TRUE LANGUAGE OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT

The Language of the Psalms

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IN ENGLISH WE TALK ABOUT pouring out our feelings or giving vent to them, as though they are forces dammed up inside us. The Spanish word is *desahogarse*, 'unsuffocate oneself': we rid ourselves of something which prevents us from breathing freely. The Italian *sfogarsi* has the same meaning, although the sound reminds one also of *fuoco*, fire. How is the idea expressed in Hebrew prayer?

'I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord', replies Hannah to Eli the priest when he thinks she is drunk (1 Sam 1:13-14). The psalmist too uses this word 'pour', whether it is the heart itself that is poured out (62:8) or our complaint (142:2). The description given at the begining of Psalm 102 is 'the prayer of someone who is faint and pours out complaints to the Lord' (ICEL). Again, in the book of Lamentations, the people are told: 'pour out your heart like water before the presence of the Lord!' (2:19).

Talk of pouring out feelings may be for us a convention. But it was not so for the biblical Hebrew writers. To understand the psalms we need to think imaginatively rather than conceptually. The Hebrew vision of humanity was very much rooted in matter, in the body. The heart was the seat of thoughts, feelings, desires and decisions, a recess where conflictual or intense feelings could mount up until the pressure forced them to burst out. If the outburst, however uncontrolled, happened before God, it counted as prayer.

In the Bible prayer emerges from within the person; the person praying is expressing these feelings as a way of searching for God, for the one who can patiently listen to them and accept them. How does this outpouring take place? One way is through gestures: falling prostrate on the ground, raising one's hands, dancing:

> to him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust. (22:28)
>
> Lift up your hands to the holy place, and bless the Lord. (134:2)
>
> Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre. (149:3)

Another gesture is that of turning one's gaze:

> Our eyes look to the Lord our God, until he has mercy upon us. (123:2)

But an article on psalms must inevitably focus on how feelings are poured out in words. The simplest and most elemental verbal form in the psalms is the exclamation, the cry, the naked call. Psalm 133 begins:

> How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

There is obviously a factual statement being made here: it is good to live in unity. But the psalmist sets this statement within an exclamation, marked by the Hebrew particle which we translate here as 'how'. It is the feeling being expressed that is important. The same Hebrew particle is found in Psalm 8, both in the exclamation at the beginning – 'how majestic is your name' – and in what we translate as the awestruck question at the psalm's centre:

> When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;
> what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? (3–4)

Often the very fact of crying becomes the psalmist's main focus: 'O my God I cry by day . . . and by night' (22:2); 'Listen to the sound of my cry, my King and my God . . .' (5:3). Or, more elaborately:

> In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help.
> From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears. (18:6)

The psalms are full of longings and desires expressed to God: listen, answer me, lead me, protect me, do not rebuke me, save me, deliver me, uphold my cause . . .

Throughout the Psalter we come across phrases expressing intense emotion:

> . . . your servants hold . . . [Zion's] . . . stones dear, and have pity on its dust. (102:13)
>
> For he knows how we are made; he remembers that we are dust. (103:14)

> . . . we have had more than enough of contempt. (123:3)
>
> Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you. (137:6)
>
> Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again, before I depart and am no more. (39:13)
>
> . . . for not by their own sword did they win the land, nor did their own arm give them victory;
> but your right hand, and your arm, and the light of your countenance, for you delighted in them. (44:3)
>
> Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more. (104:35)

As well as expressing interior reality, the poetic word can also conjure up imaginary experience. In Psalm 77, for example, the psalmist recreates and contemplates the passage through the Red Sea so intensely that he seems to be participating himself and thereby calming his anxiety.

Images

To express feelings or desires directly in this way is, however, no more than a beginning; it is not enough in itself to make a psalm. Ordinary people simply complain; the poet transforms this experience into words. Here the difficulty begins. Does his language have adequate terms? Will he have to create new verbal forms in order to express himself properly?

The opening of Psalm 39 is an excellent example of the psalmist's use of imagery:

> I said, 'I will guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue;
> I will keep a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence.'
> I was silent and still; I held my peace to no avail;
> my distress grew worse, my heart became hot within me.
> While I mused, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue . . .

Here we have both literal expressions – 'I was silent and still' – and figurative ones, found only here in the Psalter – the guarding of the tongue, the muzzle on the mouth. Then the author recognizes what his violent, tense silence has brought about. He uses the image of an uncontainable fire forcing him – paradoxically and despite all his resolve – to speak.

Images must not be explained away. There are still those who think that literal and conceptual language is primary, and that imagery is only a subsequent decoration or translation. But the truth is exactly the opposite. For many interior experiences the first expression is an imaginative one, and the literal description may (or indeed may not) come later. The enjoyment and well-being that a happy family life can bring cannot be pinned down, cannot be specified detail by detail. Psalm 133 evokes this reality through an exclamation, a direct expression of feeling: 'how very good and pleasant it is'. It then uses two images:

> It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard,
> on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.
> It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.

The literal expression – 'there the Lord ordained his blessing' – comes only at the end, and is but part of a much richer whole.

The Psalter is a collection of lyric poetry expressing the heart's outpourings and human spiritual experience through a rich treasury of images. At the beginning of Psalm 4, for example, we find a telling antithesis ignored in the standard translations: 'I was in straits; you set me at large'. The spatial associations are richly evocative: on the one side, narrowness, pressure, tightness: on the other, space, freedom and breadth. The psalmist seeks God's face (27:8); takes refuge in the shadow of God's wings (36:7); looks towards God and is radiant (34:5); tastes and sees that the Lord is good (34:8). If they throw him into the Pit, God will bring him out in a trice (30:3, 11).

Metaphor and symbol are not to be understood as emergency resources for poets to use when things cannot be called by their proper names. The image, quite apart from being the first name given to anything, analyses, uncovers and makes visible things which normal sight cannot perceive. These people who have come together to persecute me, shatter me, destroy me – are they human beings at all, or are they wild beasts in human form? The poet's accumulation of metaphors in the middle section of Psalm 22 names the truth of the reality: many bulls, strong bulls of Bashan, a ravening and roaring lion, dogs, the horns of the wild oxen. Faced with such rampant, concerted threats, how do I feel? Everything solid and firm in me turns to liquid, while my streams of life dry up:

I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax, it is melted within my breast;
my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.

(22:14–15)

We will never understand the psalms or be able to make them our prayer if we insist on seeing imagery as dispensable linguistic decoration. Texts written out of the imagination must be read with the imagination. The speaker of Psalm 57 wakes up, wakes up his musical instrument, wakes up the lingering dawn with his melody until he can invoke the rising sun-God, filling the earth with light and glory. The God of the psalms is a shepherd (23:1); a guardian who does not sleep (121:3–4); a judge who passes sentence (7:8); a warrior who draws his spear and javelin (35:3); a sovereign over heaven and earth (99:1); the founder of the city taken as the divine capital (87); a midwife who assists at our birth (22:9, 76:6); a broker to whom we can entrust our very life (31:5); a rock (18:2); flowing water (42:1); cataracts, waves and billows (42:7); light (27:1). It is not enough to recite these descriptions as conventional formulas from a bygone age; one must feel the evocative power of such titles.

The language of the body

Though the language of the psalms is in one sense fluid and free-floating, it is also often earthed in the body. The psalmist is very aware of what his body and his senses tell him, and shows this awareness in various ways. When he feels ill and in pain, he does not go off to a doctor and list his symptoms, but brings his misery before the God of compassion. Psalms 31 and 38, for instance, show how from such a beginning the psalmist can move to consider what is causing his suffering, namely sin.

Elsewhere, and equally significantly, the body expresses violent inner agitation:

. . . in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted.
I think of God, and I moan; I meditate, and my spirit faints.
You keep my eyelids from closing; I am so troubled that I cannot speak. (77:2b – 4)

. . . my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace.
My heart is stricken and withered like grass; I am too wasted to eat my bread.

> Because of my loud groaning my bones cling to my skin. (102:3–5)

The senses also play a part in prayer. The eyes and ears contemplate and listen. Our eyes can look at the world around us and discover in it or through it the transcendent God:

> When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established . . . (8:3)
>
> O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.
> Yonder is the sea, great and wide; creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. (104:24–25)

For their part the ears can hear God's voice breaking the cedars, flashing forth flames of fire, shaking the wilderness, causing the oaks to whirl, and stripping the forest bare (28:4–9). Moreover, God can answer precisely by attending to our bodily needs: the Lord 'gives food to the hungry', 'opens the eyes of the blind', 'lifts up those who are bowed down' and 'upholds the orphan and the widow' (146:7–9).

Psalm 19 is particularly bold. Can silence be heard? Without speech or words or voice, the heaven and the firmament, the day and the night proclaim and reveal, for those able to see it in prayer, the glory of God. Our senses contemplate; our mouths respond in praise; our hands, our heads and our whole bodies move in gesture. Moreover, if words are not enough, we can have recourse to music, both vocal and instrumental (150:3–5).

Another role of the body and the senses in the psalms is that of symbolizing the interior or imaginative senses, of giving outward expression to spiritual activity. Typical examples come in Psalm 63:

> Let me gaze on you in your temple:
> a vision of strength and glory. (4, ICEL)
>
> I feast at a rich table,
> my lips sing of your glory. (6)
>
> I rejoice beneath your wings.
> Yes, I cling to you,
> your right hands holds me fast. (8b–9)

Briefer and more intense are two verses from Psalm 36 (8–9):

> They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights.

For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.

The imagination invests God too with bodily characteristics. God has eyes to see and ears to hear. 'You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me' (139:5). God has a face which can appear or be hidden (27:8–9), which can shine luminously and kindly (31:17; 67:2). God sits on a heavenly throne, and stands up to pronounce sentence or to defend the innocent (82:1–4, 8).

Inner conflict

Sometimes the psalmist, as he reflects within himself, observes an interior struggle, as if two people were battling within. It is not just the complexities and ambiguities of the person's character, but a dramatic inner conflict. We have already noticed the conflict at the beginning of Psalm 39: the psalmist begins by setting a muzzle on his mouth, but then is driven to speak. The most significant example comes in Psalms 42 and 43, which were initially one poem. There is here acute conflict, which we see being resolved in the refrain which comes back three times:

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

The first time (42:5–6a) this suggestion of hope is given timidly; it gains strength the second time (42:11), and its final occurrence is triumphant (43:5). This movement occurs without any change in the words.

Another notable example is Psalm 73. The psalmist struggles as he contemplates the injustice in his experience: the wicked thrive and the honest suffer. He feels temptation, but does not yield to it; he wants to understand, but he fails. This continues until God widens his horizon and lengthens his perspective. Then, having gone into 'the sanctuary of God' (17), he comes to see something much greater than he was searching or hoping for. Looking back he reflects on the struggle, and tries to capture it in various images:

When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart,
I was stupid and ignorant; I was like a brute beast toward you.
(73:21–22)

Language with a message

There are psalms or passages in psalms where the language serves not to express inner feeling, but to address other human beings. The

psalmist is speaking in order to exhort, instruct, denounce or encourage. In Psalm 49 the speaker is a sage in the wisdom tradition. He begins by summoning an audience to hear his teaching and take it to heart:

> Hear this, all you peoples; give ear, all inhabitants of the world,
> both low and high, rich and poor together.
> My mouth shall speak wisdom; the meditation of my heart shall be understanding.
> I will incline my ear to a proverb; I will solve my riddle to the music of the harp.

The psalm is a brief sermon on death, counterpointed with a profession of personal hope: 'but God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol' (15a). This profession too is meant to be an exhortation. Those who recite this psalm can meditate on it, and apply its message to themselves.

Psalm 58 is a passionate denunciation of deliberate, concerted, malicious injustice. The rhetoric includes phrases from the world of magic incantation, but all is referred to God, 'who does justice on the earth':

> Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods? Do you judge people fairly?
> No, in your hearts you devise wrongs; your hands deal out violence on earth.
> Let them vanish like water that runs away; like grass let them be trodden down and wither.
> Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime; like the untimely birth that never sees the sun.
>
> (58:2–3, 8–9)

In Psalm 37 the speaker addresses the marginalized: 'do not fret', 'do not be envious', 'refrain from anger and forsake wrath', 'yet a little while . . .'. Most boldly of all, Psalm 148 is addressed to every being in creation: the word summons them, names them, orders them in categories, and enjoins them to praise God. Above, summoned through seven imperatives, there are the seven heavens; below, again summoned in the imperative, we have sea monsters, wind and weather, mountains, trees, animals, kings, peoples.

Elsewhere it is God in person who speaks:

> I say to the boastful, 'Do not boast', and to the wicked, 'Do not lift up your horn' . . . (75:4)

Or, for a different audience:

> 'Hear, O my people, while I admonish you; O Israel, if you would but listen to me!
> There shall be no strange god among you; you shall not bow down to a foreign god . . .'
>
> (81:9–10)

More subtly, a voice different from the psalmist's, either from outside (a cultic official) or from within (the voice of God in the heart), can come into his personal prayer, either gently and sinuously, or else with a strong intervention: 'Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you' (55:22); 'Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!' (28:14).

Poetic form

A poem is more than a collection of images, aphorisms or exclamations; poetry involves composition, the bringing together of different materials. The poet, having no material other than words, uses them to put together – or com-pose – something meaningful and permanent. The poem or psalm, however individual and distinctive, also stands in relationship. Modern particle physics speaks of four forces present in everything that exists, and these can serve as a model for the forces at work in any psalm. The *gravitational force* is pulling the poem towards God; the *electromagnetic force* is firing the one praying with energy; the *forces of weak and strong interaction* are holding together the words of the poem as a meaningful whole.

In the whole Psalter there is only one place where the author writes about the process of composition:

> My heart overflows with a goodly theme; I address my verses to the king;
> my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe.
>
> (45:1)

There are two levels of creative activity here, both equally significant: the composition of the poem itself, and the act of recitation. The word translated here as 'overflows' is quite distinctive in the Hebrew: it is as though something is boiling up from within and the words are flowing without restraint. The poet is writing for posterity:

> I will cause your name to be celebrated in all generations; therefore the people will praise you forever and ever.
>
> (45:17)

When we pray with the words of a psalm we are entering into a network of verbal links, a network which can reflect the complex ways in which our own personal identities, expressed in emotions, desires and projects, are shaped by our relationships. The verses do more than just follow on one from another: the poem is a structural whole, even though there are many verses and phrases which can be taken out and used as brief exclamatory prayers. What the word is to a sentence, the verse is to a psalm. The meanings of words and sentences are interdependent, and likewise those of verses and whole psalms. Moreover, the poetic structures are not closed in on themselves but open to be referred to what lies beyond them, whether deliberately (through symbol and semantics) or subliminally (through semiotics). Thus to pray each psalm well we need to grasp what holds it together as a poetic composition.

Admittedly there are some psalms where the principle of unity is weak and extrinsic, for example those where each verse or section begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, although the content of some of these (for example Psalm 37) lends them a certain coherence. But in a number of psalms the formal structure is very significant. In Psalm 4 the speaker addresses the 'proud fools' who insult his honour:

> Look! God astounds believers,
> the Lord listens when I call.
>
> Tremble, but do not despair.
> Attend to your heart,
> be calm through the night,
> worship with integrity,
> trust in the Lord.
>
> (4:4–6, ICEL)

It is the seven imperatives, culminating in 'trust in the Lord', which hold the poem together. The confidence they convey prepares us for the poem's final statement:

> I sleep secure at night,
> you keep me in your care.

The unity of Psalm 12 centres on the idea of the word: the lying words of the flatterer; the boastful words of the ungodly who say 'with our tongues we will prevail' (4a); the promises of God to the poor, which are 'silver refined in a furnace' (6b). Psalm 7 is structured as an

innocent person's plea in a lawcourt: 'Judge me, O Lord, according to my righteousness' (8b). Psalm 18 is like a large diptych on the theme of liberation. On one side the treatment is imaginative and the idiom mythological: 'the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me' (5). On the other side the writing is more descriptive, pointing to particular events: 'you delivered me from strife with the peoples; you made me head of the nations' (43a). Between the two panels, so to speak, there is a hinge: a statement of the general theme: 'with the loyal you show yourself loyal . . .' (25ff). Psalm 19 turns on a tension between revelation in nature, in the heavens which 'are telling the glory of God' (1a), and revelation in the law, 'more to be desired . . . than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey' (9–10). At the end, there is a sense that the law fails: even though the law serves as a warning, and there is great reward in keeping its precepts, we are still threatened by our 'hidden faults' and by 'the insolent' (12–13). But the earlier evocation of God's silent revelation in nature prepares us for the poem's final statement of confidence:

> Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. (14)

Psalm 22, the most intense plea in the whole Psalter, is another example of a poem structured in two parts: a cry for help and a promise of thanksgiving. In the first part, language of nearness and distance is structurally significant: 'do not be far from me, for trouble is near' (11); the second progressively broadens from the psalmist's own kindred and congregation to all the offspring of Jacob, then to the poor and those who seek the Lord, then to all the nations, and finally to the dead and to future generations. Another diptych, this time a brief one, is the much loved Psalm 23: the Lord is both shepherd (1–4) and waiter at table (5–6). Psalm 29 is the psalm of the seven thunders at each of which there is the unanimous cry, 'Glory!' Psalm 30 is structured by the contrasts intrinsic to human experience, the most radical of which is that between death and life.

Psalms 20 and 21 need to be taken together. They are both prayers spoken for a king in time of battle: one before the fray – 'may he send you help from the sanctuary' (20:2a) – and one after the victory – 'Lord, the king triumphs in your help' (21:2a, ICEL). Psalms 50 and 51 should be prayed as two stages of a great penitential liturgy. In the first, God reproaches 'the faithful who seal my covenant with sacrifice' (50:5) for their misdeeds:

> 'If I kept silent
> you would think I am like you.
> So I will indict you
> and bring my case against you.'
> (50:21, ICEL)

In the second, an individual confesses their sinfulness and begs for pardon:

> Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
> according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.
> (51:1–2)

The two pieces draw on a literary tradition of expressing God's relationship with the chosen people through courtroom language.

Psalm 136 is held together by its litanic refrain, implying that all things occur and exist because 'his steadfast love endures forever'. The psalm falls into three equal parts. The first celebrates the cosmic gifts of earth, water and sea; the second recounts the historical events of the Exodus and the inheritance of the land; the third acknowledges God's ongoing providence, remembering us in our low estate and giving food to all flesh. By contrast, psalm 106 (if we discount some extraneous material that has been added), is structured around the seven major sins committed by the people during this history.

Poetic interpretation

Writings on the psalms in this century have been dominated by form criticism, by the classification of the poems according to genre. Obviously genre too is a principle of poetic unity. But genre analysis should not be taken so far that the differences between the psalms become obscured: it is rather a first step, a framework for appreciating the distinctive qualities of each poem. Other writers in this Supplement elaborate on the different genres, and there is no need for me to repeat this material here.

In general, professional commentators may have a tendency to be too narrow in their interpretation of the psalms. It is all too easy for a sense of poetic inspiration to become lost in classifications of literary genre, for the imaginative to be reduced to concepts and ideas, and for bodily experience to be spiritualized into abstraction. Most of the psalms express feelings in imaginative language; it is only if we acknowledge that fact that we will do justice to these great spiritual poems.

Translated from the Spanish by Philip Endean SJ. Unless there is an indication to the contrary, all biblical quotations and numberings follow the NRSV.