here in the whole Bible, we may well be expected to hear in it the indication of especially delicate work as the speaker scans the exquisite tracery of the night sky. After the focusing between versets of line 4, we move from heaven to man, who is a little lower than the heavens and the celestial beings (*'elohim*), and below him to the rest of God's handiwork, "all" that is "at his feet" (the Hebrew says literally "under his feet," thus reinforcing the downward vertical movement in the picture of the cosmic hierarchy). The famous cry of amazement over God's singling out of man (line 5) is a particularly striking instance of the intuition of counterpoint that often guided biblical poets in their occasional use of static semantic parallelism. In every other line of the poem, there is dynamic movement between the versets: specification, focusing, heightening, or sequentiality. Here, by contrast, at the exact thematic center and in the fifth of the poem's ten lines, semantic movement is slowed to allow for the strong, stately emphasis of virtual synonymity, noun for noun and verb for verb in the same syntactical order: "What is man that You should note him, / human creature, that You pay him heed?"

God has set this human creature only a little lower than the divine, and that means (parallelism of specification and sequentiality) crowning him with honor and glory, quite like the attributes He Himself possesses (lines 1 and 2). The next line (7) then specifies the meaning of this coronation as man's having been given dominion over earthly things, and thus makes a transition in the vertical scheme from heaven through man to the world below. The last two lines before the refrain, with their inventory of living creatures loosely recalling Genesis 1 (though the terms are different from those in Genesis), go on to specify what is contained within the "all," the "work of Your hands" referred to in line 7. In apt concision, the four versets invoke both domestic and wild animals and all three spheres of terrestrial life—field and air and sea. The last of these versets focuses "fish of the sea" by replacing it with a

kenning—indeed, one that sounds vaguely Anglo-Saxon—"what passes over the paths of the sea." Interestingly, it is the only active verb in the poem attached to a created thing. God acts on all realms of creation; man beholds the various realms; but until this penultimate movement the created things themselves have been merely listed as objects of God's attention and that of his surrogate, man. Now, in the final detail of the catalogue of creation, we see an image of movement, a nice intimation in this panoramic view of the chain of being of that teeming vitality, surging through the most inaccessible reaches of the created world, over which man has been appointed to rule.

The God of biblical faith, however, as has often been noted, is not a God of the cosmos alone but also a God of history. A good many psalms—including those referring explicitly to the Judean king and classified as "royal psalms"—are responses to the most urgent pressures of the historical moment, whether as pleas to God to save His king and people at a time of national danger or as celebrations of some recent or remembered military victory. Poems of this sort abound in the premonotheistic world, where every nation was presumed to have its own particular god of battles whose intercession was solicited in time of military need. Even in monotheistic guise, this may seem one of the less edifying forms of worship (one recalls Voltaire's bitter mockery at the beginning of *Candide*, when he has both sides simultaneously celebrate Te Deum over the smoking battlefield for having been vouchsafed the grace to slaughter thousands of the enemy). But the strongest of what we may call the political psalms are neither as narrow nor as crudely pragmatic as modern preconceptions might lead us to expect. Most fundamentally, the composers of the political psalms were confronted with expressing in poetic form a paradox at the heart of biblical religion: the universalistic belief in a single God of all the earth Who had chosen as the medium of His relations with humanity the particularism of a compact with one people. This paradox had a major geographical corollary. The psalms having been made for use in and around the temple cult in Jerusalem, how was the Israelite to imagine this capital city of a nation-state, first conquered by David for strategic and political reasons, as the "city of our God," the God who was master of all the nations of the world? The poetic medium, I would suggest, with its extraordinary capacity for interlocking disparate elements and establishing intricate progressions of images and ideas, provided a uniquely apt instrument for the expression of such meanings held in high tension. Here is Psalm 48, which would seem to be a song sung by—or perhaps