

Of Psalms and Poetry: Bridging the Corporeal Chasm

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...to learn

from the lichen's slowness
at work something of the slowness
of the illumination of the self.

R.S. Thomas^[1]

Theoretical preliminaries

In this paper, I shed light on the intimate relationship between poetry and psalms in my life. Moreover, I trace how this relationship has evolved into a more dialogic nature as I began to interrogate through my poetic practice the significance of the psalms as they call attention to the dearth of representation of women's experiences. To achieve this goal, I enact the critical stance of autotheory posited by the mode of personal essay where reflexivity is of utmost value. The theory was substantiated in a recently released book by Canadian writer and art critic Lauren Fournier entitled *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing and Criticism*.^[2] One of the empowering aspects of autotheory is its rejection of the stifling binaries of the theoretical and the autobiographical, a dichotomy that is entrenched in the contrast between the intellectual and the personal, public and the private spheres.^[3] This resistance to essentialising the complexity of the experiential life echoes a postcolonial drive that allows for the self to re-centre and enunciate itself. Theory is never an alien territory from the material but highlights the range of knowledge that can inhere from the embodied.^[4]

The reason why 'autotheory' serves as a potent critical tool for women artists lies in the fact that the 'body' is recognised as the fountainhead of knowledge. The autotheoretical stance of 'theorizing through flesh and blood' implies that every day, the quotidian can be an organic source of cognition. The body can be likened to a vast field through which currents of energy charge it with life's entire range of emotions—from vulnerability, fragility and sorrow to that of triumph, joy and transformation. This is essentially so for women considering that the female body is outrightly entwined with the crucial stages in her life shaping her subjectivity. For a long time, the body is dealt with suspicion—a judgment contingent on the fact that the rationale, the mind, is viewed as independent of the body which is the source of fragility.^[5]

While the autotheoretical impulse has its origins in the works of nonfiction, its drive resonates well with the feminist advances in the study of theology. The poet bell hooks's influence on autotheory bears on her assertion that feminism is a 'theory that emerges from lived experience' and 'a lived sense of urgency.'^[6] We are summoned to affirm how our personal lives have much to bear on the larger theoretical landscape that receives premium over the so-called personal narratives. Filipino theologian Agnes Brazal confirms how daily life has been an 'ignored phenomenon' as scholars focus instead on the larger structures of societal life as if these could fully explain all facets of cultural occurrences.^[7] Theologian Kwok Pui-lan in her book *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* amplifies the struggle for validation of women's knowledge with this question—'How do we come to know what we know?'^[8] The query was raised within the context of how the women's articulation of their experiences (which include the imaginative and creative modalities of storytelling and dancing or even quilting)—activities springing forth from the body—are considered as 'nondata: too fragmented, or insufficiently documented for serious inquiry' by conventional academic establishments.^[9]

In an essay aptly entitled 'Autotheory as rebellion: On research, embodiment, and imagination in creative nonfiction,' Arianne Zwartjes asserts how 'autotheory is the chimera of research and imagination.'^[10] At the outset, the assertion blurs the claim that research is an intellectually top-heavy enterprise. For Zwartjes, the 'rootedness in embodiment' is how autotheory may be viewed as having emerged from feminist studies that include Black, postcolonial and queer studies.^[11] Or viewed largely, autotheory is the acceptance of the 'affective turn' in cultural criticism. Research is an act of imagining that requires situating oneself consciously across the continuum of sociocultural processes and asking, according to Zwartjes, *Where is your body in all of this?*^[12] Furthermore, she characterises autotheory as 'a writing form that transgresses and transcends boundaries of all kinds,' 'an intelligent rebellion—intellectual and embodied,'—that favours a

complex and nonconforming truth.^[13] It is thus with the understanding that autotheory can push my writing beyond accepted boundaries that I examine how my earlier reverence for the psalms has taken a critical turn despite them serving as inspiration for my poetic craft.

This essayistic pursuit, however, does not in any way signify a claim for exegetical prowess or scholarly expertise on the Psalter enough to challenge its value in the hierarchy of liturgical books. This writing is more of a reflexive attempt to strike a middle path in autotheory's subversive nature and the criticism often levelled against it—solipsism or narcissism.^[14] Or, as phrased by Fournier, 'the risk of a potentially excessive methodological individualism.'^[15] But I hail my truth as something that comes with the intersection of the 'self' and the multiple knowledges with which it can come across. I bring to the fore how autotheory allows for the 'self—a productive 'intersectional thinking'^[16]—a confluence of the critical, investigative and self-reflective—which makes us more receptive to the possibility of decolonising theory and institutions of knowledge.

And here is my story: the change in my perception of the psalms was brought about by a searing personal crisis—the breakdown of my marriage. I married late by our culture's standard. I was in my late 30s and felt no pressure to deviate from the path I had chosen to take up in life—to write, travel and teach. At 36, marriage was a choice I had made on the cusp of my mother's death from colon cancer to my recovery from grief three years after her passing. The loss of one's source of connectedness—one that had assured me of presence even as I was in another part of the world—brought a sorrow that was disorienting as it was draining. Marriage felt like a timely choice soon after and though I entered it with all the optimism for a bright future, differences soon emerged. Slowly, but each time, they bit into the fibre of togetherness. The freedom I had enjoyed too well became the source of bitter contention. Six years felt like a complete undoing—a consuming withdrawal from the self I knew to one I had tried forging. The result was a discord that tore at the heart of everything I knew of joy. The 'wholehearted submission' that was the biblical teaching on marriage proved unendurable. Still amid the trials were prayers for togetherness, for deliverance. Ultimately, under the erosive daily grind, the time came when the decision to leave felt the only way to redeem any sense of self.

This period in my life instigated a questioning of the theological values and truths I had adhered to for a long time and which dictated many of my decisions in life. It was during this time of great personal upheaval that I returned to the scriptures for comfort and guidance as if they were the only source of understanding I could draw from only to realise how my traumatic experience as a woman may not find full expression in the psalms. I had asked as well if this may be so for other women. If indeed, as the poet John Calvin says of the psalms as the 'Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul,'^[17] I failed to hear, for the first time, my voice in the lines I had uttered over and over in my youth. For the first time, I found the psalms as disembodied texts.

In the study of psalms, Carleen Mandolfo acknowledges the slow progress in the feminist critical attention to the Bible. She explains that the few studies on the Psalter are more inclined to identify male imagery and concerns. That the psalms are heavily attributed to David and outrightly 'project[s] a masculine bias.'^[18] But it is precisely at this juncture that Mandolfo summons the feminist scholars to push back and ask, '*Where do we find women in the text* [my emphasis]?'^[19] Mandolfo proposes a three-schema reading of the psalms using Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical work.^[20] I shall expound on this in the latter part of the essay.

And to beg the question, *Where do I find myself in the text?* As someone who grew up in Catholic Philippines, my theological education has seeped through the core of my being. My entry into this world was sanctified by the sacraments whose celebration everyone in the family revels in. To embrace the routine of attending the Sunday Mass and the yearlong liturgical celebrations was for me a constant renewal of the mystery of language. It evoked what I felt was a mystical as well as a linguistic feat: transubstantiation. *A real presence is brought to light* the moment the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. To believe is to be invited to communion.

Yet despite or, rather, because of the magnificence of the ecclesiastical language, I might have found myself trapped in the abstractions of language itself. The *body is here, right now* and its place is in the material world given to decay and disintegration. Its consecration requires that we transcend the messy flesh that covers it, that suffers the corruption of this world.

Poetry has come to me as naturally as I come to water. It is life-giving. It allows me to safely fall into depths I could only experience in prayers. But its discipline and craft, unlike the reading of psalms, require the sensory faculty to be engaged, for the body to equally share in the creation of a world. Its etymology—the Greek word *poiesis* which means 'to make'—dictates this creative practice. And here I realise that the experience of reading the psalms when I was much younger was like grace being bestowed on me. The words were perfect unto themselves. Each time I read a psalm was a complete poetic experience. On the other end, as I began to seriously write poems, each one would be a new struggle altogether. I could only describe the process as if something is being torn open out of me. There was always the anxiety that the poem I

had intended to write would not equal the creative resources I possessed. Hence, I need to draw from my experiences of the material world to evoke a figurative and profound resonance. The struggle was for attention. To come to oneself as in prayer. Stillness. In the book *Poets on the Psalms*, American lyric poet Carl Phillips says of this moment as 'the equivalent of answered prayer, of divine attention.'^[21]

Thus, here in this essay, I take up the lyrical imperative to bare my heart in the gesture of the psalms. I bring myself, the body that had brought me to the heights of poetry, to the battlefield of daily living, the body that had borne all the scars of truth and knowledge, and finally the body that learns how to hew in the sacred light of the word.

'A poet's debt to the psalter'

Be still and know that I am God.

In awe. This is how I would describe the first time I encountered this line in Psalm 46:10.²² Yet I did not have the faintest idea of its meaning in my young life. The line sounded simply succinct. Tensile. One only has to listen to the compelling voice behind the command to discern the assurance that attends the words.

At the young age of eight, I knew that I had fallen in love with words. And growing up in Catholic Philippines in the 1970s afforded me a unique experience in the complex workings of language and religion. Being the youngest in a brood of ten, I would find myself locked up in the room upstairs to avoid being a nuisance to the affairs of the adults who were busy managing the household like clockwork. The room I shared with my four sisters was filled with books and the accoutrements of a burgeoning female world. Lingerie of different colours, sizes and styles. Cosmetics in different stages of use. Amid these worldly possessions was the intimidating book of the King James Bible that stood like a sentinel at the entrance of our door. It was a gift from my paternal aunt, a nun, who several times had tried recruiting me for the nunnery. And each time my mother would refuse her offer, my aunt would leave behind biblical comic books that made me realise that a few saints did live traumatic lives before they become paragons of virtue.

Alone, the room became my sanctuary. There was delight at the moment I could finally own it and latch on the chain lock to begin my hours of solitude. I almost felt like a hermit, an ascetic. The uninterrupted hours of reading and writing into the waning hours of the afternoon were my initiation to the solitary life of a poet—of someone who chose a vocation of language.

It was during these years that I awakened to the mystical power of both poetry and the psalms. There was something so welded, so fused in the psalmic lines:

The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer. (Psalm 18:2)

The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. (Psalm 23:1)

Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. (Psalm 37:4)

I was drawn to these poetic lines for the powerful torrent of emotions of praise, worship, lament and supplication. For the strength that ensued from inhabiting the divine. There was that tension of a lyrical 'I' addressing God and laying her heart bare to him. Yet, as what is apparent now, the postcolonial interrogation of the liturgy pushes the notion of 'lament' as a 'profoundly counter-hegemonic liturgical practice'^[23] that has at its core the goal of transformation. To lament is to name the wrongs committed unto oneself and another. It is not a passive gesture but one that requires 'an honest examen of conscience'^[24] that forges one's will toward justice.

However, even as I was intermittently reading the 150 psalms directly from the Bible, they did not strike me as a unified whole. There was something highly performative about them that for a young student who was often asked to join declamation competitions, reciting the psalms became a satisfying pastime.^[25] The forceful and emotionally charged words rolled off my tongue as if they came from a depth that I could not yet fully recognise. But that it was there and connected with a larger energy way beyond my comprehension deepened my fascination for the psalms.

I began to fully appreciate the breadth of the psalmic imaginary when I slowly glimpsed the links that the biblical stories taught to us in our high school catechism to the significance of the psalms. The biblical story of David and Goliath, for instance, piqued my interest. As an allegory between the weak and strong, David's courage fortifies the layperson's heart. The stark image of the young David hitting the Philistine giant Goliath's forehead with a stone from his sling fires up the imagination of men. David won the battle for the Israelites by not wearing the armour offered to him by King Saul but rather

by putting on the 'breastplate of righteousness.'[\[26\]](#)

David was himself a shepherd and his relationship with his flock was one of utmost devotion. He looked on God as bestowing the same guidance on him to the extent that no dark wilderness can lessen his reliance on God. In the deepest corners of his heart, he knew he will be provided for. Knowing David and Goliath's story illumined the following words from Psalm 23:

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me. (Psalm 23:4)

I did not realise that when I was reciting these lines I was harkening back to a prelude of a violent battle. I was invoking David's defiance and bravery in his life-changing combat with Goliath. David as the shepherd boy knew the sheer lesson of needing to lay down his life for his flock.[\[27\]](#)

In the scholarship on the psalms, David's name surfaces in seventy-two titles which comprise nearly half of the psalms' total number.[\[28\]](#) Some studies ascribe the entire Psalter to this most revered King who is well adept at playing the lyre. But despite the variations in attributions, it is undeniable that the Davidic psalms are the most eminent of all the Five Books of the Psalms.[\[29\]](#) David was seen as a prophet who envisaged what Jesus did and spoke.[\[30\]](#)

Masculinity, the belief of men in his God the Father, and the almost militaristic non-questioning discipline of obedience were just some of the images that gradually came out of the psalms. Undeniably, patriarchy marshalled the people against religious conquest. David Clines, whose work is cited in the *Oxford Handbook of Psalms*, summarises the Psalms as one that is remotely far from 'human and humane.' Many of them could pass off as instructions whose underlying message is that 'God will make a man of you' and in which YHWH appears as the original avenger 'arch-killer.'[\[31\]](#)

Interestingly, alongside the predominantly male imagery in the psalms, my attention (as someone learning the craft of poetry) was to the poetic elements in the psalms. I found the parallelisms in the psalms most striking. In the book *Encountering the Psalms: A Literary and Theological Introduction to the Psalms*, professor emeritus of the Hebrew Bible C. Hassell Bullock prefaces the discussion of 'parallelism' in the psalms as a way of 'scanning the orchestra.'[\[32\]](#) Similar to the study of poetic elements, one needs to identify aspects of poetic performance to fully appreciate the inner workings of a psalm. Moreover, while my reference to Bullock's work is for the understanding of the Psalter's poetic structure, a key text in the field that came in a decade earlier is James Kugel's *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelisms and Its History*.[\[33\]](#) It offers a rich historical background to the various debates in the understanding of the nature of Hebrew poetry.

Bullock calls the device of 'parallelism' the heart of Hebrew poetry and should be subjected to the worthwhile task of scansion or scanning if a reader were to appreciate the psalms' literary strategies.[\[34\]](#) This device that at times comes in two lines (or distich or bicolon) is what many of the psalms owe their power to. With parallelism, the first line introduces a thought and is emphasised in the second line. An example of which is the following distich:[\[35\]](#)

The Lord is my light and salvation
Whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life
Of whom shall I be afraid. (Psalm 27:1)

At the time I was immersed in the reading of psalms, I also began exploring poets whose works revealed the discipline of crafting lines similar to that of the psalms. In fact, over time what I considered a poetic line was akin to that of the psalmic line: one of lyricism, syntactical integrity, compelling diction, and concision that is almost of prayer. Indeed, the introduction of an idea in the first line and then reinforced in a second line allows for a sustained thought. Here, Bullock mentions the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who affirms that such notion of repetition is the beginning of prayer since it permits for moments of immersion and focus on a thought.[\[36\]](#)

As I have come to closely associate psalms with poetry, I felt that the fact they are termed differently seems untrue to me. For me, they are tautological. C.S. Lewis, a British writer known also for his theological musings, asserts 'psalms are poems, and poems intended to be sung: not doctrinal treatises, nor even sermons.'[\[37\]](#) This was so for me. In many ways, I had learned to define the poetic line as something that could only have the power of the psalms.

In the chapter entitled 'The Psalms in Poetry,' Peter Hawkins describes the psalms' inspiration offered to the poets as 'less

commonly recognized.'^[38] Yet as he argues, the prominence of the psalms in public awareness was reached by the sixteenth century? Protestant Reformation during which translations were rife.^[39] 'The Psalms were brought to meter,'^[40] for easier recitation and memorisation. In modern times, there are undeniable aspects of the psalms that are characterised as shared by poetry. Singing a 'new song' has summoned poets' skills to adapt the psalms to the concerns of contemporary times. The imaginative/poetic reworkings done by poets such as R.H. Thomas, Anthony Hecht, and Sylvia Plath, have been varied as they are versatile. There have been 'free-ranging meditations,'^[41] recognising the beauty of the psalms though denouncing the violence found in them and injecting the romantic slant into the poems.^[42] Among the three aforementioned poets, the Anthony Hecht's poetry collections—*The Hard Hours*^[43] and *The Darkness and the Light*^[44]—perhaps stand out as exemplifying the most intense explorations of historical and personal trauma, divine prayer and poetry.

The Psalter is considered 'a parent text' by the poet, and this association has come to be known as the 'poet's debt to the psalter.'^[45] In the poet's attempt at adapting the psalms 'the psalter's larger world of reference shrinks to the dimensions of the self.'^[46] The poet's stricken soul navigates through the 'transfiguring vision' of the psalms.

The poets were the ones who had put their soul and poetic fervour into paraphrasing the psalms. As if by doing so, they would somehow enter the divine realm of articulation. In the psalms, a much larger reality is being addressed, and thus the effusive, expansive quality. The thematic concerns of the psalms encompass a larger public, the anonymous ones. The poet, as with her lyric address, can fuse into the emotional intensity of the psalms and finds a more than appropriate venue for the channelling of the lyric intent. The 'intending I' in the lyric, an address to a beloved is thus embraced by the psalms breathless blanket of praise.

The psalms in their original are evocative. And through the years, I have collected and memorised many of the one-liners that served as my armoury of self. The one-liners offered the range of emotional intensities that by then I was clueless would afflict and break every individual. It is these lines that offer succour and heal us into prayer. The pleading, the rhapsody, the plenitude—these found themselves in my own poetry. As the fragilities of life came in stark and surprising ways, it was also poetry and the psalms that made me ask if indeed language is enough. And here began the transformation.

The liturgical transformation

As someone who went to primary and high school years in the orphanage-cum-convent of the St. Rita College in Sucat (Parañaque, Metro Manila), I regularly attended mass services that corresponded to the yearlong liturgical celebrations. Attending these celebrations was purportedly the hallmark of our youthful life in formation.

The morning praise, the daily recitation of the Holy Rosary, the First Friday Mass, and the celebration of the saints. These occasions were enough to fill up my entire year and consume my every living hour. We were taught that to be submissive was to be respectful to the nuns and priests. We were forbidden to be noisy whenever they take their midday naps.

I became well-versed with the anatomy of the Liturgical Mass. The introductory rites, the greeting, the penitential act, then the Liturgy of the Word to the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The Eucharistic rites had been so ingrained in my mind and body that I became inured to being herded into the school church for the holy celebration, much like David's sheep in his flock.

There was something so heart-stopping in the presence of the altar. Everything that takes place on it entranced me even as an adult participating in a community's desire for peace and love. And the highlight of the Eucharistic celebration—the transubstantiation—calls into unison the mortal and the divine. The Real Presence.

As years have led me through life, the transformation has come against the crude realities of life. And continues to do so. My years were enthralled by the sublime expression of ecclesiastical language. *Where the notion of body is absent*. Or rather, that the body needs to be redeemed. That to be in the material flesh was a state of corruption and vile. And in these two contrapuntal states, I limn the divine language whose ethereal resonance pierces through one's entire being.

Yet, as I was growing up, this beauty was, disproven time and again, *by the very corporeality of everyday life*, the inescapable quotidian through which my subject position as a woman, scholar, and poet had to be defined time and time again.

The discipline of writing poetry—of having to pierce through the patina of consciousness—pushed me into questions I did not earlier have of the psalms. In many ways, I realise that this was likewise brought about by my growing critical questioning of how the Catholic doctrine clipped my imagination.

Theological education was complicit in entrenching the patriarchal values that restrict the intellectual and critical ability of women to reason for themselves. What prevail over most of our actions was the binary of punishment and reward. And this became pronounced when I began navigating the world of intimacy, commitment, marriage, and finally walking out of the marriage that I thought I would be able to keep forever as inviolable, sacrosanct.

The beauty of all things ecclesiastical trapped me in the abstract world. The real pain came gradually over the years of marital disintegration which left us in denial. Through the painful process that shook me to my core, I realise that when I returned to the psalms and Scripture, the words sounded as beautiful as ever. Only that they achieved an embodied truth after undergoing what I felt was the corporeal counterpart of daily living. And thus, they gained more value for me. The enunciation was marvellous.

The most transformative truth came when I accepted how my theological education was complicit in my own (mis)understanding of life's lessons. They opposed the more agonising experiences of the women in the Philippines and other parts of the world where the body is concerned. The woman's body is a site of contestations. She is a life-giver and many of the nature metaphors honour the fertility with which she is blessed. Yet, at the same time, she is the least to have a say on what she could and could not do with her own self. Her agency is restricted to the impositions of cultures and societies.

The pioneering theological studies made more sense in shedding light on how women's experiences of faith and worship could not be fully explained by the scriptures. There was a need to 'rethink the identity of the divine.'^[47] How am I to appreciate women's experiences as products of patriarchal edicts that inadvertently assign them places in the periphery and not share space in the centre of power? Why is it that even as some psalms talk of the 'disenfranchised women,' no psalms offer the practical insight on how to fend for oneself? In Psalm 128:3, for instance, the wife imagery is that of the vine that creeps up and is almost attached to the surface, with a sense of fertility introduced.

Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
within your house;
your children will be like olive shoots
around your table.

Biblical studies scholar Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher writes of the Psalm 128 as belonging to the Psalms of Ascent.^[48] While she favourably describes the spatial qualities undergirding the psalm, it is apparent that the notion of centre from which stability arises can never be occupied by a woman as her ascribed role is always that of home—'the sides of thine house.'

As I outline my realisations at the juncture of self and theology, I also acknowledge the emergent thoughts on these fields that heed the postcolonial drive for 'creative and subversive readings of scripture'^[49] to the extent that a 're-imagining of the pulpit'^[50] can occur to challenge the remnants of patriarchal and colonial manifestations of the 'elevated pulpit'^[51] from which the so-called truth had long been delivered. The works of HyeRan Kim-Cragg and Kristine Suna-Koro as cited here are just a few of the ongoing staunch and empowering engagements with liturgy and theology.

Moreover, feminist scholars on the psalms find it inevitable that a 'retrieval' or 'recovery' of women's voices be made in the study of psalms. The Davidic nature of the imagery and scenes of temple worship exclude women's participation in the psalms. A specific method offered by scholars is that of intertextuality which read psalmic texts as a compendium in the rich and often unwieldy collection of allusions and quotes.^[52]

In Mandolfo's study of the discourse of resistance, she suggests a third way (one that connects with intertextuality).^[53] This strategy implies appropriating the psalms to the contemporary setting which may include women's issues and concerns. In this way specific psalms can be more responsive and inclusive:

The point is to seek in the text itself, on the one hand, the internal dynamic that governs the structuring of the work and, on the other hand, the power that the work possesses to project itself outside itself and to give birth to a world that would truly be the 'thing' referred to by the text.^[54]

In my modest way, I wrote poems that have an affinity (or recall) with my earlier interest in psalms. But this time, it was a way of embodying my experience of a crisis that involved the entirety of what I had learned of the sacramental vows. These poems appear in a collection aptly entitled *Naming the Ruins*.^[55] As I was processing the gamut of emotions that came in waves, I basked in the scriptural and poetic language.

Rewriting the Liturgy

As I finally began experiencing the full range of emotions that came with separation, I became more intense with my writing. I wanted to make sense of the loss that I had suffered. To come to terms with my former self and the new one that could emerge from the trauma. I wanted to understand how my education as a Catholic woman rendered it quite difficult to finally let go of a vow I had held on to as one of the lasting tenets of the Church.

Poetry not only was a therapeutic tool for me but a venue to explore all the conflicting emotions that burdened me at the time. The discipline of writing was reinforced by the need to heed the images that marked the shift in emotions. I was most productive during those times. After a day's work of teaching, I would return to my apartment, finish the menial tasks, then turn off the internet to face my laptop. I would sit down through the night patiently waiting for lines that could come out of the hours.

The images that came to me then were mostly scriptural. I wrote of the crossing of the waters, the notes falling in a church song, and images that harken to my young faithful and creative life. In the poem 'Coda,' I wrote of the pain subsiding as akin to the songs sung in the church: '... The words are uttered, / each syllable freed / for what it is. / The sound of heartbeat, crisp on the verge of song / not of misery, / nor of joy, / but the silence of great cathedrals / as the last note / falls / in praise.'[\[56\]](#)

Citing the psychological phenomenon 'Repetition Compulsion,' I highlighted the search for the ultimate love in the following lines: 'And why not? Why shouldn't I seek the likeness of God? Of Him / who preaches love is knowing / something is born in us again.'[\[57\]](#)

The one poem that captures my awe of the psalms is entitled 'The Liturgy.'[\[58\]](#) Writing this poem made me feel as if I had gone full circle with my faith. The inspiration for 'The Liturgy' was a poem written by a first-generation Ukrainian American poet Olena Kalytiak Davis entitled 'Six apologies, lord.'[\[59\]](#) I was at once drawn to the crisp, short lines that uttered a cry for the Lord. And reading the words out loud was reminiscent of the times I would recite the psalms loudly. The staccato rhythm only made the persona's reaching out more piercing than anything and, thus, more pressing. I adapted the tone of the poem to create a sense of supplication, a questioning of the faith that had made me believe in the human gift of love and union.

I must have nearly outlined everything I could have of what I had encountered in the psalms. The praise, the supplication, the sorrow, the lament, and finally the line '*Be Still and know that I am God.*'[\[60\]](#)

The Liturgy

after Olena Kalytiak Davis

Don't say I haven't tried, Lord.
Don't say I haven't bruised my knees
pleading once more for mercy.
Have you not heard me gasping
in the night, Lord, as I pulled
at my hair from the tearing

of flesh? I waited long for you
to become Love Incarnate,
Lord. Have I confused heaven

and hell again? Where are the lush fields
of the Song of Songs? Its bliss,
feasts? My throat is dry

from singing. Your Word,
Lord, was close to my heart. The Promise
of Salvation, The Kingdom,

The Reward—

The way out of fire.
I grit my teeth, Lord, until I knew.
"Be still," You said. "And know

I am God." I know. I am still.
To Know, and Be Still. Only prayer
tending to my soul as the world pays

for its mortal heart—each day, Lord,

unknowing of the ascent
from the crucifixion.[61]

Had I finally understood even a small sense of the Psalter in writing the poem 'The Liturgy'? Had any of the psalms directly mentioned the anguish of a woman who had come to realise that a marriage is now about to end? I was trying to make sense of the psalms as they could very well contain the torment of the fast-paced contemporary world unable to sustain the most sacred and intimate of relations.

Again, in Mandolfo's study of the 'Discourse of Resistance,' she cites Paul Ricoeur's 'Phenomenology and Hermeneutics' as instructive in retrieving the meanings of psalms and making them more responsive to our contemporary lives. Mandolfo identifies three ways of reading psalms so as to respond to specific concerns of their historical and textual contexts. These strategies of reading at times collapse the past and present in order to effect the most productive interpretation of the psalms. Of the three, namely—'In Front of the Text: Contemporary Appropriations'—Mandolfo comes closest to how psalms may open spaces for the inclusion of marital conflicts.[62] Yet this approach does not exclude giving attention to the formal features of the psalms and the native context from which they originated. Mandolfo thus asserts that what is needed for these hermeneutic processes to be generative is 'an equally firm commitment to the text and to the world being created by the interpretative process levelled at the text.' [63] At this intersection of reading is where the richest eruption of meaning can take place.

Going back to the militaristic origins of the Davidic psalms, one may ask: how can the psalms resonate with the concerns of women given the institution of marriage that is at once fraught with the teachings of 'submission' and 'servility'?

I still am in awe of the psalms. Even as I write this, I have not been able to comprehend the full extent of Psalter's creation. They remain one of the scriptural wonders that offer spiritual wisdom against life's many trials. But while their beauty may be a product of poetic creation, their significance may escape even the faithful.

From feminist and postcolonial perspectives, my present knowledge of the psalms has been transformed by the corporeal and quotidian experience of marriage, its disintegration, attendant suffering, recovery and renewal. Whereas before, my recitation of the psalms exuded the power of the words over me, now I have learned how to read it *from the body*, as the Argentinian theologian feminist scholar Mercedes Garcia Bachmann proposes as the only way to discover the psalms, according to the study of Kate McElwee.[64]

I could only say that my poetic practice and my faith are enhanced landscapes of inwardness and knowing—the embodied nature of knowledge.

Notes

[1] R.S. Thomas, 'To learn,' untitled poem in *The Echoes Return Slow*, London: Papermac, 1988, p. 103.

[2] Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing and Criticism*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021, doi: [10.7551/mitpress/13573.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/13573.001.0001).

[3] Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*, pp. 25–27.

[4] Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*, pp. 49–51.

[5] Differing notions of the female body and the biological and philosophical assumptions behind these are found in 'Feminist perspectives on the body,' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2019, online: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-body/>, accessed 20 May 2022

[6] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, New York, NY: Routledge, 1994, pp. 74–75.

[7] Agnes Brazal, 'Recasting Liberation Theology's classic methodological mediations: A proposed way of integrating contextual-cultural [feminist] values and perspectives,' Vol. I., PhD dissertation, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 1998, p. 58.

[8] Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005. p. 30.

[9] Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination*, p. 30.

[10] Arianne Zwartjes, 'Autotheory as rebellion: On research, embodiment, and imagination in creative nonfiction,' *Michigan Quarterly Review (Features)* 58, no. 3 (Summer, 23 Jul. 2019), online: <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mqr/2019/07/autotheory-as-rebellion-on-research-embodiment-and-imagination-in-creative-nonfiction/>, accessed 10 Jun. 2022.

- [11] Zwartjes, 'Autotheory as rebellion,' paragraphs 10, 16 and 21.
- [12] Zwartjes, 'Autotheory as rebellion,' paragraph 21.
- [13] Zwartjes, 'Autotheory as rebellion,' paragraph 18.
- [14] Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*, p. 272.
- [15] Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*, p. 272.
- [16] Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*, p. 272.
- [17] Peter S. Hawkins, 'The psalms in poetry,' in *Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown, 99–113, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014, at p. 99.
- [18] Carleen Mandolfo, 'Discourse of resistance: Feminist studies on the psalter and book of laments,' in *Feminist Interpretation. I. Biblical Books*, pp. 196–98, online:
https://www.academia.edu/9396638/DISCOURSE_OF_RESISTANCE_FEMINIST_STUDIES_ON_THE_PSAALTER_AND_BOOK_OF_LAMENTATIONS, accessed 11 Jun. 2022
- [19] Mandolfo, 'Discourse of resistance,' p. 197.
- [20] Mandolfo cites Paul Ricoeur's 'Phenomenology and Hermeneutics,' in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, ed. James M. Edie, 25–52, Evanston, IL: Northwestern Press, 1991 to outline a three-stratagem reading of psalms as may be inferred from earlier critical studies of the Psalter. She cites these methods of reading as 'behind the text,' 'in front of the text,' and 'in the text.' It is the third mode of reading psalms that appeals the most to me in its thrust to contemporise the psalms.
- [21] Lynn Domina, ed., *Poets on the Psalms*, San Antonio: TX: Trinity University Press, 2008, p. 16. **This is an edited book. Who wrote the material on page 16? What is the title of the chapter? What is the page range of the chapter?**
- [22] All lines from the psalms cited in this paper are taken from the New International Version of the Bible, online:
<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2046&version=NRSVUE>, accessed 13 Oct. 2022.
- [23] Kristin Suna-Koro, 'Liturgy and lament: Postcolonial reflections from the midst of a global refugee crisis,' *Liturgy* 34, no. 2 (3 Apr. 2019): 31–40, at p. 34, doi: [10.1080/0458063X.2019.1604032](https://doi.org/10.1080/0458063X.2019.1604032).
- [24] Suna-Koro, 'Liturgy and lament,' p. 34.
- [25] High school students in the Philippines at times are asked to participate in declamation competitions as training for public speaking. Well-known speeches by famous or historical figures are often used for these activities. At the time, I would rehearse for these events by reciting the psalms as I considered them to be powerful performance texts.
- [26] Jeremy Bouma, 'David and Goliath: Six lessons' (1 Samuel 17 Commentary), Zondervan Academic, 21 Nov. 2018, online:
<https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/david-and-goliath-1-samuel-17-commentary>, accessed: 15 Jun. 2022.
- [27] Joshua J. Van Ee, 'The psalm of David the shepherd,' *The TableTalk Magazine*, Aug. 2018, online:
<https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2018/08/the-psalm-of-david-the-shepherd/>, accessed: 18 Jun. 2022.
- [28] William P. Brown, 'The psalms: An overview,' in *Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown, 1–23, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014, at p. 3, doi: [10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199783335.013.001](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199783335.013.001).
- [29] Brown, 'The psalms,' p. 15.
- [30] Brown, 'The psalms,' p. 6.
- [31] Melody D. Knowles, 'Feminist interpretation of the psalms,' in *Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown, 424–35, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, at p. 425.
- [32] C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering the book of Psalms: A Literary and Theological Introduction to the Psalms*, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2018, p. 36.
- [33] James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelisms and Its History*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.
- [34] Bullock, *Encountering the Psalms*, p. 36.
- [35] Bullock, *Encountering the Psalms*, p. 37–38.
- [36] Bullock, *Encountering the Psalms*, p. 36.

- [37] C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2017 [1958], p. 2.
- [38] Hawkins, 'The psalms in poetry,' p. 99.
- [39] Hawkins, 'The psalms in poetry,' p. 100.
- [40] Hawkins, 'The psalms in poetry,' p. 100.
- [41] Hawkins, 'The psalms in poetry,' p. 109.
- [42] Hawkins, 'The psalms in poetry,' p. 109.
- [43] Anthony Hecht, *The Hard Hours*, New York, NY: Atheneum Publishing House, 1967.
- [44] Anthony Hecht, *The Darkness and the Light*, New York, NY: A.A. Knopf, 2001.
- [45] Hawkins, 'The psalms in poetry,' p. 106.
- [46] Hawkins, 'The psalms in poetry,' p. 107.
- [47] Knowles, 'Feminist interpretation,' p. 425.
- [48] Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, "'Like olive shoots around your table': Images of space in the psalms of ascent," in *The Composition of the Book of Psalms*, ed. Erich Zenger, 489–500, Leuven: Peeters, 2010.
- [49] HyeRan Kim-Cragg, 'Probing the pulpit: Postcolonial feminist perspectives,' *Liturgy* 34, no. 2 (3 Apr. 2019): 22–30, at p. 26, doi: [10.1080/045806x.2019.1604028](https://doi.org/10.1080/045806x.2019.1604028).
- [50] Kim-Cragg, 'Probing the pulpit,' p. 28.
- [51] Kim-Cragg, 'Probing the pulpit,' p. 28.
- [52] Knowles, 'Feminist interpretation,' p. 429.
- [53] Mandolfo, 'Discourse of resistance,' pp. 202–3.
- [54] Mandolfo, 'Discourse of resistance,' p. 203.
- [55] Dinah Roma, *Naming the Ruins*, Sydney: Vagabond Press, 2014.
- [56] Roma, *Naming the Ruins*, p. 9.
- [57] Roma, *Naming the Ruins*, p. 12.
- [58] Roma, *Naming the Ruins*, p. 10.
- [59] Edward Hirsch, *Poet's Choice*, Orlando, FL: Harcourt Books, 2006, pp. 371–72.
- [60] For a discussion of lament psalms as a way for Christians to deal with weariness and sadness without being guilty, see Federico G. Villanueva, *It's OK to Be Not OK: Preaching the Lament Psalms*, Mandaluyong City: OMF Literature, 2012.
- [61] Roma, *Naming the Ruins*, pp. 10–11.
- [62] Mandolfo, 'The discourse of resistance,' p. 202.
- [63] Mandolfo, 'The discourse of resistance,' p. 204.
- [64] Kate McElwee, 'Reading psalms "from the body" with Mercedes Garcia Bachmann,' in *Women's Ordination Conference*, 27 Jan. 2015, online: <https://www.womensordination.org/blog/2015/01/27/reading-psalms-from-the-body-with-mercedes-garcia-bachmann/>, accessed 10 Jun. 2022.

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