

The Study of Classical Hebrew Poetry: Epistemological Issues

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It is possible that reading POETRY has fallen into desuetude in our ultra-technological society, because the poetic rendering of reality does not provide the type of instant information we expect. Nevertheless, a rhymed structure gives flavour to a card, as much as a balanced quatrain makes a song immortal. What makes POETRY stand in such a privileged and yet, intriguingly, ignored position? Is it the coexistence of non-sense and emotional value that meet in POETRY? Or rather a deep inner sense of rhythm that binds our life from the thinking process to the most ordinary activity? (Aviram 1994, 43) Shall we hope for a better and easier understanding of POETRY if we approach literary criticism expecting to perceive poetic structures?

It might seem obvious that as meaning derives from form, so a proper understanding of specific literary forms (genres, subgenres) should precede our understanding of POETRY. However, does our own experience confirm this theoretical knowledge? How frequently do we leave a poem with the satisfaction of having understood it? Probably even at the theoretical level things are not as clear as we might expect? Moreover, can we nonchalantly transfer this modern concern into old, remote and non-cognate literatures, specifically Hebrew?

As we will indicate below, the issue of reading Hebrew literature intelligibly is a painful exercise, which involves interdisciplinary knowledge, exquisite sensitivity and elevated literary ability, to name just a few qualities. Given the large and varied corpus biblical texts offer and the variety of theoretical approaches as well, a few preliminary delimitations are in place. Epistemologically, we do not perceive form without content, meaning being a natural outcome of the balanced observation of the two. Nevertheless, besides the text itself (utterance), the

hermeneutical circle comprises an encoder (writer), a decoder (reader), and the proper response of the decoder to encoder's stimuli. All these elements are important for the interpretation of the text. This theory of the process of communication, guarantees that our expectations of finding meaning in literary forms might be met, if our response to original stimuli is calibrated in accordance with the author's intention by the mediacy of stylistic devices (henceforth, SDs).

The enterprise of reading POETRY with understanding, and differentiating POETRY from PROSE, constitute two basic issues, which one needs to address before launches the search for a methodology. They enable us to mould our method in close correspondence with the peculiarities of literary language, avoiding breaches in literary theory. There is a general distinction assumed here, one between POETRY and PROSE, which leaves unnoticed a large diversity of texts. As the following discussion will indicate, a general description of the ANE literary texts as POETRY against PROSE should be neutral, without entangling the difficulties prompted by the modern literary typology as genres.

How do we differentiate POETRY from PROSE?

By addressing this question we have entered the field of literary criticism. Critics generally agree on the matter that if there is such a thing as literature, there have to be at least two main literary genres, PROSE and POETRY. Both of them, whether oral or written, are responsible for creating a specific effect on the audience. Most times, they are judged on the level of aesthetics, POETRY being related generally with subjectivity, vivid expression and atemporality, PROSE being completely the opposite. Theoretically, however, defining POETRY as opposed to PROSE proves to be rather a difficult task. This delimitation, as many others might be, proves to be extremely difficult in the post-modern context, where relativism replaced standardization, and deconstruction became norm (cf. Jakobson 1987, 368ff).

Aviram avoids the traditional definition of aesthetics, refraining from defining pure categories of POETRY and PROSE. Instead, he promotes POETRY and PROSE as hypothetical directions (Aviram 1994, 44f).¹ The two opposite extremes are by themselves theoretical probabilities and factual impossibilities. Both of them represent asymptotic ends.² One to apply the idea of binary scale to biblical criticism was Tremper Longman III (1987, 20-1), who concluded that POETRY is characterized by a higher level of artistry than PROSE.³ A similar dissatisfaction with the procedures available for discriminating literary texts is expressed by Alonso Schökel too (1988, 19).

Consequently, at one end of the spectrum there is ordinary language which is supposed to be *transparent*, i.e., it draws the reader's attention not to its rhetorical features (style, images, figures), nor to its formal features (how it sounds), but rather to its thematic content. Expository and scientific writing share this very quality. At the other end of the spectrum there is *opaque* language, i.e. language with a strong interest in sounds, and therefore very difficult to understand. One can discover its meaning only in the larger context of a conventional system of signs with potential meaning (Aviram 1994, 49).

One can render the binary opposition transparent: opaque as the two extremes of a bipolar spectrum because of the dual nature of the linguistic sign, as first described by Saussure. Transparent language focuses our attention on the signified, whereas opaque language focuses it on the signifiers, which always mean more than just one thing. Signifiers are bound together into a network of contexts, and can easily lose their meaning, reverting to meaninglessness. This means that, in the case of POETRY, the surface signifiers demand a great deal of attention. What characterizes POETRY then is the tension between sense and sound, between meaningful and

¹ Niccacci's courageous attempt to propose pure POETRY on the basis of his criteria, as opposed to Aviram's suggestion, is presented below.

² By doing so, Aviram hopes "to isolate the qualities that serve as criteria for what is more poetic or less poetic," so that he might formulate a definition of POETRY (Aviram 1994, 46).

³ Longman defines artistry in terms of rhetoric. He identified three synthetic characteristics of HP as present in all works of Hebrew literature, i.e. parallelism, imagery and terseness. One might penalize the school of New Criticism for mixing rhetorical devices with stylistics and structuralism (O'Connor 1980, 10).

meaningless, between transparent and opaque, which tend to be in some kind of a balance, whereas in PROSE form is supporting content. That makes a poem to be an utterance designed to draw the receptor's attention simultaneously in the opposed directions of mere sound and meaning (Aviram 1994, 50).

Aviram is aware that advocating an identical perception of POETRY throughout history is not an eligible choice, as the assumption that the original reader could understand the old POETRY. It is very probable that at any particular time, for any particular reader, some kind of spectrum existed. This is particularly true because 'art is an integral part of the social structure, a component that interacts with all the others and is itself mutable since both the domain of art and its relationship to the other constituents of the social structure are in constant dialectical flux' (Jakobson 1987, 377). In other words, an ordinary citizen and speaker of a given language would have recognised with ease the quality of a given text (written or spoken) to stimulate aesthetics more than others.

However, Aviram is promoting a unique organizing principle, i.e. *rhythm* (see *infra*), with particular embedments throughout history, because the concept of POETRY is conditioned temporally. One may suggest two basic tests to distinguish POETRY from PROSE: (1) if a part of a text, out of its context, cannot be identified as POETRY, the text is PROSE; (2) if for a given text a paraphrase can easily be made, the text is PROSE. The reciprocals are also applicable. These affirmations can help us to define POETRY by contrast, because it is obvious that PROSE's function is bound to the context and it facilitates an easy understanding of the text.

Far from being comprehensive, this definition requires further refining. Context is equally important for PROSE as for POETRY. The longer the poem is, the more important the context of the individual sayings becomes. Moreover, an easy paraphrase does not necessarily imply prosaic features. Due to their clarity in meaning, i.e. they are easy to paraphrase, nursery rhymes continue to entertain children any longer. Therefore, one needs to regard these tests from the perspective of

the bipolar spectrum suggested by Aviram. There are infinite options of registers on which one can arrange any work of literature without risking total failure, and they compensate the lack of an ideal representative. Jakobson militates for a liberal approach to POETRY, but holistic, according to which poeticity is not to be reduced mechanically to its components. Instead, he invokes emotivity and opacity as main characteristics of such texts:

But how does poeticity manifest itself? Poeticity is present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and inner form, acquire weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality. (Jakobson 1987, 378)

It is obvious that both emotivity and opacity display a high degree of subjectivity. We are still left without a decisive, objective criterion to distinguish POETRY from PROSE in world literatures in general or in ANE literature in particular. If the means to stir emotions in the mind of an Ancient Semite were different, which were they? If rhythm as a state of mind was embodied in a particular way in ANE literature, what was it? The matter of conscious use of structures noted by modern scholars by the ancient poets stays with the purposive value of poetic language (Jakobson 1987, 250-61). Spontaneous creation is not excluded, particularly when revelatory texts are concerned, but this cannot restrict us from assuming consciously and painstakingly the mission of careful analysis of the texts.

How do we read POETRY with understanding?

There should be no question about the linguistic value of the poetic discourse. Since it makes use of the verbal art, poetics is notoriously part of linguistics, in spite of all critics. Nevertheless, as one can approach linguistics synchronically and diachronically, so can POETRY itself (Jakobson 1987, 63ff). It seems that we need to find out particular textual devices, which embed Aviram's timeless principle of *rhythm* in HPy. Are rhetorical devices, as material devices, all that matters, or are they to be considered in addition to a much more rigid poetic form? Our search seems to be a matter at the interface between form, content, and meaning.

Aviram understood the relatedness of the three concepts in three main directions throughout the history of literary criticism. The first one, which found recent support in New Criticism and post-structuralism, considers poetic form a plain rhetorical device. Form is a matter of style and, thus, subordinated to meaning. The second option, highly appreciated by the structuralists (Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss), admits that form has meaning by itself and depends on the mediation of conventional social codes. They promote the existence of a formal tradition, certain ideas being associated with each form in part. Consequently, meaning in POETRY would derive from the interpretation of the allegorized tradition, but form and meaning have no relation whatsoever. What actually happens is that poetic form is beyond meaning and therefore, uninterpretable by itself (Aviram 1994, 111).

The third option, the one Aviram embraces and considers a middle way, would be when form transcends its traditional associations. Then POETRY has a dual nature, being an intriguing association of meaning and *sound* (not identical with *form* in the previous theories), and thus responsible for drawing the mind in two opposite directions: sense and non-sense, transparency and opacity. POETRY is both a statement that makes sense (has meaning) and a sequence of sounds producing a rhythm and drawing attention to the physical properties of its words (has sound). As seen above, Aviram talks of *rhythm* not as a rhetorical device but as a controlling principle for both meaning and sound. It relates to the mental process of comparing and contrasting, which produce metaphors. By itself, although it has no meaning, rhythm still has an aesthetic value, because one can experience it physically and cognitively. Rhythm is the expression of a human social need for less formalism. Aviram (1994, 135-51) explains human reaction toward rhythm as a drive towards it, just as in similar terms Freud spoke about human activities in general as based on the *pleasure principle*.⁴

⁴ After presenting the insufficiencies of Russian formalism, Aviram traced his own theory down to Nietzschean tradition (chapter 8) in general, and to Freud's and Lacan's psychoanalytic revisions of Nietzsche.

Jakobson did not ignore this reality when he spoke of the proper interpretation given to POETRY. On the contrary, he admitted “the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination” (1987, 71). Obviously specific poetic genres display a conflation of the verbal function with the dominant poetic function. Thus, epic poetry (third person oriented) involves the referential function of language, lyric poetry (first person oriented) is connected with the emotive function, exhortative poetry (second person oriented) has rather a conative function (Jakobson 1987, 70).

Expressing ones thoughts metaphorically, i.e. allegorizing the reality, the poet(ess) attempts to access the sublime, which in most cases means a challenge of the tradition. The sublime power of rhythm consists exactly of this challenge balanced by the intrinsic ability of becoming a tradition on its own. Two contradictory principles inherent to rhythm – destabilization and tradition – both undermine the provinciality of day’s *Weltanschauung* and encourage its reformation (Aviram 1994, 229). Finding meaning in POETRY is the mental process that allows the reader to understand the metaphors across their discontinuity, thus revealing the riddle the poem is.

The theory of POETRY advocated by Aviram preserves the importance of *sound* (form) without subordinating it to *meaning*, thus without reducing it to a rhetorical device. The relation between *sound* and *meaning* is analogous to Nietzsche’s relation between the Dionysian and the Apollonian: they are mutually dependent, but the process of reading treats *meaning* as an interpretation (representation) of rhythm (Aviram 1994, 236). In conclusion, form is not all we seek, neither rhetorical devices, nor content itself. Aviram applies his method to several old and new ballads, making clear the procedure he favours. The thematic meaning of a poem comes first

as an aftermath of a traditional consideration of the content, from which the poem is approached as an allegorized expression of its rhythmical form.⁵

As a mental principle, rhythm is a paradox; it is both difficult to perceive and easy to guess. It is easy because human experience and thinking share common basic processes. On that basis, we can assume how a human might have reacted or might react to a particular stimulus. If social strings that might have constrained that human being to react in a particular way are unknown to us, then rhythm is more difficult to perceive. In short, POETRY interpretation is a complex process that cannot restrict itself to literary forms, rhetorical devices, or internal content. The older the poem, the remoter its setting-in-life is; the remoter the setting-in-life, the stranger its author is; the stranger the author, the harder its interpretation is. It is our desire not to obstruct the beauty of the poems and the skilfulness of their authors, but the only chance we have in order to assess these relates strictly to a careful consideration of the forms. It is all we may be certain of having. The larger the corpus and more analytic the approach, more certain is the reconstruction of the traditional forms, and clearer the derivative meaning.

Nevertheless, what criteria matter in such an analysis? This question will receive a proper answer if a further distinction is in place, that between pure linguistic analysis and stylistic analysis (Riffaterre 1959, 154). The distinction is based on the effect that both language and style have on the reader. While language expresses, style stresses. Hence, style is understood as an emphasis of some kind (expressive, affective, aesthetic), added to the information conveyed by the linguistic structure, without alteration of meaning. Whereas the linguist has the task of collecting all the features of the speech of his informant, the style analyst chooses only those features, which carry out the most conscious intentions of the author. Whilst the linguist's purpose in analysing the data is reconstructing a past state of the language, the style analyst's purpose is to reconstruct

⁵ It might become clearer now the reason which motivated so many exegets to avoid a singular exegetical method when applied to Psalms interpretation. Some of these methods will be reviewed in another article (e.g. D. Pardee, E. Wendland).

the effects the poem's style had at the time of its creation, and to suggest corresponding reactions of the modern readers or even correct the wrong ones.

Both traditional and Gricean understanding of communication have in common an encoder and a decoder as the two poles of the communication system, being in contact by means of an utterance, which is interpreted according to a decoding system. Although the patterns set for the control of decoding remain unchanged, the decoder's linguistic frame of reference changes, as time passes by. For this reason, a stylistic analysis should encompass both synchronic and diachronic exertions.

Synchrony refers to the state of the language in its structural integrity and its pre-set stylistic patterns of decoding control frozen by writing. Diachrony refers to actualizations of the poem's potentials, by successive generations of decoders, within the limits of the poem's patterns and the reader's codes, conflicting or not. (Riffaterre 1959, 160)

A stylistic analysis has some limitations, as pointed out by Riffaterre (1959, 166-8): the state of the language the reader knows, difficulty in judging between SDs (consciously intended features) and automatisms (unconscious mistakes, mechanical imitations or self-imitation), lack of an ideal norm to base stylistic judgements (where writer intention converge with reader's perception). The solution offered is by promoting context and convergence as criteria for an objective discernment of SDs from mere linguistic devices. The stylistic context is a linguistic pattern suddenly broken by an unpredictable element, the resulting contrast creating a stimulus, which has stylistic value. Converging SDs produce a convergence of their effects into one more powerful emphasis. Therefore, convergence is "a heaping up of stylistic features working together." (Riffaterre 1959, 172) Consequently, we need to be looking for forms with meaning. However, our intention is to organize the linguistic data during the heuristic stage and consider their stylistic significance during the interpretative stage. It is precisely in the area of stylistics that Jakobson's own suggestion fits. The sense of measure (limited number of syllables of sequences), versification (rhythm, be it syllabic verse, accentual verse, or quantitative verse), intonation, rhyme (beware the *homoioteleuton*), and alliteration (and any sound figures that involves

repetition of sounds), grammatical parallelism, metaphor (and other tropes) (Riffaterre 1978, 71-84). These might be abstracted somehow by saying that any repetition of equivalent units is poetically valuable, be them at the sound or grammatical level.

His warning reiterates Aviram's caution towards the imprecision one encounters when searching for pure species:

How the verse instance is implemented in the given delivery instance depends on the *delivery design* of the reciter; he may cling to a scanning style or tend toward proselike prosody or freely oscillate between these two poles. We must be on guard against simplistic binarism which reduces two couples into one single opposition either by suppressing the cardinal distinction between verse design and verse instance (as well as between delivery design and delivery instance) or by an erroneous identification of delivery instance and delivery design with the verse instance and verse design. (Jakobson 1987, 80)

So far, we have noticed that we, as humans, share a dyslectic behaviour toward POETRY, balanced by an inner preference for *rhythm*, that determines us to avoid it but still to look for it. It is our intention to contribute to the discussion of distinguishing between POETRY and PROSE so that the spiritual, intellectual and emotional elevation experienced through reading a canonical poetic text will not be overshadowed by a discomfort reclaimed by its supposed interpretation. It also seems obvious that a sharp distinction between the two types of texts is not to be expected, once authors might have been easily implied the mixture of the characteristic devices for particular purposes. Instead, in searching for meaning, we should consider the dialectics of POETRY, and extract them through the interpretation of form and function in relation to the pressure tradition exercised upon the author. The outcome of this odyssey may be refined as the style a particular author might have developed. It might also convey information about the author himself, his community, and the frame of mind that inspired the origin of the texts. For now, one suggests using the broad categories of POETRY and PROSE only as qualifiers for those literary texts that manifest an obvious tendency towards opacity or transparency, respectively.

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