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AN INTRODUCTORY SURVEY OF UGARITIC POETIC TECHNIQUE AND ITS
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF HEBREW POETRY

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Introduction

*“Poetry is what is lost in translation”*¹

Attempting to read poetry in any language other than one’s native tongue is a task fraught with many dangers. The general problems associated with translation are all heightened by the poetic form which, by its very nature, delights in subverting the conventions of language. Lexical ambiguities, syntactical peculiarities and unusual structural features are all to be expected. Poetic devices vary between cultures and generally require a high degree of prior acquaintance with the subtleties of the language and with other literary and cultural references. When a language is still the subject of so much uncertainty as Ugaritic, especially in the areas of lexicography and syntax, and when so many of the texts are only partially recovered, attempting to understand the poetry of that language is daunting indeed.

However, the significant similarities between the biblical Hebrew corpus of poetry and the Ugaritic texts have enabled more rapid progress in understanding the peculiarities of the Ugaritic system than might have been anticipated. The two bodies of literature have sufficient commonality for comparative study to be an inviting prospect to many scholars, and it is certain that this comparative work has illuminated both literatures. In addition to the religious background to the Hebrew Bible, many lexical and semantic parallels have been found in the Ugaritic poetry which have furthered understanding of several difficult Hebrew texts. Our concern in this paper, however, is at the level of poetic structure, technique, and function. These three areas have all been considered as potential ways to formulate a definition of poetry in both

1. Robert Frost

Ugaritic and Hebrew, and one of our concerns will be to offer some thoughts on this matter of distinguishing poetry from prose.

The Ugaritic texts are usually classified into prosaic and poetic texts. The former include letters, contracts and other administrative documents. The latter may be further subdivided into narrative and religious verse, following Watson's suggestion.² The *Baal* cycle, *Aqhat*, *Kirta* and other mythological fragments fall into the category of narrative verse. Religious verse is a general term Watson uses for the remaining poetic texts which include a wedding poem and various incantations, prayers and a few of the ritual texts.

Poetic Structure

"I'm not maintaining that logical progression is the key to poetic structure.

*But I'd say that it is an element."*³

Ugaritic poetic structure has been the subject of much lengthy and detailed statistical analysis. Text after text has been analysed to identify distinct cola, verses, strophes, and higher level units. This task has not been helped by the common practice of the Ugaritic scribes of physically writing the text without reference to its structure. Occasionally texts are found with word dividers placed at the end of each colon, and sometimes the physical lines are made to coincide with poetic lines, but much more commonly, the whole text runs on without any indication of cola, verse or larger unit. Frank Moore Cross also rightly points out that our minimal knowledge of Ugaritic vocalisation adds a further source of uncertainty in establishing poetic scansion.⁴ Internal criteria including semantic, syntactical and metrical considerations must be applied with due caution and comparison with parallel passages may also be used to illuminate the poetic structures of a text.

2. Following Wilfred G. E. Watson, "The Character of Ugaritic Poetry," *JNSL* 11 (1983): 158.

3. James Dickey

4. Frank Moore Cross, "Prose and Poetry in the Mythic and Epic Texts from Ugarit," *HTR* 67 (1974): 5.

Johannes C. de Moor and Marjo C. A. Korpel have provided a clear, thorough summary of the general principles which appear to pertain to Ugaritic poetic structure in their essay on the ‘Fundamentals of Ugaritic and Hebrew Poetry.’⁵ They identify a basic rule that appears to apply to the structural dimension of all North-West Semitic poetry: ‘Within certain limits every structural unit could be expanded or contracted, as the singers saw fit.’⁶ That is to say, there is no fixed number of feet in each colon, nor for the number of cola in each verse, and so on. Even within a single text, these structures vary.

<i>ylkm . qr . mym</i>	Woe to you, ‘Water fountain’
<i>ylk . mrrt . tǧll . bnr</i>	Woe to you, ‘Tree growing deep in the tilth’
<i>ylk . qrt . ablm</i>	Woe to you, ‘City of Mourners’ ⁷

Korpel and de Moor make a significant assumption about the nature of the poetry under consideration here. It is assumed to have the form of song lyric, rather than spoken verse, and the divisions within the poem are understood to be related to breathing phrases.⁸ Watson draws the same conclusion from his survey of Ugaritic studies: ‘some form of free rhythm was used, to the accompaniment of music.’⁹ A certain amount of evidence for this is found in the descriptions of the troubadour which appear in both the Baal cycle and the story of Aqhat.¹⁰ Watson considers that ‘such evidence, combined with traces of oral poetic technique in the poems, points to a degree of live improvisation at some stage in the creation of these works.’¹¹ Cross is less than optimistic about the usefulness of this observation for our understanding of Ugaritic poetic

5. Marjo C. A. Korpel and Johannes C. de Moor, “Fundamentals of Ugaritic and Hebrew Poetry,” in *The Structural Analysis of Biblical and Canaanite Poetry*, ed. William van der Meer, de Moor, JSOTSupp (Sheffield, 1988), 1–61.

6. Korpel and de Moor, “Fundamentals of Ugaritic and Hebrew Poetry,” 2.

7. *KTU* 1.19 iii. 46, 51-52, 3

8. S. Segert, “Ugaritic Poetry and Poetics,” *UF* 11: 730 notes that Professor Ann D. Kilmer has reconstructed the tune for a Hurrian love song found on a cuneiform tablet at Ras Shamra. However, he makes the observation that while such shorter units may have been sung, the longer narrative poems which form the bulk of the Ugaritic corpus, would more probably have been recited.

9. Watson, “The Character of Ugaritic Poetry,” 161.

10. e.g. *KTU* 3A i 18-20 See Watson, “The Character of Ugaritic Poetry,” 162–63.

11. Watson, “The Character of Ugaritic Poetry,” 163.

structure: ‘Almost certainly elision and like forms of poetic license were available to the Ugaritic singer. But, unless a Ugaritic treatise on poetry is dug up, we shall never be able to solve all such difficulties.’¹²

According to Korpel and de Moor, the stressed syllables take priority within the breathing phrases of the song, so it is these that should be counted towards establishing any kind of rhythm or meter.¹³ Any number of unstressed syllables may be included alongside the stressed syllables. The number of stressed syllables within each colon tends to show only small variation within a text. However, in order to achieve this regularity, smaller units may sometimes be joined together. In Hebrew this is often indicated by the *maqeph*, and in Ugaritic it may sometimes be shown by the omission of the word-divider, though this is by far less reliable an indicator. Margalit offers a lengthy and detailed explanation of the different ways in which a single foot (which he terms ‘verse-unit’) may be formed.¹⁴

De Moor and Korpel have analysed the smallest and largest existing units at each level of the poetic structure in an attempt to outline some rules for the formation of Ugaritic and Hebrew poetry. In each case, examples from both literatures were cited, yielding virtually identical results. Their conclusions are given below:

<i>Building block</i>	<i>Smallest</i>	<i>Expandable</i>	<i>Largest</i>
Foot	1 syllable	Yes	8 syllables
Colon	1 foot	Yes	5 feet
Verse	1 colon	Yes	9 cola
Strophe	1 verse	Yes	4 verses
Canticle	1 strophe	No?	5 strophes?
(Sub-)canto	1 canticle	?	? ¹⁵

12. Cross, “Prose and Poetry in the Mythic and Epic Texts from Ugarit,” 5.

13. See Oswald Loretz and Ingo Kottsieper, *Colometry in Ugaritic and Biblical Poetry* (Ugaritisch-Biblische Literatur, 1987) for a detailed approach to colometry based on the counting of consonants, and Cross, “Prose and Poetry in the Mythic and Epic Texts from Ugarit” who counts syllables. Cross goes to some lengths to account for the variations in syllable count, proposing a number of prosaic rubrics or other insertions in the poetic text, and in some instances arguing for dictation error to emend the text. His scheme ultimately presumes too much rigidity and requires too much special pleading to be persuasive. In practice, since we have little evidence of vocalisation, counting syllables and consonants usually yields the same result.

14. B. Margalit, “Introduction to Ugaritic Prosody,” *UF* 7: 291–98.

15. Korpel and de Moor, “Fundamentals of Ugaritic and Hebrew Poetry,” 60.

The variety found at each level of the structure suggests that this kind of prosodic structure may not have been the most important factor in Ugaritic poetry.

In addition to this, they have analysed all 1889 verses of Ugaritic poetic text available to them and a sampling of the same number of biblical Hebrew verses, in order to identify the most common types of verse. They concluded that in both literatures, the normal verse is the bicolon, though in each case other combinations of cola are possible.

	Ugaritic	Hebrew
Unicola	320 (17%)	49 (3%)
Bicola	1198 (63%)	1442 (76%)
Tricola	341 (18%)	361 (19%)
Multicola	30 (2%)	37 (2%) ¹⁶

The only significant difference appears to be a slight preference for unicola in Ugaritic, as compared with Hebrew. Korpel and de Moor suggest that this can easily be explained by virtue of the difference in genre between the Ugaritic verse, which is predominantly epic narrative, and the Hebrew poetry, which includes hymns, prayers and prophetic texts.

We do not intend to discuss all the examples and arguments Korpel and de Moor employ in order to reach these conclusions. A handful will suffice to show both the strengths and weaknesses of their methodology.

Identifying cola

- (i) *KTU 1.4: IV.9*
mdl . 'r . šmd . pħl He saddled a he-ass, harnessed a male.¹⁷

The physical composition of the text strongly suggests that this line should be read as a single colon, for it appears on a tablet in which the poetic line breaks are made to match the physical line breaks. However, Korpel and de Moor argue against this, by means of a comparison with a parallel passage, which they acknowledge is slightly extended.

KTU 1.19: II.8f.
bkm . tmdlñ . 'r Thereupon she saddled a he-ass

16. Korpel and de Moor, "Fundamentals of Ugaritic and Hebrew Poetry," 15.

17. Korpel and de Moor, "Fundamentals of Ugaritic and Hebrew Poetry," 5.

bkm. tšmd . phl thereupon he harnessed a male.

They conclude that ‘because in this case too the physical disposition is colometrical it cannot be doubted that *two* cola are involved. For this reason we are forced to conclude that the bicolon in *KTU* 1.4: IV was written on one line only to save space.’¹⁸

There are two clear factors that are relevant here: the reliability of the physical line breaks in the text in question and the relative significance of the parallel passage. Korpel and de Moor are inclined to give the latter greater weight, despite the extended length of the colon in the second text. This indicates a general presumption of regularity of structure within the poetic form, even across different texts (*KTU* 1.4 forms part of the Baal cycle, while *KTU* 1.19 is part of the Aqhat story.)

- (ii) *KTU* 1.1: II.21f.; III.10; 1.3: III.18; IV.11
ḥšk ‘šk ‘bšk Hurry up! Press on! Make haste!¹⁹

The question here is whether these three related infinitives (translated as imperatives) should be read as one colon or three cola. The principle of internal parallelism suggests that the latter is certainly possible. However the context mitigates against this, since two parallel cola, each of three feet, follow our phrase. The rhythm of the poem would be more consistent if the first line also consisted of a single colon of three feet.

There are no Ugaritic passages of similar construction, but Isa. 55:1 exhibits a similar structure and other examples are found in Isa. 24:17; 52:11; Jer. 4:2; Joel 2:19. A final confirmation that the line should be read as a single colon is found in *KTU* 1.3: III.18 where the same formula is written on a single physical line as are the two cola preceding it.

Identifying verses

The principle of internal parallelism is applied at the level of the verse. For Korpel and de Moor, ‘parallelism is our most precious help in establishing which cola should be joined to form a

18. Korpel and de Moor, “Fundamentals of Ugaritic and Hebrew Poetry,” 5.

19. Korpel and de Moor, “Fundamentals of Ugaritic and Hebrew Poetry,” 6.

verse. However, as with the colon it has to be recognized that often an absolutely certain delimitation of verses is impossible.²⁰ The problem is most acute in the case of what is known as ‘synthetic parallelism.’ De Moor and Korpel conclude that ‘because sentences running on through more than one verse do occur, there is no reason whatsoever why we should not write a ‘synthetical’ bicolon as two independent unicola.’

<i>KTU</i> 1.14: V. 12-14	
[’apn]k [p]bl[. mlk .]	Thereupon king Pubala
[g]m . l’att[h . k]y[šh .]	cried aloud to his wife. ²¹

In this example, the two phrases are semantically dependent on each other but there is no obvious parallelism of syntax or semantics. It would seem plausible even to consider the whole sentence as a single unicolon, though this would exceed the normal limit suggested by de Moor and Korpel of five feet in a colon. A further possibility is that narrative insertions such as this need not be expected to conform to the ‘rules’ of poetry. Indeed Korpel and de Moor hint at such an idea: ‘It is often difficult to decide whether we are dealing with a unicolon or with an asymmetrical verse of more than one colon. This is especially the case when several unicola follow each other, lending a peculiar prosaic flavour to the poem.’²²

In addition to these metrical principles, some of the poetic devices can be useful in identifying cola or verse divisions. The quasi-acrostic, other forms of alliteration, parallelism, chiasmus and the use of refrains will be discussed below.

The problems of enjambment and caesura

These poetic techniques which deliberately separate the poetic line from the sense unit render the identification of cola and verses on the basis of semantics and syntax particularly difficult. Enjambment consists of the extension of a thought or sentence beyond the end of the

20. Korpel and de Moor, “Fundamentals of Ugaritic and Hebrew Poetry,” 17.

21. Korpel and de Moor, “Fundamentals of Ugaritic and Hebrew Poetry,” 17.

22. Korpel and de Moor, “Fundamentals of Ugaritic and Hebrew Poetry,” 21.

poetic line. Caesura occurs when the end of a thought or sentence comes in the middle of a poetic line. The alternative to each of these is end stopping, whereby each poetic line coincides with a single thought or sentence. ‘End-stopping is almost inevitable in a poetic tradition (such as Hebrew) which uses sequences of parallel lines. One effect of end-stopping is to restrict the natural patterns of speech: every line has to be a unit and end at a grammatical juncture, the result therefore tending to be a little artificial.’²³

Some examples of enjambment and caesura can be confidently identified within Ugaritic poetry, but it is unclear how frequently this device was used, nor how much uncertainty it should add to our identification of poetic units. Watson describes the effects of enjambment: ‘By going counter to the metrical flow of the poem, enjambment provides an element of variety. The chief effect of enjambment, though - related to the effect just mentioned - is to bring verse closer to everyday speech.’²⁴ It is certainly true that enjambment can have the effect of imitating ordinary speech but it can also be a powerful way of creating tension, by introducing a rhythmic break at an unexpected place within a sense unit.

Watson thinks that synthetic parallelism is really an example of enjambment, as for example, in *KTU* 6 i 56-57

<i>apnk 'ttr 'rz</i>	Then Athtar, the High-brow,
<i>y'l bšrrt špn</i>	ascended the heights of Zaphon. ²⁵

Segert accurately describes the usual approach to prosodic analysis, which illustrates the particular problem caused by enjambment, and its corollary, caesura: ‘Despite attempts to apply phonetic criteria, such as the syllable count, to the analysis of Ugaritic poetry, they have to be considered secondary. The structure of prosodic units was primarily determined by the semantic and syntactic affinities of words that form the cola and their combinations.’²⁶ Since semantics and syntax are the most significant factors used to determine verses and cola, devices which

23. Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 2005 (London: T & T Clark, 1984), 333.

24. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 333

25. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 335.

26. Segert, “Ugaritic Poetry and Poetics,” 730.

deliberately separate poetic line from sense unit are virtually impossible to identify confidently in the absence of external factors such as physical layout.

Loretz and Kottsieper recognise the problem here: ‘In many cases the western reader runs the risk of underestimating the significance of the formal element and seeks to solve the colometric problem by precipitant recourse to the supposed sense of words or contexts.’²⁷ But it is naive to say, as they do, that ‘it is only after we have recovered this [colometric] structure that we are able to work out satisfactory solutions for the problems of lexicography, grammar and content in a given Ugaritic poem.’²⁸ Very frequently there is nothing other than meaning and syntax that may be used to determine the prosodic structure. The structure, at least at this stage of Ugaritic study, is as dependent on the solution to problems of lexicography, grammar and content, as vice versa.

Identification of larger units

This is most easily done by the recognition of run-on sentences, acrostics, or the use of refrains all of which connect verses together into strophes, or strophes into canticles, or canticles into cantos. Other markers such as deictic particles, imperatives, and external markers such as the Hebrew *selah* can be used to indicate the boundaries of these units.

These higher level units usually exhibit some form of careful structuring, which may be indicated by features such as verbal repetition, alliteration, inclusio, or chiasmus. Pieter van der Lugt has argued that usually ‘the verses forming a strophe are connected by external parallelism.’²⁹

It should be noted that this hierarchical structure is merely *presumed* to apply to Ugaritic poetry. Particularly with respect to the long narrative works and the higher level structures, a

27. Loretz and Kottsieper, *Colometry in Ugaritic and Biblical Poetry*, 33.

28. Loretz and Kottsieper, *Colometry in Ugaritic and Biblical Poetry*, 37.

29. Korpel and de Moor, “Fundamentals of Ugaritic and Hebrew Poetry,” 33.

certain amount of caution should be taken so as not to force the poems into forms fitting our own cultural norms.

Ugaritic poetic technique

*“Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood.”*³⁰

Poetry, like all art forms, has its own conventions by which it can communicate its meaning and its artistry. If the poet is sufficiently skilled, these conventions need not be consciously recognized in order to achieve their effect. We should be careful not to confuse an analysis of poetic technique with an interpretation of the poem itself. Nonetheless, a proper understanding of the poetic devices used within Ugaritic poetry is essential in overcoming the difficulties of reading in translation. Here we will consider four of the most common poetic devices found in the Ugaritic literature: parallelism, alliteration, figurative language, and various forms of redundancy and economy.

Parallelism

Dahood speaks for many scholars of Canaanite poetry in declaring that ‘the dominating principle of both Ugaritic and biblical poetry is the same, namely, that of balance or symmetry, the famous *parallelismus membrorum*.’³¹ Kugel notes three features of Ugaritic parallelism more pronounced than in the biblical literature: ‘the frequency of three-clause sentences; the very common appearance of repeated words or phrases in consecutive clauses; and the existence of a stock vocabulary of pairs of words.’³² The first of these makes the identification of sentences and verse units a more difficult task in Ugaritic for the tricolon and the bicolon frequently alternate without any obvious order or rationale. It also suggests to Kugel a different function for the

30. T. S. Eliot

31. Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I: 1–50*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1966), xxxiii.

32. James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, Paperback edition, 1998 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 26.

parallelism than mere repetition or restatement: ‘an emphatic, elevating function quite independent of symmetry, parallelism, or even poetic structure.’³³

Although parallelism has been proposed as the definitive feature of Canaanite poetry, it must be noted that parallelistic expressions appear in Hebrew and Ugaritic prose texts, and that not all poetic lines can be persuasively shown to be parallelistic. It is certainly an important feature of such poetry, but it is neither necessary nor sufficient for distinguishing poetry from prose. In a particularly telling example observed by Margalit the same parallelistic expression appears in both poetic and prosaic texts.

KTU 6 iii 46-48 From strength to strength, O Shipshu,
From strength to strength may El keep you;
may the gods keep you safe.

This is an example of ‘staircase parallelism’ in which the final phrase of the second line is repeated at the start of the third line. It is also, however, an adaptation of the standard greeting used in Ugaritic letters.

KTU 19 iv 194-195 May the gods keep you safe,
may they guard you and keep you safe.

A further distinctive feature of Ugaritic parallelism noted by Segert is that ‘the mutual relationship of the cola in the Ugaritic poetry is always positive. Only one instance of an antithetic relationship of the cola may be found, but it is not certain.’³⁴

Word pairs

Much of Mitchell Dahood’s important study of the comparisons between Hebrew and Ugaritic poetry is centred on this common feature of parallelism.³⁵ The word pair often occurs as a subsidiary feature of parallelistic structure. Many stock pairings can be observed, encompassing antonyms (e.g. day/night), synonyms (e.g. cup/flagon), general and specific (e.g. hand/right hand), and so on. For Kugel,

33. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 27.

34. Segert, “Ugaritic Poetry and Poetics,” 731 Segert does not give the reference for the one possible exception.

35. Dahood, *Psalms I: 1-50*, xxxiii.

the function of such fixed pairs is obvious. They strongly establish the feeling of correspondence between A and B. Indeed, the more stereotypical the pairing, the greater the bond; with the most frequently used pairs, the appearance of the first in itself creates the anticipation of its fellow, and when the latter comes it creates a harmonious feeling of completion and satisfaction.³⁶

Alliteration

The prevalence of alliterative phrases and the common use of ‘quasi-acrostics’ in which successive lines begin with the same letter in the Ugaritic poetic techniques is striking. This can occur by simple repetition of the initial word(s).

<i>KTU 1.6 iv 15-17</i>	
<i>iy aliyn b'l</i>	Where is mightiest Baal?
<i>iy zbl b'l arṣ</i>	Where is the Prince, Earth-Lord?

Sometimes, more skilfully, it is achieved without word-repetition.

<i>KTU 1.17 i 16-18</i>	
<i>abynt dnīl mt rpi</i>	Misery of Danel, Rapiu-man.
<i>anḥ ḡzr mt hrnmy</i>	Moaning of the adult, Hrnmy-man

Watson notes that similar quasi-acrostics also appear in Hebrew poetry.³⁷

Margalit considers that “‘Alliteration’, properly conceived, is in fact ‘definitional’ of NWS poetries (to judge by the OT and Ug. specimens) if not strictly, and structurally, constitutive. It is ubiquitously employed and in accordance with certain conventional restraints.”³⁸ He gives numerous examples to illustrate that the choice of rare words and the choice of words over a close synonym are often determined by alliterative exigencies. Indeed, for Margalit, alliteration is as important a technique as parallelism:

the extent of its use - nothing if not ubiquitous - and the tremendous pains taken by the poet to effect it, indicate that alliteration is no mere literary frill or decoration to be used, if at all, at the poet’s whim or discretion. One may well assume that the successful Canaanite poet could no more dispense with alliteration than he could with “parallelism”. The audiences craved both.³⁹

36. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 29.

37. See P. W. Skehan, *CBQ* 23 (1971), 127

38. B. Margalit, “Alliteration in Ugaritic Poetry,” *UF* 11: 537.

39. Margalit, “Introduction to Ugaritic Prosody,” 310.

Margalit considers that alliterative principles should be taken into consideration in determining verse structure, and textual restoration and emendation. ‘A verse whose structure has been correctly established should show itself as an alliterative unit as well. A restoration or emendation which blends with the alliterative landscape is preferable, *ceteris paribus*, to one which doesn’t.’⁴⁰ He also offers this as an explanation for a large proportion of the enclitic particles found in the Ugaritic texts.⁴¹

Figurative language

Perhaps it is the nature of narrative poetry to exhibit fewer examples of figurative language than one might expect of other kinds of verse, but it seems to be generally the case that Ugaritic poetry relies comparatively little on devices such as metaphor, simile, hyperbole and other figurative language. Watson finds just a small handful of examples, including this nice pictorial image of wine as the necklace of Lebanon:

Must of wine fit for rulers,
 wine without after-effects,
 wine of happiness,
 the purple necklace of Lebanon,
 dew of must grown by a god.⁴²

There are of course difficulties involved in identifying figurative language in translation. Where there are gaps in our lexical knowledge, for example, to be guessed at only by context, we are very unlikely to propose a figurative interpretation. Even when we have surer knowledge from within the Ugaritic lexicon or by comparison with cognate languages, still ‘we often cannot be sure, for example, whether a word is used in its everyday sense, whether it is a stereotyped metaphor that no longer involves any conscious comparison, or whether it is a metaphor that actively engages the mind of the hearer in relating two different entities.’⁴³

40. Margalit, “Introduction to Ugaritic Prosody,” 311.

41. Margalit, “Introduction to Ugaritic Prosody,” 311.

42. Watson, “The Character of Ugaritic Poetry,” 165.

43. Simon Parker, “The Use of Similes in Ugaritic Literature,” *UF* 36: 357.

This difficulty is made somewhat easier in the category of simile, since these require some marker in the text, usually the particle *k* or *km*. The use of similes in the Ugaritic literature is mainly restricted to the narrative poetry and even there is not frequent.⁴⁴

Simon Parker's analysis shows that the similes in *Kirta* have a structural role, being clustered around the parallel episodes describing Kirta's loss of family, El's provision of a bride, and finally the crisis of Kirta's impending death. The first cluster heightens the sense of Kirta's grief, while the second is used to draw attention to the deity, and the third increases the narrative tension by drawing attention to the significance of Kirta's possible death. Parker considers all the similes to contribute to the themes of the poem, which concern Kirta's complete dependence on El and El's ability to deliver Kirta from all threats.⁴⁵

In *Aqhat*, the similes have a different role. They appear only in conjunction with the plan and execution to kill Aqhat. Only four distinct similes are used though due to the repetitious nature of the poem as a whole, these four appear several times. Their use 'focusses the hearers' attention and intensifies their imaginative and emotional response to this violent act which is the central event in the whole story.'⁴⁶

Likewise in the *Baal* cycle, all the similes are used to refer to situations of violence, death and mourning. 'In other words, similes are not used occasionally and incidentally to adorn a particular verse, but dramatically in association with Baal's disposal of Yamm, Anat's violence, and especially Mot's conflict with Baal, and the mourning of El and Anat over Baal's demise.'⁴⁷

More than half the similes identified draw on some comparison with the animal world, both domestic and wild beasts. This is especially true for similes used in contexts of violence, death and mourning. Other sources include the ideals of the gods themselves, agriculture, and economics. 'In the poetic world of simile, then, the myths convey a sense of the human and

44. Parker, "The Use of Similes in Ugaritic Literature," 358.

45. Parker, "The Use of Similes in Ugaritic Literature," 362.

46. Parker, "The Use of Similes in Ugaritic Literature," 363.

47. Parker, "The Use of Similes in Ugaritic Literature," 367.

divine worlds as close to the animal world, “red in tooth and claw,” even as they also suggest that the gods may model ideals in the realms of politics, aesthetics, and ethics (dominion, beauty, and wisdom).⁴⁸

‘Metaphors are relatively rare in Ugaritic poetry, especially in the Baal cycle, while they are somewhat more frequent in the Aqhat epics.’⁴⁹ ‘The lack of comparable contexts in Ugaritic prose makes the recognition and evaluation of these and other poetic figures difficult and uncertain.’⁵⁰

Clear metaphors identified by Segert include the following :

1.4: IV: 38	<i>dm . ‘šm</i>	blood of vines
1.16: I: 27	<i>qr . ‘nk</i>	the well of your eyes
1:17: VI: 35	<i>šrgk . ḥḥm</i>	your lies are rubbish

Redundancy and Economy

Watson explains the significance of both redundancy and economy in poetry:

Poetic technique includes the ability to control and balance redundancy and economy in language. Redundancy is built into everyday prose while incomplete phrases and sentences are common. Such redundancy and economy, though, are bound by definite norms. Poetry, on the contrary, is to a large extent freer; a certain amount of repetition (refrains, parallelism, epithets etc.) is expected; at the same time terse writing is indicative of skilful composition. It is the poet’s task to use redundancy and ellipsis to their fullest effect.⁵¹

Redundancy need not require precise repetition, though in Ugaritic narrative poetry this often occurs.

Whole sections are repeated word for word: foretelling dreams and their enactments; command and fulfilment; plans and their execution. There is, besides, a fondness for stereotyped passages. When someone is given bad news she (or he) stamps her feet, contorts her spine, sweats, convulses her vertebrae and the small of her back. The implication (once again) is that we are dealing with oral poetry.⁵²

48. Parker, “The Use of Similes in Ugaritic Literature,” 369.

49. Segert, “Ugaritic Poetry and Poetics,” 733.

50. Segert, “Ugaritic Poetry and Poetics,” 733.

51. Wilfred G. E. Watson, “Verse-Patterns in Ugaritic, Akkadian and Hebrew Poetry,” *UF* 7: 491.

52. Watson, “The Character of Ugaritic Poetry,” 168.

As Watson observes, sometimes a passage may not be repeated, but the form is so stereotypical as to render the content redundant. The list of filial duties found in *KTU* 1.17 i. 26-33 and *passim* falls into this stereotypical category. One can imagine the hearers of the poem reciting along with the performer.

Watson gives two examples to show how redundancy was used to poetic effect, including a line we considered earlier from *KTU* 1.1: II.21f. (*ḥšk 'šk 'bšk* = Hurry up! Press on! Make haste!) He suggests that the repetition here is used to indicate urgency. In another line which he translates, ‘the gods’ toil was great, the work heavy, much the distress,’ the piling up of equivalent expressions adds to the sense of burden being expressed.⁵³

Certain poetic techniques employ both redundancy and economy, indicating that the primary motivation was not overall length of the poetic unit. The pivot pattern, for example, often includes repetitious elements on either side, whilst the central pivot does double-duty.

<i>KTU</i> 14: IV 205-206	<i>tnh kspm</i> <i>ātn</i> <i>wlth hršm</i>	Twice her (weight) in silver will I give Thrice even in gold ⁵⁴
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Other techniques that require varying degrees of redundancy include the sorite, in which the final phrase of one colon is repeated at the start of the following colon.

<i>KTU</i> 2 IV 11-13	<i>šmk . st ygrš</i> <i>ygrš . grš ym</i> <i>grš ym . lks'ih</i> <i>[n]hr lkht drkth</i>	Your name is Chaser Chaser, chase sea Chase sea from his throne River from his seat of dominion. ⁵⁵
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In this section we may also include the poetic device known as chiasmus. Watson notes that ‘*chiastic patterning*’ is by no means exclusive to the poetry we are describing; it is found in most ancient literature to a greater or lesser degree. However, in the texts from Ras Shamra chiasmus is used in a special way, namely, to show two or more individuals acting as one.⁵⁶

<i>KTU</i> 17 v. 10-11	The coming of Kothar he surely saw,
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53. Watson, “Verse-Patterns in Ugaritic, Akkadian and Hebrew Poetry,” 491.

54. Watson, “Verse-Patterns in Ugaritic, Akkadian and Hebrew Poetry,” 489–90.

55. Watson, “Verse-Patterns in Ugaritic, Akkadian and Hebrew Poetry,” 487.

56. Watson, “The Character of Ugaritic Poetry,” 164.

he saw the rapid advance of Hasis.

The chiasmic structure of the verse links the two titles of the deity to indicate that it should be understood as a single being.⁵⁷

Distinguishing poetry from prose

“A prose writer gets tired of writing prose, and wants to be a poet.

So he begins every line with a capital letter, and keeps on writing prose.”⁵⁸

The appropriate grounds for distinguishing poetry from prose in the ancient languages remain a matter of some uncertainty. Indeed, the inability to establish clear principles for such a distinction led James Kugel to dismiss the very notion of biblical poetry:

[W]hat is called biblical “poetry” is a complex of heightening effects used in combinations and intensities that vary widely from composition to composition even within a single “genre.” No great service is rendered here by the concept of biblical poetry, since the term will, if based on the various heightening features seen, include compositions whose genre and subject are most unpoetic by Western standards, and since it will imply a structural regularity and design that are simply not there.⁵⁹

Again, he observes that within the biblical text ‘there are not two modes of utterance, but many different elements which elevate style and provide for formality and strictness of organization.’⁶⁰ Kugel finds that all the features commonly associated with ancient Canaanite and Israelite poetry can be seen in biblical prose and that there is no one feature common to all poetic texts. Failing then to find any satisfactory way to ‘define’ Hebrew poetry, he concludes that the concept is worthless. The absence of a technical Hebrew term for poetry confirms the view that such a distinction is an external imposition, arising from a false view of the metrical nature of parts of the biblical text.⁶¹

57. Watson, “The Character of Ugaritic Poetry,” 164.

58. Samuel McChord Crothers

59. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 94.

60. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 85.

61. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 85.

Kugel cites from an article by Alonso-Schökel in support of his thesis:

It is no more possible to draw a clear distinction between the characteristics of poetic style and prose than between “poetic” vocabulary and “prosaic” vocabulary. Poetry raises to the utmost the possibilities of normal speech: these verbal creations of the poetic idiom then turn back towards the language of artistic prose or of ordinary prose, or of conversational speech.... Stylistic devices... *by their frequency and their force*, are a sign of poetic language. Meeting them in prose, we feel an unexpected poetic resonance.⁶²

Kugel appreciates Alonso-Schökel’s insights but he is ‘moved to wonder precisely how much “unexpected poetic resonance” is required before prose drifts into poetry,’⁶³ or whether this is indeed related to ‘our normal distinction of poetry and prose?’⁶⁴ He distrusts all theories that suggest quantitative rather than qualitative distinctions between prose and poetry and argues that this whole approach is misleading.

And yet, despite the efforts of Kugel and others to demonstrate that there is nothing uniquely poetic about any of the biblical texts, there remains a nagging sense that certain texts do demand to be read differently. Perhaps the study of the Ugaritic corpus may help to identify what this sense is and where it arises.

Johannes C. De Moor and Wilfred G. E. Watson have edited a volume in which they collect a variety of attempts to identify poetry in different Ancient Near Eastern texts.⁶⁵ Within that volume a wide range of criteria are employed by different scholars in this task of distinguishing poetry from prose: ‘acrostic patterning, comparison with passages in verse, denseness of corresponding features, lineation or stichometry, metre or rather rhythm, repetition and its most salient expression: parallelism, syntactical features such as ellipsis and forms of chiasmus, vertical grammar and overall analysis of structure.’⁶⁶ They point to the obvious

62. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 83 cites L Alonso-Schökel, s.v. “Poésie hébraïque,” in *DBS* Fasc. 42, pp. 56-57, emphasis added by Kugel.

63. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 83.

64. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 83.

65. Johannes C. de Moor and Wilfred G. E. Watson, eds, *AOAT 42 (1993) Verse in Ancient Near Eastern Prose*.

66. de Moor and Watson, *Verse in Ancient Near Eastern Prose*, xiv.

symmetry which characterised ancient architectural and pictorial art and suggest that it is not surprising to find similar symmetrical structures in poetic constructions.

Despite the efforts of these scholars, many of which yield convincing results when applied to individual texts, it remains the case that any attempt to clearly define the poetic genre as a whole in opposition to prose by means of structure or technique is unconvincing. Many prose narratives in the ancient literature exhibit evidence of careful structuring by means of palistrophe, inclusio, or other markers. Even that great constant of ancient poetry, internal parallelism, can be found in texts that otherwise appear prosaic. And it is certain that poetic passages can be found which do not conform to the parallelistic measure.

We should not, perhaps, be so surprised or dismayed at these difficulties as some scholars appear to be, since even within our own language, such definitions have proved elusive.⁶⁷ As Watson and de Moor admit, ‘When the prosody of a modern European language is still a matter of dispute it should come as no surprise that the differentiation between prose and verse in ancient Near Eastern languages also remains problematic.’⁶⁸

They turn to a third kind of criterion which may ultimately prove more fruitful in both identifying and interpreting ancient poetic texts, namely that of function.

The function of poetry

*“Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words.”*⁶⁹

An important question to ask of any poetic text is why it has been composed in that form. Why choose to use these conventions of structure, or these artistic devices? What could not be conveyed so well through the simpler, more straightforward prosaic manner? Perhaps a clearer

67. The quotations I have included at the beginning of each section are intended to illustrate that the problems facing the student of ancient Near East poetry are not unique. All poetry is elusive, resisting definition, relying on technique but yet not bound by technique.

68. de Moor and Watson, *Verse in Ancient Near Eastern Prose*, ix.

69. Robert Frost

understanding of the purpose of poetry will lead to a sharper distinction from prose and it will certainly lead to a better reading strategy for these texts.

Watson and de Moor suggest that the purpose of poetry can be distinguished from that most easily accomplished in prose: ‘Although there is some degree of overlap, prose is composed for purposes which differ from those for which verse (poetry) is intended. Prose provides information, generally accepted as authentic, whereas verse can be fantasy, entertains and is persuasive.’⁷⁰ Tremper Longman broadly agrees with these distinctions: ‘Prose, the language of everyday discourse, suggests authenticity; poetry, an artificial ornamented use of language, suggests literary invention.’⁷¹

It is not quite true to say that poetry always suggests literary invention or fantastic entertainment. The proverbs, for example, are cast in verse form and yet convey a striking air of authority. Poetry can lend a sense of other-worldliness to ritual or mythological texts which, though they may appear fantastic to us, presumably were intended to provoke a sense of awe and worship of the divine. Pardee’s analysis of certain of the Ugaritic ritual texts leads him to conclude that ‘poetic formulation was reserved for special cultic events.’⁷² This is to say that ritual events are more commonly expressed in prose form, so that the few examples of poetic cultic texts are in some way ‘special’. Pardee notes that by comparison with other ancient Near Eastern parallels, there are surprisingly few Ugaritic poetic ritual texts.

Gerald Morris has made an interesting comparison between poetry and rhetoric in his analysis of a Hebrew prophetic text. He argues that ‘rhetoric and poetry are... two distinct genres: two distinct genres, moreover, which even upon casual consideration appear different to the point of being irreconcilable.’⁷³ He makes this distinction in terms of purpose, effect,

70. de Moor and Watson, *Verse in Ancient Near Eastern Prose*, xvii.

71. de Moor and Watson, *Verse in Ancient Near Eastern Prose*, xvii cites T. Longman III, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography. A Generic and Comparative Study* (Winona Lake 1991), 210

72. D. Pardee, “Poetry in Ugaritic Ritual Texts,” *AOAT* 42 (1993): 218.

73. Gerald Morris, *Prophecy, Poetry and Hosea* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 26.

structure and clarity.⁷⁴ While rhetoric seeks to persuade its audience to understand and agree with its conclusion, using logical and empirical arguments, set forth in a clear progression, poetry, on the other hand, invites hearers to become involved in the poem and thus infer its meaning from within. To achieve this, poetry may be structured in non-logical ways and does not primarily aim for clarity of expression.

Morris' observations are particularly valid with respect to lyric poetry, but even the narrative poetry of the Ugaritic mythological texts displays some of these characteristics. The reader is invited to share the point of view of both human and divine characters, seeing the world through their eyes. The poet makes little attempt to defend, explain or analyse the world of the poem, he merely presents it and invites the reader (or more properly, hearer) to become part of that world. This is particularly suited to the mythological texts, having the effect of making these divine characters appear real, powerful and involved with the world. The hearer of these poems shakes with fear and awe at El, determines to stand up to Anat at their peril and so on. The poems are thus a powerful religious tool, engaging not only their hearers' minds, but more importantly, their imaginations.

Some implications for the study of Hebrew poetry

If we come to the Ugaritic texts hoping to find, at last, a simple definition by which can confidently assert some ancient literature to be prose and some poetry, we will inevitably be disappointed. The structural work we discussed earlier provides some useful parameters, giving guidelines to determine the likely divisions of poetic units and alerting us to unusual situations. This work has obvious implications for exegesis. Korpel and de Moor also illustrate its use in text-critical, semantic and source-critical debates.⁷⁵ The impressive level of statistical correspondence between the Ugaritic and Hebrew literatures which they have shown indicates the

74. Morris, *Prophecy*, 42–43.

75. Korpel and de Moor, "Fundamentals of Ugaritic and Hebrew Poetry," 53–54.

validity and importance of using the Ugaritic texts to help us better understand the structures of the poetic texts in the Hebrew bible.

A similar correspondence at the level of poetic technique is illustrated in Watson's volume on Hebrew poetry. Almost every technique he observes in the Hebrew texts is supported by examples of a similar device in the Ugaritic literature. The comparative frequency of certain devices varies, but this is only to be expected given the different genres of poetry that dominate the two bodies of literature. Not only the word pairs so beloved of Dahood, but other kinds of parallelism, sound play, repetition and ellipsis, and various kinds of figurative language used in the Ugaritic texts give the reader a new awareness and understanding of the effect of these techniques in the Hebrew texts.

More than all these benefits, however, I suggest that the great gain brought by the discovery of the Ugaritic texts is simply the opportunity to read more poetry of a similar nature to the biblical texts. We began this study by noting the many difficulties surrounding the attempt to read poetry outside of one's own language and culture. It seems to me that these difficulties are exacerbated by the apparent lack of awareness of basic reading strategies associated with all poetry, regardless of the particular conventions of language, structure or technique. Until we are able to move beyond the kind of analysis discussed in much of this paper and learn to read these ancient poems as poems, allowing ourselves to engage with them in our hearts and minds, we will be no more than users of the texts, not truly hearers of the poetry. It seems appropriate, therefore, to end this paper with a poem, in the hope that it will stimulate its readers to a better appreciation of poetry as poetry.

Introduction to Poetry

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

Billy Collins, (c) 2001

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