

ABSTRACT

The Psalmist in the Psalm:
A Persona-Critical Reading of Book IV of the Psalter

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This dissertation offers a literary and theological reading of Book IV of the Psalter, a reading that is informed by the theory of the literary persona, as well as canonical-critical approaches to the Book of Psalms. This project argues that the speaker or speakers in a psalm are properly identified as literary personae, and should not be equated with the psalm's historical author. This distinction is hermeneutically significant insofar as the psalm's speaker is therefore oriented to the world of the poem rather than the reader's knowledge of or access to the historical author.

There is sufficient evidence to conclude that individual psalms may be read canonically, that is, interpreted in relation to one another and as a whole. Therefore, the literary personae of individual psalms may also be interpreted in this manner. According to a persona-critical reading of Book IV of the Psalter,

readers encounter in these psalms many personae that, in their present literary context, collectively imagine a reoriented identity under the kingship of Yahweh.

After identifying the utility of persona criticism for the interpretation of the Psalter in chapter one, the second chapter of this dissertation surveys the history and theory of persona. Chapter two essentially characterizes persona as a highly variable but inherent phenomenon of poetry that is distinct from the historical author and hermeneutically oriented to the world of the poem.

Chapter three situates the persona theory within the context of ancient poetry. A brief survey of ancient Near Eastern texts demonstrates that persona criticism is indeed applicable to ancient poetry. The Psalter in particular is well suited to persona-critical analyses, though such an approach has not generally been emphasized by interpreters.

The fourth chapter is an exegetical reading of Psalms 90-106. Collectively and in their present literary context, the personae of Book IV imagine and bespeak a reoriented identity under the kingship of Yahweh. These poetic personae, however, demonstrate a striking variety of characteristics that contribute to the overall theological thrust of Book IV. These characteristics are summarized, along with the overall results of the project, in chapter five.

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To Kathy,

whose voice I hear
in the truest verse

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The Psalmist Paradox: Presence and Ambiguity in the Psalter

The psalmist has long occupied the attention of scholars. Such sustained interest is due in part to the psalmist's paradoxical nature – at once present and yet obscured within the Psalter. On the one hand, the reader of the Psalter is confronted with the presence of the psalmist with nearly every turn of the page. Steven J. L. Croft observes that the “I” of the individual psalmist appears in over three-fifths of the psalms.¹ Even in the absence of any explicit self-reference, the reader encounters a speaker (or speakers), imbued through the lyrics of the psalm with a texture or quality, a particular tone, character, or point of view.

On the other hand, even a casual reader of the Psalter can observe the characteristic ambiguity of its poetry. The Psalter is vague with regard to the specific historical situation behind the text, both in terms of contributing authors and editors and the circumstances in which they composed. In its final form the Psalter presents readers with poetry that is “universally applicable and adaptable,” and “open to use by many.”² While this “universalizing” of the

¹Stephen J. L. Croft, *The Identity of the Individual in the Psalms* (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1987), 11.

²W. H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms: Reading and Studying the Book of Praises* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1990), 29.

Psalter's poetry enabled the continued use of these texts within a community no longer tied to the pre-exilic Jerusalem cult,³ it also effectively obscured the identity of the historical poets.

Not surprisingly this paradoxical psalmist, ever present but blurred, has led to various reconstructions. Interpreters have typically assumed that the identity of the psalmist who speaks in a given psalm rests in the identity of the historical poet. At times, interpreters are very imaginative in this regard. In his analysis of Psalm 92, for example, Artur Weiser proposes a very specific circumstance for the historical poet:

When v. 2 speaks of the confession which is uttered in the morning and by night, the thought which most easily comes to our mind in this connection is that the poet must have stayed at the sanctuary for several days during the festival season (cf. Pss. 55.17; 134.1), possibly during the New Year Festival, at which according to tradition a cultic ceremony took place during the festival night.⁴

Weiser's suggestion certainly resonates with the content of the psalm, and is entirely possible. At the same time, the poem could be the work of one or more temple functionaries who had never managed to keep vigil past midnight, with subsequent contributions made by editors who had no temple to visit.

The point here is not to suggest that the historical circumstances behind the final form of the text are not a valuable object of study. The diachronic analysis of the Psalter has vastly improved our understanding of the Psalter, and

³See Bellinger, *Psalms*, 29.

⁴Artur Weiser, *The Psalms* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 614.

no doubt many insights and discoveries remain. The point is rather that from a literary perspective, it is not necessary, or perhaps even best, to equate the psalmist who speaks in the psalm with the historical poet. Instead, one may read the Psalter with an understanding that the speaker is part of the literary world of the psalm, a character of the text who is in some sense separate and distinct from the historical poet. The most appropriate identification for this psalmist in the psalm is a *literary persona*.

New Tricks for an Old Dog: The Persona Theory and the Canonical Psalter

The theory of the literary persona, which has gained much purchase in the broader enterprise of poetic hermeneutics throughout multiple literary eras, has received little attention within biblical hermeneutics, even with regard to the 150 poems of the Psalter. This neglect is perhaps a consequence of the general disconnect between Old Testament scholarship and the larger literary-critical discussion. In the introduction to his study of fictional Akkadian autobiography, Tremper Longman III comments that while “[Herman] Gunkel was aware of contemporary developments within the fields of comparative literature and literary theory, biblical scholars in his wake tended to elaborate his methodology without keeping in touch with the changes and refinements in those fields.”⁵ Specifically with regard to poetics, David L. Petersen and Kent Harold Richards

⁵Tremper Longman III, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography: A Generic and Comparative Study* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1991), 3-4.

note that “scholarly work on Hebrew poetry usually does not incorporate the broader discussions of poetry.”⁶ According to David Noel Freedman this disconnect can even be reinforced by reverence for the text:

The treatment of the Bible as sacred, canonical literature has tended to erase all distinctions among the various types of literature, including the basic one between prose and poetry. Whether the concern was legislative or theological, the objective was to fix the exact wording of the text and establish an authoritative interpretation to settle questions and cases. In the process of making the Bible a constitutional authority, poetry was leveled out as prose. Reverence for the text nearly killed off its spirit and effectively suppressed the special features of its poetry.⁷

The tendency to pass over the poetics of biblical poetry, however, is changing.⁸ Scholars now recognize that attention to the “special features” of biblical poetry and treatment of the Bible as a sacred canon of literature are not mutually exclusive hermeneutical goals. In keeping with this direction, I propose to analyze a particular poetic feature – namely the aspect of literary persona – in an effort to further illuminate the theological vitality of the canonical Psalter.

Of course, in taking this methodological step, one immediately stubs one’s interpretive toe. Although the theory and application of persona is indeed quite ancient, the explicit use of *persona* as a literary-critical term is a twentieth-century

⁶David L. Petersen and Kent Harold Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 8.

⁷David Noel Freedman, *Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy: Studies in Early Hebrew Poetry* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1980), 12.

⁸Longman, Petersen, and Richards note this change. See Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, 4; Petersen and Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry*, 8.

phenomenon. The problem, then, is related to the application of a modern critical tool to an ancient text. There are no extant treatments from antiquity regarding the use of literary persona within Hebrew poetry, and therefore such analysis is anachronistic. The problem, however, is more complex. Indeed, there are no surviving ancient critical treatments of *any* aspect of poetry or poetic theory, within ancient Hebrew literature or any other ancient Semitic culture.⁹ In the absence of what Longman calls “poetological documents,”¹⁰ modern critics do not even have an ancient premise for distinguishing between poetry and prose; there is no ancient terminology or descriptive discourse to formally separate the Psalter from Genesis.

Yet modern critical scholarship has made considerable progress using a variety of tools that have no explicit precedent in an ancient context. In his introduction to Freedman’s *Pottery, Poetry and Prophecy*, Frank Moore Cross offers the aspect of syllabification in Hebrew poetry as an example: “Syllable counting has proven a useful technique in isolating metrical structures. Yet this

⁹See Petersen and Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry*, 3; Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, 12.

¹⁰Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, 12. Longman derives this terminology from H. R. Jauss, “The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature,” *New Literary History* 10 (1979); “Littérature médiévale et théorie des genres,” *Poétique* 1 (1970): 79-101; and G. P. Firmat, “Genre as Text,” *Comparative Literature* 17 (1980): 16-25.

does not mean necessarily that the ancient poet counted syllables.”¹¹ Jan P.

Fokkelman puts the implication of Cross’ comment in broader terms:

Our language is a well-ordered and subtle system of signs, which may be described as a network of relations and differences. These forms of cohesion were discovered only at the beginning of the twentieth century, which means that scholarly attention to them is comparatively recent; the poets, however, have been actually working with them for thousands of years. They brilliantly exploit the differences and contrasts inherent in their language as a system.¹²

In short, the ancient Hebrew poets were not concerned with describing the techniques of their psalmody, but were rather concerned with employing those techniques in the composition of psalms – even if uncritically, or perhaps even unconsciously. That the theory of the literary persona is a modern critical concept does not, by default, mean that the concept or use of persona is beyond the ancient Hebrew poet; instead, it is perhaps the modern critic who is finally beginning to catch up.

Thus the utility of the persona theory for biblical hermeneutics, particularly with regard to the persona-aspect within Hebrew poetry, requires further investigation. The present project is concerned with that investigation, and is therefore primarily methodological in focus.

The first step of this investigation involves an analysis of the history and theory of persona criticism. This analysis will consider the different ways

¹¹Freedman, *Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy*, vii.

¹²J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry: An Introductory Guide* (trans. Ineke Smit; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 16.

authors and critics of the classic, Romantic, modern, and postmodern periods have understood the relationship between historical poet and poetic voice. This analysis will also examine the extent to which a literary persona is, or is not, an inherent aspect of poetry. Finally, this analysis will provide a basic conceptual framework for the methodological application of the persona theory.

With the theory of persona in clear view, the second step of this investigation will examine the plausibility of literary personae in the ancient Near East, in the biblical text, and finally in the Psalter. In order to allow for a persona-critical approach to the Psalter that is sensitive to the specific aspects of its poetry, two additional considerations are necessary. First, an account of previous scholarship regarding the identity of the psalmist will provide the necessary context for an understanding of the psalmist as a literary persona. Second, an examination of the shape and shaping of the Psalter will provide the necessary framework for hearing these psalms in close relationship with one another.

The final step of this investigation is concerned with utilizing persona criticism to interpret a specific group of psalms. Due to its manageable size and unique canonical role within the Psalter, this project will be limited to Book IV. Of particular interest with regard to this objective is what contribution, if any, the aspect of poetic voice makes to the overall literary and theological significance of these psalms.

CHAPTER TWO

Persona: History and Theory

Artifice is as natural to humankind as spontaneity.

– Robert C. Elliott, *The Literary Persona*

About a Revolution: Introduction to the History and Theory of Persona

In 1978, literary critic Robert C. Elliott characterized the impact of persona criticism upon the literary critical world:

The term *persona* has a long literary history going back to classical drama; but over the last two generations the word has become associated with a way of interpreting literary texts that can only be called revolutionary. It is no longer possible to read the work of Chaucer or Thomas More or Jonathan Swift or Alexander Pope – or indeed that of Horace or Juvenal, or even Dante, or that of Proust or a hundred other contemporary writers – as it was read before the word *persona* entered the critical vocabulary.¹

Besides characterizing persona criticism as revolutionary, Elliott's comment indirectly exposes another aspect essential to our study. While this "way of interpreting" is a development of the modern era, the application of persona criticism exhibits a strikingly broad reach. Persona criticism has its hand in nearly every cookie jar, finding suitable subjects in classic, Romantic, modern, and postmodern poetry. As Elliott points out, the reason for this inclusive scope

¹Robert C. Elliott, *The Literary Persona* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), ix.

is that the concept of persona is itself an ancient tool, used by poets of multiple literary eras to pen their lyrics. Therefore a full, working understanding of that thing called “persona criticism” requires observation from several overlapping vantage points. One must understand the development of persona criticism in the modern period, even as it looks back to the literature of an earlier day. One must also trace how the concept of persona has fared throughout its long history – particularly among poets and the aesthetic sensibilities of the culture in which poets create their verses. Finally, one must peek beneath the fairly plain surface of this idea and behold its astonishingly complex underpinnings.

While persona’s esteem has understandably waxed and waned over the centuries, one can reliably find it tangled in controversy at the hinge-point of several literary eras. Of course, such a statement is always artificial; “eras” are the constructs of literary historians, the boundaries of which finally prove arbitrary. Nonetheless, the changing tides of the literary ethos always carry with them notions of how the artist relates to art – earning both accolades and disdain for the concept of persona. At times, the distance between artist and art is emphasized, highlighting the impersonal aspects of form and style. Conversely, other periods assert that poets are more consonant with their poetry, focusing on the self-expressive capacity of verse. In any case, the persona theory bears directly on questions of method, for both poet and reader.

A Classic Persona

Raptures of a Sober German Philologist: The Ancient Etymology of Persona

While confidence in the hermeneutical utility of etymology has waned among biblical critics in recent years, the history of the term *persona* can nonetheless contribute to our understanding of the concept, both in its ancient and modern contexts. The word enjoys a rich and complex history, to say the least. Although discussion of the term's history will take us beyond the classical period, the origins of the word are rooted firmly in antiquity.

The term *persona* is a product of the ancient theatrical stage, a Latin word originally denoting (more or less exclusively) an actor's *mask*.² While scholars are fairly unanimous regarding this original meaning, theories regarding the word's derivation are manifold. For some time, the most widely accepted view was that *persona* derived from the Latin *per*, "through," and *sonare*, "sound," reflecting the "sounding through" of the actor's voice when speaking through the mouthpiece

²Gordon W. Allport, *Personality: A Psychological Interpretation* (New York: Henry Holt, 1937), 26; Elliott, *The Literary Persona*, 19-21; Marcel Mauss, *Sociology and Psychology: Essays* (trans. Ben Brewster; Boston: Routledge, 1979), 78; Hans Rheinfelder, *Das Wort 'Persona,' Geschichte Seiner Bedeutungen mit Besonderer Berücksichtigung des Französischen und Italienischen Mittelalters* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Romainsche Philologie 77; Halle: Niemeyer, 1928), 22ff; Mark Sadoski, "Imagination, Cognition, and Persona" *Rhetoric Review* 10 (Spring, 1992): 273; John Emerson Todd, *Emily Dickinson's Use of the Persona* (Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1973), xii; Alois Walde, *Lateinisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Zweite Umgearbeitete Auflage; vol. 2; Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1910), 291-92; George T. Wright, *The Poet in the Poem: The Personae of Eliot, Yeats and Pound* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), 9.

opening of the mask.³ Other scholars argued that *persona* derived from the Greek πρόσωπον, and that the Latin term was a direct descendant of the Greek word.⁴ Additional candidates include Latin terms *peri soma* (around the body), *per se una* (self-containing), or the Etruscan and Old Latin *persum* (head or face).⁵ Philologist Hans Rheinfelder notes the theory that the term may reach as far as the Hebrew פְּנֵי, which is etymologically connected to the Aramaic term *parsuph* (face), which in turn entered the Latin language as *persona*.⁶

More recently an alternative theory has managed to eclipse the host of other possibilities. Evidence for this new majority view comes in the form of paintings that decorate the walls of the Tomb of the Augurs in Tarquinii, Etruria. Among the paintings, which date to the sixth century BCE, is a depiction of Roman gladiatorial combat:

A masked figure, called Phersu in the inscription, holds a fierce dog by a long leash which he has wrapped round the legs of his antagonist, who holds a club but is unable to use it, because he has not yet succeeded in

³James Bradstreet Greenough and George Lyman Kittredge, *Words and Their Ways in English Speech* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), 268.

⁴Allport, *Personality*, 26. See also Mauss, *Sociology*, 79; Elliott, *Persona*, 19; Alfred Ernout, *Dictionnaire Étymologique de la Langue Latine: Histoire des Mots* (4th ed.; Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1967), 500; Walde, *Wörterbuch*, 291-92. Both πρόσωπον and *per sonare* involve improbable phonetic changes. See Allport, *Personality*, 26; Elliott, *Persona*, 20.

⁵Allport, *Personality*, 26. Walde, *Wörterbuch*, 291-92; Mauss, *Sociology*, 79; Elliott, *Persona*, 20.

⁶Rheinfelder, *Persona*, 22.

freeing his head from a sack; meanwhile the dog has torn great bleeding wounds in his legs.⁷

Another painting depicts Phersu fleeing (again, masked). Many philologists derive the Latin word *persona* from this masked Etruscan character.⁸

From whatever “face-related” Greek, Latin, Aramaic, or Etruscan word *persona* may derive, it is not obscure origins alone that invite Elliott to chide that “sober German philologists have been known to go into raptures” over the term.⁹ What once almost exclusively denoted the Roman theatrical mask eventually experienced a kind of “semantic explosion.”¹⁰ *Persona* came to signify the actor’s deliberately conceived role and gradually “any distinctive personage or

⁷William Beare, *The Roman Stage: A Short History of Latin Drama in the Time of the Republic* (2d ed.; London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1968), 22; Elliott, *Persona*, 20.

⁸Elliott, *Persona*, 20; Beare, *Roman Stage*, 22; Mauss, *Sociology*, 78-79; Walde, *Wörterbuch*, 291-92. The previously dominant theory of derivation had lost favor by the late 1960s. See, for example, Sir Arthur Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1953), 195-96. Opinions vary as to the extent of Hellenistic influence upon the Etruscan paintings, as well as the development of drama in Etruria. See Ernout, *Dictionnaire Étymologique*, 500; Luisa Banti, *Etruscan Cities and Their Culture* (trans. Erika Bizzarri; Berkeley: University of California, 1976), 76; Peter G. Brown, “Actors and Actor-managers at Rome in the Time of Plautus and Terence,” in *Greek and Roman Actors: Aspects of an Ancient Profession* (eds. Pat Easterling and Edith Hall; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 226.

⁹Elliott, *Persona*, 18. Elliott’s humorous comment is not without merit: Rheinfelder’s *Das Wort ‘Person’* analyzes the term for two hundred pages.

¹⁰Elliott, *Persona*, 23. See also Catharine Edwards, “Acting and Self-actualization in Imperial Rome: Some Death Scenes,” in *Greek and Roman Actors: Aspects of an Ancient Profession* (ed. Pat Easterling and Edith Hall; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 379.

individuality.”¹¹ The word therefore acquired much utility for describing the multiplicity of human roles within society. Roman legal terminology borrowed from the theatrical stage: plaintiffs, defendants, and judges were called *persona*, in the sense that each had a role or part to play in the court drama.¹² Theologians of the early Church employed the term in their debates over the Trinity.¹³ Ancient rhetoricians made extensive use of the term as well.

From this semantic boom comes, of course, the English word *person* and the “immense complex of ideas surrounding it,” ideas that continue to hold center stage in anthropology, sociology, psychology, theology, and philosophy.¹⁴ As we will see, poet and literary critic Ezra Pound adopted the term *persona* at the height of the modern literary period to indicate the various characters through whom he speaks in his poetry.¹⁵

Generalizations about the “obscure provenance and tangled permutations” of the word *persona* are a suspect enterprise, according to Elliott, with this exception: “the most striking characteristic of the term is its polysemous

¹¹Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 9; Elliott, *Persona*, 23; Edwards, “Acting,” 379.

¹²Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 12; Elliott, *Persona*, 28; Adolf Trendelberg, “A Contribution to the History of the Word Person: A Posthumous Treatise,” trans. Carl H. Haessler; *The Monist* 20 (1910): 353.

¹³Trendelberg, “History of the Word Person,” 353.

¹⁴Elliott, *Persona*, 28. See also Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 9.

¹⁵ T. S. Eliot, “The Three Voices of Poetry,” in *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1957), 95.

nature, the contradictory range of its reference.”¹⁶ The multivalent character of the word, Elliott further maintains, is to blame for much of the controversy it has generated among literary scholars.¹⁷ Despite Elliott’s warning, it does appear that within both ancient and modern contexts, *persona* often denotes the recognition or use of a role or character – a complex mask of identity or voice. Beyond this basic generalization, one can employ the word in a vast scope of “relationships that define in part the human situation.”¹⁸ For many of these relationships – in particular the manner in which poets relates to their poetry – the degree of distinction between mask and mask-wearer is elusive.

Nero Singing: The Classic Roots of Persona

In general, the classical world understood some distinction between historical author and literary (or dramatic or oratory) voice. The ancient artist, according to Henri Peyre, was not as a rule obliged “to be himself and to have lived and suffered before he wrote a tragedy, an elegy, or a public oration.”¹⁹

As we have noted, the classical convention of *personae* begins on the dramatic stage. The use of masks on stage may represent the earliest application

¹⁶Elliott, *Persona*, 31.

¹⁷Elliott, *Persona*, 31-32.

¹⁸Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 9.

¹⁹Henri Peyre, *Literature and Sincerity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 3, 14-15; See also Georg Misch, *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity* (vol. 1; trans. E. W. Dicks; Westport, Con.: Greenwood Press, 1973), 193.

of personae, in which the stylized facade of the actors symbolized some significant or universal aspect that was beyond the capacity of a normal human face: the actor could play the role of an abstract idea, theme, or element, thereby making it incarnate within the imaginary world of the stage.²⁰

Eventually the actor's repertoire became fixed. Characters or personae of the ancient stage – of comedy in particular – were drawn from templates familiar to audiences.²¹ According to Charles Baldwin these stock personae endured well beyond the classical period, captivating audiences during the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, as well as the French seventeenth century; even modern plays and novels confirm the impression “that broad characterization is generally more effective before an audience,” since each spectator can recognize him or herself in the character.²²

²⁰See Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 9. The earliest use of the dramatic mask is somewhat obscure, although one ancient tradition attributes the idea to the tragedian Thespis, who began with painting his face and only later began using linen covers. Dramatic masks are further said to have evolved through Choirilos and Phrynichus, and with Aeschylus came stylized and often terrifying masks. Reaching behind the dramatic uses of masks is even more difficult, although some scholars believe the tradition derives from the cult and its use of masks in worship and festivals. See Elliott, *Persona*, 22; Pickard-Cambridge, *Dramatic Festivals*, 177-78.

²¹Charles Sears Baldwin, *Ancient Rhetoric and Poetic: Interpreted from Representative Works* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1959), 189.

²²Baldwin, *Ancient Rhetoric and Poetic*, 176-80. See also Edward Burns, *Character: Acting and Being on the Pre-Modern Stage* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 39-40, 55, 97.

Shadi Bartsch²³ presents an interesting illustration of the classical gap between actor and role. She recalls the hagiography of mystic philosopher Apollonius of Tyana, authored by the Greek sophist Flavius Philostratus. In his contempt for Nero, Apollonius lectures his pupil Menippus on the conundrum of the ruler's playacting tour of Greece:

Many are the tragic actors, Menippus, among whose ranks Nero has enrolled himself. Well, what if one of them, after playing Oenomaus or Cresphontes, upon leaving the theatre were so imbued with his mask that he wished to rule others and to consider himself a tyrant – what would you say of him? Wouldn't you say he needed a dose of hellebore and a potion of medicine sufficient to clean out his mind? But if a man who is a tyrant himself should live his life by the concerns of tragedians and musicians . . . what would you say of the wretched people living under his filth? Whom do you suppose the Greeks think he is, Menippus? Xerxes razing their city, or Nero singing? (Philost, *Vit. Apoll.* 5.7)²⁴

Indeed, Apollonius suggests that Nero's theatrics constitute madness: "whether the line of travel is from stage to life or life to stage, real tyrants and fictive tyrants are separated by an inviolate boundary."²⁵ To assume otherwise is patently absurd. But Nero complicates the relationship: in his quest for celebrity the ruler actually wore theatrical masks that reproduced his own features, landing him squarely in what Bartsch calls "the strange region between life and drama."²⁶ The paradox is striking: by his actions Nero suggests that the most

²³Shadi Bartsch, *Actors in the Audience: Theatricality and Doublespeak from Nero to Hadrian* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 36-37.

²⁴Cited in Barstch, *Actors in the Audience*, 36-37.

²⁵Barstch, *Actors in the Audience*, 37.

²⁶Bartsch, *Actors in the Audience*, 46-47.

aesthetically appropriate representation of himself is in fact not himself, but a stylized mask – a persona – of himself.

Antiquity's theater would prove conceptually fertile territory for other arenas of ancient society. Aristotle, for example, recognized that the principles of rhetoric, once understood, would have the same effect in declamation as on the stage.²⁷ For Aristotle, an orator's capacity to persuade depended in part on the ability to exhibit a character with qualities conducive to persuasion, such as good sense, virtue, and goodwill.²⁸ The orator, however, only needed to *act the part* of a credible speaker, to give the appearance of moral veracity; the actual character of the historical person was a secondary matter. For Aristotle, the "instrument of persuasion" is "quite detached from the moral nature of the rhetorician."²⁹ Like the actor on the stage, Aristotle's ideal rhetorician wears the "mask" or persona appropriate to an orator.

Like Aristotle, Cicero recognized connections between actor and orator, and he drew such connections not only in the content of his writings, but in their form as well. *De Oratore* "is dramatic in representing the speakers as *personae*,"

²⁷Aristotle, *Rhet.* 2.1.7.

²⁸Aristotle, *Rhet.* 2.1.2-7; 2.21.13, 16; 3.7.3, 6-7; 3.16.5, 10. Aristotle even advocates that "we must make another speak in our place" in times when it is necessary to insulate the (perceived) moral character of the speaker from attack (*Rhet.* 3.17.16 [Freese, LCL]).

²⁹Everett Lee Hunt, "Plato and Aristotle on Rhetoric and Rhetoricians," in *Historical Studies of Rhetoric and Rhetoricians* (ed. Raymond F. Howes; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961), 63-64.

although Baldwin cautions that the literary device functions only insofar as it gives concreteness to a subject that is tiresome when addressed in abstract terms. Cicero's personae are not as dramatically realized, for example, as those created in Plato's writings.³⁰

The content of Cicero's treatise also describes the task of the rhetorician in dramatic terms. In *De Oratore*, however, the rhetorician does not feign, but rather adopts his personae to the point that the distinction is dissolved.³¹ Both actors and orators shape themselves "into the cast of a role with which they strive to identify without ceasing to perform," but only orators are "players that act real life" (*De Or.* 3.214 [Rackham, LCL]).³² Cicero argues that a speaker cannot persuade "unless all those emotions which the speaker would inspire . . . are visibly stamped or rather branded on the speaker" (*De Or.* 2.189 [Rackham, LCL]). While Cicero recognizes that the orator may advocate a truth that is not "rooted in personal (private) beliefs," he nonetheless emphasizes the need "for the orator to feel the emotions he tries to arouse."³³ This paradox creates a peculiar circumstance in which the speaker "entertains a composite relation to his self," an internal relationship that according to Hvidtfelt Nielsen "bears a

³⁰Baldwin, *Ancient Rhetoric and Poetic*, 40-41.

³¹K. Hvidtfelt Nielsen, *An Ideal Critic: Ciceronian Rhetoric and Contemporary Criticism* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 31.

³²See Nielsen, *Ideal Critic*, 31.

³³Nielsen, *Ideal Critic*, 31; Martin L. Clarke, *Rhetoric at Rome: A Historical Survey* (London: Cohen & West Ltd., 1953), 59. Cf. *De Or.* 2.189.

high degree of similarity to the actor's modelings of his own person."³⁴ In this way Cicero advocates a very complex arrangement and something of a paradox (not unlike Nero's conundrum): the emotions of the speech at hand are so deeply inscribed on the orator that he or she no longer presents a persona but his or her own self, and yet at the same time that "self" is a formalized representation suited to the task of persuasion. In short, orators are "players that act and write their own selves."³⁵

Quintilian differs from Aristotle with regard to the relationship between a rhetorically credible persona and the speaker's moral character. For Quintilian, the former cannot develop independently of the latter. Quintilian's ideal orator must be "a good man," since "one cannot speak well unless he is good."³⁶ This more Stoic view of the rhetorician does not, however, prevent Quintilian from enlisting theatrical skills in the service of persuasion, as M. L. Clarke explains:

A good declaimer was a virtuoso, with much of the actor about him. For, as Quintilian says, when he spoke he impersonated the various characters who were protagonists in the set themes, sons, parents, rich men, old men, etc., and thus had to be almost as versatile as a professional actor.³⁷

In some sense, speaking in the character of another relates to the rhetorical device identified by ancient progymnastic exercises as *prosopopoeia*. According to

³⁴Nielsen, *Ideal Critic*, 30-31.

³⁵See Nielson, *Ideal Critic*, 31; *De Or.* 3.214.

³⁶*Inst.* 2.15.33-35; 12.1.1-5.

³⁷Clarke, *Rhetoric at Rome*, 96. Cf. *Inst.* 3.8.51.

Theon, *prosopopoeia* denotes “the introduction of a person to whom words are attributed that are suitable to the speaker and have an indisputable application to the subject discussed.”³⁸ *Prosopopoeia* may be employed for both specific and non-specific characters:

What words would a man say to his wife when leaving on a journey? Or a general to his soldiers in time of danger? . . . What words would Cyrus say when marching against the Massagetae? Or what would Datis say when he met the king after the battle of Marathon?³⁹

Theon explains that *prosopopoeia* is “most receptive of characters and emotions.”⁴⁰ Theon also recommends “a simple treatment . . . at the introductory level.”⁴¹ While there were more advanced applications of *prosopopoeia* at the later stages of the educational process, basic speech-in-character likely would have been recognizable even to those with only an elementary understanding of (or general familiarity with) ancient rhetoric.⁴² Subsequent exercises by Hermongenes, Apothonius, Nicolaus, and John of Sardis further delineate speech-in-character into *prosopopoeia*, *ethopoeia*, *eidolopoeia*, depending on the

³⁸Aelius Theon, "The Exercises of Aelius Theon," in George A. Kennedy, *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric* (trans. George A. Kennedy; Writings from the Greco-Roman World 10; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 115 [Kennedy, 47].

³⁹Theon, *Exercises*, 115 [Kennedy, 47].

⁴⁰Theon, *Exercises*, 117 [Kennedy, 49]. See also Ronald F. Hock, “The Rhetoric of Romance,” in *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period, 330 BC-AD 400* (ed. Stanley E. Porter; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997), 457.

⁴¹Theon, *Exercises*, 117 [Kennedy, 49].

⁴²See Theon, *Exercises*, 118 [Kennedy, 49].

nature of the personified character (imagined, real, dead, etc.), but together demonstrate that on the whole speech-in-character was commonplace and would not have been lost on the average ancient audience.⁴³

In drama, rhetoric, and literature, the classical world regularly encountered identities and voices that were in fact distinct from the empirical, historical individual presenting them. For exhibiting this very distinction – to take on and speak in the character of another – Aristotle bestows high praise on Homer, since for Aristotle “the poet should speak as seldom as possible in his own character” (*Poet.* 24.13-14; see also 9.10). The use of literary persona was a classic ideal.

This distinctive of classical aesthetics does not mean, however, that ancient artists avoided personal expression in their work. In fact, ancient erotic poetry in some instances (such as expressions of amatory frustration) predicated a very intense form of personal poetry, in which the persona is ostensibly an honest representation of the poet – the “self” is the emphasis of the poem.⁴⁴ Yet

⁴³See Hermogenes, “The Preliminary Exercises Attributed to Hermogenes,” in Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 20 [Kennedy 84]; Aphthonius, “The Preliminary Exercises of Aphthonius the Sophist,” in Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 44 [Kennedy, 115]; Nicolaus, “The Preliminary Exercises of Nicolaus the Sophist,” in Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 64-65 [Kennedy, 164-65]; John of Sardis, “Commentary Attributed to John of Sardis” in Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 194 [Kennedy, 213].

⁴⁴See Peter Toohey, “Eros and Eloquence: Modes of Amatory Persuasion in Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria*,” in *Roman Eloquence: Rhetoric in Society and Literature* (ed. William J. Dominik; New York: Routledge, 1997), 199. Toohey credits Ann Carson with the idea that “blocked eros” predicated a personal speaking voice

this self is nonetheless a persona, a “persuatory mask” that “hides blemishes and makes the seducer more attractive.”⁴⁵ “Classical literary doctrine,” Elliott observes, “assumed no necessary connection between the most intense personal poems and the lives or personalities of their authors.”⁴⁶ Catullus, Ovid, and Martial, for example, all claim or advocate chastity in life in contradistinction to the indulgent, wanton character of their lyrics: the poets themselves advocated a distinction between art and life.⁴⁷ Even when presenting oneself, the ancient artist nonetheless employed a mask or persona.

Yet neither were the ancient poets necessarily insincere in their poetry. Rather, the sincerity of their poetry was located in the texture of the poem itself, a function of style, a convincing (to the audience) representation of a self appropriate to the poem or the genre – not to the personality or character of the poet.⁴⁸ Thus Archibald Allen concludes:

Sincerity, then, as we find it in ancient criticism, involves a relation between the artist and the public; it is established by the style of the work

that is easily read as the genuine echo of the author (199). See Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

⁴⁵Toohey, “Eros and Eloquence,” 199, 202.

⁴⁶Elliott, *Persona*, 43.

⁴⁷See Elliott, *Persona*, 43; Toohey, “Eros and Eloquence,” 204-05.

⁴⁸Elliott, *Persona*, 43.

of art. The personality of the artist, except as it appears to the public in the work of art, is irrelevant to the question of sincerity.⁴⁹

Thus the ancient audience did not generally expect poetry to necessarily grow out of the poet's actual personal experience.⁵⁰ This view of sincerity differs, as we will see, from the Romantic and postmodern view in which sincerity references not the artistic illusion created by the poem itself but rather the relationship existing between the poem and the external facts of the poet's life.⁵¹

A Romantic Persona

The Emphatic Appearance: Poet and Persona in Nineteenth-Century Poetry

In poetry leading up to the modern period, the distance between poet and persona is greatly diminished. Nineteenth-century poetry reflects what George Wright calls the "emphatic appearance of the poet in the persona."⁵² This strategy, in which poets explicitly present themselves in their poetry, reaches a high point in Romantic poetry.⁵³ Thus in Romantic poetry the "self is central in, and definitive of, reality," resulting in a view of poetry in which the experiences

⁴⁹Archibald W. Allen, "Sunt qui proprietum malint," in *Critical Essays on Roman Literature: Elegy and Lyric* (ed. J. P. Sullivan; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 110.

⁵⁰Elliott, *Persona*, 44.

⁵¹Allen, "Sunt qui proprietum malint," 111.

⁵²Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 59.

⁵³Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 45.

of the poet are primary.⁵⁴ The Romantic poets injects themselves not only into dramatic monologues, but into third-person characters as well: the “self” of the historical author becomes the basic element of the poem and the “principal meeting place of the poet and reader in the poem.”⁵⁵ This technique invites readers to direct their hermeneutic energy into the personae, and thus the emphasis and value of the poem rests upon “the experience presented and . . . the wisdom acquired from it” rather than the texture of the poem itself.”⁵⁶

In this way the Romantic aesthetic developed a more confessional and direct mode of expression in place of classical orthodoxies, which had afforded a greater distinction between author and literary (or dramatic or rhetorical) voice.

A Manner Superb: Precursors to the Modern Aesthetic

Wright observes that this Romantic mode of self-revelation required a literary voice that had, of course, a capacity for significant experiences and was thus worth reading. He concludes that in this period the persona “practically *has* to be a poet in order to respond appropriately” to his or her experiences, a rhetorical situation that in turn creates a consistently vaulted and esoteric persona whose “manner becomes superb.”⁵⁷ Therefore a “severe discrepancy of

⁵⁴See Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 46-49.

⁵⁵Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 45.

⁵⁶Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 45.

⁵⁷See Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 46-59.

status” exists between reader and persona; the persona is “significance speaking to ordinariness.”⁵⁸

A shift in this apparent inequality may be found in the work of Victorian poet Robert Browning, whose poetic personae are ordinary and flawed, presenting not “instances of significant life,” but “significant instances of life,” as Wright explains:

this is to say that we draw the meaning out of their presentation, not out of their being or acting. Instead of our seeing people at moments significant for *them*, we see them at moments ordinary to them but of special significance for *us*. Through this apparently simple change in perspective the poet withdraws both himself and the reader from an identification with the persona, and locates the poem’s meaning in an awareness superior to that of the speaker. Not the experience of the persona, but the experience of understanding him, is what the poet invites the reader to share.⁵⁹

The effect of this shift, however slight, moves away from the Romantic aesthetic in which the poet figures more prominently within the poem. In this regard, Browning’s poetry paves the way for the later work of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and the modern aesthetic, in which poetic personae descend from their “nineteenth-century heights to chat with the reader . . . in tones basically casual.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 49.

⁵⁹Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 48. See also Randa Abou-Bakr, “Robert Browning’s ‘Dramatic Lyrics’: Contribution to a Genre,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 21 (2001): 114-15.

⁶⁰Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 52. On the relationship between poet and persona as a distinction between Romantic and modern poetry, see also Michael

Another precursor to the modern aesthetic is the poetry of Emily Dickinson. According to John Emerson Todd, the use of persona is a key technique in Dickinson's poetry, whose personae exhibit an impressive scope. Her dramatic poses range from little girl to humble bride to a woman on her deathbed; in her poetry she speaks as ornate queen as well as barefoot boy.⁶¹ A broad span of character, however, is not the only noteworthy aspect of her work. Equally impressive is the differing degree of autonomy exhibited between these characters and the historical author. Some personae reflect only "minor wish-fulfilling changes of what she felt to be her own personality," while others are "independent as figures in a play," bearing little resemblance to the actual events of the poet's life.⁶² Elizabeth Phillips observes that Dickinson's "almost excessive versatility enabled her to gather children, men, and women, alive or dead, to enter their histories, and to use their services in the poems."⁶³ Phillips and Todd agree that her multivocal style is a measure of her significance as a poet.⁶⁴ Phillips contends, however, that Dickinson's literary feat has often been lost on

Hamburger, *The Truth of Poetry: Tensions in Modern Poetry from Baudelaire to the 1960s* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), 25.

⁶¹Todd, *Dickinson*, xiii.

⁶²Todd, *Dickinson*, xiii.

⁶³Elizabeth Phillips, *Emily Dickinson: Personae and Performance* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University, 1988), 130.

⁶⁴Phillips, *Personae and Performance*, 130; Todd, *Dickinson*, 88.

readers who have interpreted her personae to “represent herself.”⁶⁵ Phillips maintains that Dickinson “would have appreciated the critics who hold that poems are autonomous and are to be read for themselves.”⁶⁶ Nonetheless, Phillips does attempt to trace the historical sources for some of Dickinson’s poetry. In doing so, however, she advances an interesting qualification:

Dickinson’s poems are often a record of the freedom and cultivation of a literary intelligence. It is fortunately not possible to uncover the diverse sources of all the poems; and in tracing something of the genesis of a small number of them, I do not assume I fully account for that number. Source studies, furthermore, are rarely pertinent to the efficacy of a poem as a poem. They are relevant to a legitimate interest in the relationship between the historical person and what T. S. Eliot called the mind that creates. They are also relevant to a sense of the poet as “impersonator,” who was not as self-absorbed and confessional as is usually believed.⁶⁷

To this extent Phillips advocates the autonomy and internal integrity of a poem, even when the poem under examination is the product of a literary era when such sentiments were not normative. Such an approach, as we will see, is characteristic of critics throughout the rise and peak of persona criticism.

A Modern Persona

Patching the Lyric Leak: The Rise of Modern Persona Criticism

Ironically, at the dawn of the persona-critical “revolution,” one finds analyses not of modern texts, but of the literature of eras past. In 1915, George

⁶⁵Phillips, *Personae and Performance*, 130.

⁶⁶Phillips, *Personae and Performance*, 130.

⁶⁷Phillips, *Personae and Performance*, 131.

Lyman Kittredge published a critical analysis of Chaucer's poetry, which included a treatment of *The Book of the Duchess*. In the poem, a speaker identified as the "Dreamer" reports a vision about his encounter with a darkly-clad knight in the forest. Because the so-called Dreamer speaks in the first person, earlier critics identified the Dreamer with Chaucer: the historical author and the "I" of the poem were assumed to be one and the same.⁶⁸ In his analysis Kittredge rejects this assumption. The basis for his critique is connected to the naïve quality of the Dreamer:

The first thing that strikes one in reading the *Book of the Duchess* is the quality of artlessness or naïveté, to which, indeed, the poem owes much of its charm. This challenges instant attention, for naïveté is often rated as one of Chaucer's permanent traits. . . . Few new facts of history, be it sacred or profane, are more solidly established than that Geoffrey Chaucer, in his habit as he lived, was not naïf. Whatever one may think of our American practice in the appointment of diplomatists, it is quite certain, that, in the fourteenth century, men were not selected by the English king to negotiate secret affairs on the Continent because they were innocent and artless. And even so, a naïf Collector of Customs would be a paradoxical monster.⁶⁹

Kittredge points out the basic incompatibility between the artless naïveté of the Dreamer and the literary skill and worldly sophistication of Geoffrey Chaucer. Kittredge is inclined to apologize for "parading" such a simplistic observation, were it not for the fact that it had been "so continually overlooked in the literary criticism of Chaucer as to lead to frequent confusion between the artist and the

⁶⁸See Elliott, *Persona*, 3.

⁶⁹George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry* (repr., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 45.

man."⁷⁰ Kittredge considers the effect of naïveté to be an intentional function of the poem's "style and versification," and argues that the apparent flaws of the poem are actually "due to Chaucer's use of this artistic expedient, and not to feebleness of grasp or a wavering vision."⁷¹ Ironically, Kittredge suggests that creating the naïve Dreamer required a skilled hand rather than an authentically naïve author. Kittredge goes on to point out the successful presentation of another main character of the poem, the Knight, who is anything but naïve:

On the contrary, he is adept in the courtly conventions, which have become a part of his manner of thought and speech. He is a finished gentleman of a period quite as studied as the Elizabethan in its fashions of conduct and discourse. All the naïveté is due to the Dreamer, whose character is sharply contrasted with that of the Knight.⁷²

Therefore to collapse the Dreamer with Chaucer – creator of both the Dreamer and the Knight – simply on the basis that the character speaks in the first person is a hermeneutical misstep. The Dreamer is a

purely imaginary figure, to whom certain purely imaginary things happen, in a purely imaginary dream. He is as much a part of the fiction in the book of the Duchess as the Merchant or the Pardoner or the Host is a part of the fiction in the *Canterbury Tales*.⁷³

⁷⁰Kittredge, *Chaucer*, 46-48.

⁷¹Kittredge, *Chaucer*, 47. Ironically, he suggests that Chaucer's contemporaries were aware of this effect, even as it was apparently lost on those of Kittredge.

⁷²Kittredge, *Chaucer*, 48.

⁷³Kittredge, *Chaucer*, 48.

Kittredge's distinction between the historical Chaucer and the speaker in his poem would later have far-reaching consequences for Chaucer criticism, and for literary criticism in general.⁷⁴ At the time, however, scholars were preoccupied with other interests, and Kittredge's simple insight would have to wait a quarter century before commanding the attention of literary scholars who were increasingly concerned with what Elliott calls "formal problems in literature."⁷⁵ Although Kittredge never uses the term "persona," later scholars would employ the word to adapt and apply his way of distinguishing between historical poet and lyrical voice.⁷⁶

In 1939, Elder Olson analyzed Alexander Pope's *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* as rhetoric, on the basis that satire was didactic in nature and thus concerned with and structured according to persuasion.⁷⁷ Olson concludes that self-representation in satire has rhetorical utility rather than biographical veracity, and thus

such questions as whether Pope's indignation is sincere, or whether Pope was actually a man of good character – questions about which his critics have troubled so much – are entirely irrelevant here. The rhetorician need not actually be sincere, need not actually be a good man; he must, however, seem to be these things, that is, he must through his art effect the impression that he is these things; it is far more important, from the

⁷⁴Elliott, *Persona*, 4.

⁷⁵Elliott, *Persona*, 4, 7.

⁷⁶Elliott, *Persona*, 4.

⁷⁷Elliott, *Persona*, 11.

standpoint of rhetoric, to seem to have good character when one actually does not, than to have it when one does not seem to.⁷⁸

According to Elliott, this approach effectively served to “banish the poet from the poem.”⁷⁹

By 1946, Leo Spitzer was arguing that the distinction between poetic voice and empirical author was generally understood in the medieval period:

I submit the theory that, in the Middle Ages, the “poetic I” had more freedom and more breadth than it has today. . . . And we must assume that the medieval public saw in the “poetic I” a representative of mankind, that it was interested only in this representative role of the poet.⁸⁰

Spitzer then distinguishes between the “empirical I” and the “poetic I” within several medieval works. Elliott credits the success of Spitzer’s analysis to the fact that the poetry of the era tends to adopt a problematic “first person mode of telling” that consequently results in an “embroilment in issues of biographical fact and responsibility.”⁸¹ Spitzer’s method eased tensions by addressing the

⁷⁸Elder Olson, “Rhetoric and the Appreciation of Pope,” *Modern Philology* 37 (1939): 21-22. For a comparable contribution to the satire genre, see Ricardo Quintana, “Situational Satire: A Commentary on the Method of Swift,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 17 (1948): 131-32.

⁷⁹Elliott, *Persona*, 11.

⁸⁰Leo Spitzer, “Note on the Poetic and the Empirical ‘I’ in Medieval Authors,” *Traditio* 4 (1946): 415-16. While Spitzer concedes that some in the medieval audience may have collapsed the historical author and the poetic voice, more sophisticated recipients would have perceived the distinction. Like Kittredge, Spitzer does not use the term “persona,” although according to Elliott “his procedure is that of the interpreters who today use the concept of the persona in the most sensitive way” (*Persona*, 7).

⁸¹Elliott, *Persona*, 5.

confusion of historical poet and literary voice. For example, in *The Book of Good Love* (*Libro de Buen Amor*), the author –Archpriest of Hita, Juan Ruiz – autobiographically situates himself within a series of escapades, many of which are entirely unbecoming of a priest. Spitzer views the lengthy poem as the facetious interplay between the poetic speaker and empirical author.⁸² Other scholars agree that the poem, however personal and autobiographical in effect, is not an accurate historical depiction of Juan Ruiz’s life.⁸³

In 1951, Maynard Mack further influenced the study of satire with his essay “The Muse of Satire,” in which he attempts to “ventilate the fetid atmosphere” of satire criticism by pointing out the distinction between the historical Pope and dramatic Pope who speaks in his poems.⁸⁴ According to Mack, Pope employs three distinct voices: the “*vir bonus*,” a wise but traditional man of plain living; the “*naïf*,” or “*ingénue*,” a simpleton of sorts; and finally the public defender.⁸⁵ Pope’s personae thus reflect a kind of stock satirist

⁸²Spitzer, “Note,” 418.

⁸³See for example Américo Castro, *The Structure of Spanish History* (trans. Edmund L. King; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 392-93; María Rosa Lida De Malkiel, *Two Spanish Masterpieces: The Book of Good Love and The Celestina* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1961), 19; Elliott, *Persona*, 5-6. It is interesting, given the focus of this dissertation, that the Spanish poem has been identified with a tenth-century Semitic literary genre called *maqāmāt*. See De Malkiel, *Masterpieces*, 20-21.

⁸⁴Maynard Mack, “The Muse of Satire,” *Yale Review* 41 (1951): 83.

⁸⁵Mack, “Muse,” 88-90. See also James L. Clifford, “The Eighteenth Century,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 26 (1965): 120.

character – so designed in order to connect with anticipations of his contemporary audience, thereby warranting his authority to persuade and teach.⁸⁶

By 1953, Francis Fergusson had transported the idea into Dante studies, initiating what would become a major theme in Dante criticism.⁸⁷ A year later E. Talbot Donaldson made waves in Chaucer criticism by applying a Kittredge-like mode of analysis to the *Canterbury Tales*, again separating the naïve Pilgrim from the sophisticated poet.⁸⁸ In the 1960s one finds the work of William S. Anderson, whose analyses of satirical works offer classic examples of persona criticism.⁸⁹

And so the literary critics of the first half of the twentieth century took to the task of demarcating a line of separation between historical poet and literary persona. Such boundaries promised clarity where the literary-critical assumptions of the day had only yielded confusion. The language of persona offered interpreters a way to describe the complex relationship between the

⁸⁶Mack, "Muse," 86. Quintana had already voiced a similar view of satire. See "Situational Satire," 130-36.

⁸⁷Francis Fergusson, *Dante's Drama of the Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), esp. 9-10. See also Elliott, *Persona*, 10.

⁸⁸E. Talbot Donaldson, "Chaucer the Pilgrim," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 4 (1954): 928-36; Elliott, *Persona*, 7-8.

⁸⁹See for example William S. Anderson, "The Roman Socrates: Horace and His Satires," in *Satire: Critical Essays on Roman Literature* (ed. J. P. Sullivan; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 1-37; Anderson, *Anger in Juvenal and Seneca* (Berkeley: University of California, 1964).

historical author and the voice in the poem. Ironically, critics found this modern hermeneutical tool quite suitable for the literature of antiquity.

These critics, however, represent only a small element in a much larger movement – a movement so dramatic in its shift of perspective as to warrant Elliott’s characterization as “revolutionary.” Aesthetic sensibilities underwent radical change during the first half of the twentieth century as poets and critics alike engaged in a campaign against old orthodoxies. In short, the literary ethos of the period rejected the confessional style of Romantic literary art, along with its zealous emphasis on “sincerity” and its critical focus on the historical circumstances of the text.⁹⁰ Instead, the so-called New Critics of the modern period “programmatically excluded from their enterprise, as outside the purview of true artistic interest, information about the authors of poems, their personalities and intentions, these exclusions facilitating exploration at new depths into the ambiguities of poetic language and the complexities of literary structure.”⁹¹ The poet was indeed banished from the poem. This sentiment quickly became orthodoxy, coined as the Doctrine of Impersonality. The most basic intention of this New Critical dogma was to isolate – to protect – the poem as an autonomous aesthetic entity, an imaginary world with borders unassailable by the outside historical context or even the poet:

⁹⁰See Elliott, *Persona*, 13.

⁹¹Elliott, *Persona*, 13.

To identify “I” and the author was as illegitimate as to inquire into authorial “sincerity,” a dim practice of nineteenth-century critics that seemed finally laid to rest. Poets and New Critics were determined to avoid what Henry James called “the lyric leak.”⁹²

At the very heart of this doctrine – and indeed high modernist poetry in general – lies the concept of persona. Therefore to understand persona in its prime, one must understand the poetry and poets of the day, the orthodoxies they reflect, and the old tenets against which they react.

The Disappearing Act: The Rise of the Doctrine of Impersonality

The impersonal theory denotes the idea that a poem is essentially independent of the poet’s “self,” and that the poet is merely a depersonalized vessel through which the forms of poetic tradition and emotion take shape. Of course, this theory has a long and distinguished genealogy, with connections tracing back to classical literature.⁹³ Therefore when we speak of the high modernist Doctrine of Impersonality, we identify more a resurrection than

⁹²Elliott, *Persona*, 16.

⁹³Maud Ellmann, *The Poetics of Impersonality: T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), ix; Marshall McLuhan, “Pound, Eliot, and the Rhetoric of the Waste Land,” *New Literary History* 10 (1979): 59-60; Hugh M. Richmond, “Personal Identity and Literary Personae: A Study in Historical Psychology,” *PLMA* 90 (1975): 219. The impersonal theory does not bear connections to the classical period alone. Hugo Friedrich traces the beginnings of the doctrine to nineteenth-century French poet Charles Pierre Baudelaire, an author who “had connections with the romantics” even as he introduced the notion of depersonalization – a striking combination. See Hugo, *The Structure of Modern Poetry: From The Mid-Nineteenth to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (trans. Joachim Neugroschel; Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 21.

innovation.⁹⁴ While followers of the movement would be legion, its progenitor and most aggressive advocate was critic and poet T. S. Eliot. Eliot first espoused the Doctrine of Impersonality in a short essay entitled "Tradition and the Individual Talent," published in 1919. Reacting to what he perceived as an unfortunate infiltration of the poet into the poem, Eliot argues for the value of poetic tradition, a sense of history that

compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. . . . No poet, nor artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.⁹⁵

Of course such an appreciation, while composing order, also came at great expense to the poet:

The other aspect of this Impersonal theory is the relation of the poem to the author. . . . What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.⁹⁶

⁹⁴See Ellmann, *Impersonality*, ix, who refers to the theory in this manner.

⁹⁵T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Perspecta* 19 (1982): 37. Of course, nothing makes this discussion seem more antiquated than the gender-exclusive manner with which Eliot and the poets and critics of this period write. Applying a heavy editorial hand in an attempt to dress them in a more satisfactory mode of academic discourse would finally amount to little more than a misleading veneer. For this reason I will let these direct citations stand as is, inappropriate as they may be.

⁹⁶Eliot, "Tradition," 39.

Thus a more mature poet is not necessarily a more interesting person with more interesting things to say, but a “more finely perfected medium in which special, or varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations.”⁹⁷ The poet, then, is a vessel, a conduit of the dead and their tradition, of the poet’s unconsciousness, and of the poet’s cultural context. In the extreme, the creative act becomes more or less dictation, a “mere amanuensis” predicated “by forces [that] elude the author’s consciousness.”⁹⁸ Art is finally impersonal, and the “poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering . . . wholly to the work to be done.”⁹⁹ The essential challenge for the poet was therefore to “obey the rules established from without rather than the impulses suggested from within.”¹⁰⁰ Eliot took this challenge to heart, spending his career “devising disappearing tricks and new varieties of scriptive self-occlusion.”¹⁰¹

Of course, the hegemony that the Doctrine of Impersonality achieved cannot be credited to Eliot alone. In this regard Ezra Pound was second only to Eliot, putting the theory into practice with his poetry, including the aptly-titled

⁹⁷Eliot, “Tradition, 39.” Eliot’s “perfected medium of feeling” allows for the possibility that the emotional force behind a poem could ultimately derive from outside the poet. Indeed, Eliot later argues that poetic expression may involve emotions familiar to the poet as well as those he or she has never experienced (42).

⁹⁸Ellmann, *Impersonality*, 4.

⁹⁹Eliot, “Tradition,” 42.

¹⁰⁰Ellmann, *Impersonality*, 5.

¹⁰¹Ellmann, *Impersonality*, ix.

collection *Personae*, first published in the United States in 1926 and reprinted several times during the 1940s and 1950s.¹⁰² In his famous essay “Vorticism,” Pound reflects on *Personae* and articulates his view that persona is a phenomenon of poetry:

In the “search for oneself,” in the search for “sincere self-expression,” one gropes, one finds some seeming verity. One says “I am” this, that or the other, and with the words scarcely uttered one ceases to be that thing. I began this search for the real in a book called *Personae*, casting off, as it were, complete masks of the self in each poem. I continued in a long series of translations, which were but more elaborate masks.¹⁰³

Pound aspired to present his authentic self in his poetry, but “the very nature of a poet’s craft, having to select which aspect of one’s authentic self could best conform to the dictates of art – symbolism, rhymes, ‘images of the self’ – while functioning as poetic voice, precludes that aspiration.”¹⁰⁴ That Pound finally titled his collection *Personae* indicates his recognition of this phenomenon, that voice in poetry is “restrained by the finite, linguistic system of a poem,” necessarily resulting in a mask or persona of the poet.¹⁰⁵

It is also appropriate (though paradoxical) to include William Butler Yeats in a discussion of literary persona. Yeats differs from Eliot and Pound on the key

¹⁰²See Elliott, *Persona*, 8.

¹⁰³Ezra Pound, “Vorticism,” in *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 84.

¹⁰⁴Samuel Maio, *Creating Another Self: Voice in Modern American Personal Poetry* (Kirksville, Mo.: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1995), 2.

¹⁰⁵Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 2-3.

point that he “overtly defied” the modern aesthetic, favoring instead the sentiments of the Romantic period.¹⁰⁶ He was anything but an advocate of impersonality. Nonetheless “many of his poems are not reminiscent or in any sense renderings of his personal experience; they are instead the expressions of characters clearly separate from Yeats himself.”¹⁰⁷ In this regard, he employed personae in his work even as he denied the aesthetic dogma to which it was so intimately tied. Yeats connects to Eliot and Pound because each recognized “that the living person differs from the writing self, and differs radically from the personality composed upon the page.”¹⁰⁸

The “authoritative stimulus” of these three – Eliot, Pound, and Yeats – coupled with modernity’s “obsessive preoccupation . . . with questions about the self,” permanently inscribed the word persona into the critical and aesthetic vocabulary of the twentieth century.¹⁰⁹ As each employed personae in their

¹⁰⁶Thomas Parkinson, “Intimate and Impersonal: An Aspect of Modern Poetics,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 16 (1958): 379. See also William Butler Yeats, “A General Introduction for My Work,” in *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 509.

¹⁰⁷Parkinson, “Intimate and Impersonal,” 380.

¹⁰⁸Ellmann, *Impersonal*, 3.

¹⁰⁹Elliott, *Persona*, 8. The idea was pervasive. Fernando Pessoa, a poet who represents the Cubist perspective (a contemporary aesthetic movement), attributes his major lyric and poetry to four characters, or “heteronyms,” to which he ascribed detailed biographies. See Leland Guyer, “Fernando Pessoa and the Cubist Perspective,” *Hispania* 70 (1987): 73-78. Guyer argues that Pessoa “exploited [the modern] fragmentation of the empirical self into multiple poetic personae more than anyone else” (75).

work and as Eliot and Pound espoused the virtue of impersonality, the literary ethos of the day underwent a massive tectonic shift, (re)creating a formidable chasm between the empirical poet and poetic voice.

These attitudes about the relationship between art and artist may appear to be a matter of peculiarity. Nonetheless, it is perhaps the core of the modern aesthetic.¹¹⁰ What are the circumstances for this modernist mantra? Maud Ellmann best articulates the catalyst for the Doctrine of Impersonality:

Romantic poets were so engrossed in making themselves *present* in their verse that they neglected the lessons of the *past*. Romanticism preached originality, exuberance and novelty where Classicism had demanded order, discipline and canonicity. And where Romanticism stressed the relativity of moral and aesthetic values, Classicism insisted on impersonal authority in both domains. For Pound as for Eliot, the only antidote to the “slither” of Romantic individualism was a fierce renunciation of the self.¹¹¹

The doctrine, she concludes, was primarily political: it was the “equivalent in art to a crusade against Romantic individualism in society.”¹¹²

¹¹⁰Ellmann, *Impersonality*, 3.

¹¹¹Ellmann, *Impersonality*, 4.

¹¹²Ellmann, *Impersonality*, 5. See also Parkinson, “Intimate and Impersonal,” 376. Parkinson suggests that Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” is best seen as a reaction to the so-called “Aesthetic” movement of the late nineteenth century, a literary trend whose proponents have been aptly characterized as the “Last Romantics.” The Aesthetics understood the creative act as “a continual self-development not self-sacrifice, a continual expression – not extinction – of personality” (376); see also Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 43. Thus for Eliot, impersonality was the cure for the sickness of the past, and Ellmann suggests that the theory united “the realms of poetry, aesthetics, philosophy and politics,” instilling each with “a borrowed vehemence” (5).

No less important was the capacity of the doctrine for screening the poet from invasive hermeneutical techniques, such as psychoanalytical methods, which attempted to interpret the poet by means of the poem. Ellmann refers to a letter written by Eliot in which he cites “personal reasons” for advocating impersonality, suggesting to Ellmann that the poet was able to “confess more freely if he disavowed those confessions as his own.”¹¹³

Smuggling Self: Personality and the Doctrine of Impersonality

In the final analysis, however, the forcefully argued and authoritatively established Doctrine of Impersonality is unstable, at least insofar as Eliot and Pound construct the idea. The source of this instability is twofold. First, Pound and Eliot’s articulation of the theory is often a moving target:

Both poets . . . are more eager to divulge what impersonality is not than what it is. Does it mean decorum, reticence, and self-restraint? Does it imply concealment or extinction of the self? Or does it mean the poet should transcend his time and place, aspiring to universal vision? These are just a few of the confusing ways that Pound and Eliot manipulate the term. In every case, however, the writer has the power to *decide* to overcome himself.¹¹⁴

As Ellmann has indicated, impersonality seems to be at once a matter of a reader’s etiquette and a theory about poetry, and one may well wonder which aspect is in service of the other.

¹¹³Ellmann, *Impersonality*, 5. The letter to which she refers dates to 1930 and is addressed to E. M. Forster. It is housed in the E. M. Forster Collection in Kings College, Cambridge.

¹¹⁴Ellmann, *Impersonality*, 4.

Perhaps more striking is the fact that both Eliot and Pound resist the implications of their own ideas, and “smuggle personality back into their poetics in the very terms they use to cast it out.”¹¹⁵ As they urge the objectivity of poetry, they expose how deeply entrenched the author’s subjectivity inevitably becomes in his or her poetry. Paradoxically, the more a poet aspires to concealment, the more he or she is revealed. Ellmann observes that because “Romantic poets give themselves away, their personalities volatilize and effervesce, while a classical ‘reserve’ defends the self from such expenditure. Surreptitiously, this economy empowers the very subject that it [promises] to disarm.”¹¹⁶ Furthermore, even for the most impersonal medium there is still an “intelligible interaction between the poet’s mind and its intellectual environment.”¹¹⁷ In other words, poetry – even those verses scripted within a classical sense of decorum – always involves the poet’s personality and is always meaningfully conditioned by the poet and the poet’s sociohistorical context. The Doctrine of Impersonality or the use of persona does not finally expunge the personal aspect of poetry. Although Eliot would later modify his idea of impersonality and accept the notion that personal experience could evoke or

¹¹⁵Ellmann, *Impersonality*, 3.

¹¹⁶Ellmann, *Impersonality*, 7.

¹¹⁷Parkinson, “Intimate and Impersonal,” 376. See also Jonathan Holden, *The Old Formalism: Character in Contemporary American Poetry* (Fayetteville, Ar.: University of Arkansas, 1999), 13.

express a general truth, the New Critical school of poets would take Eliot's first impression "as more germane to their purpose."¹¹⁸

Of course, the transition from the modern to the postmodern aesthetic is anything but precise. Randall Jarrell, for example, is a poet who quite easily confuses the boundaries of these literary eras. His collection *The Lost World* is perhaps best characterized as confessional (and therefore postmodern), and yet he makes extensive use of personae in his poetry, a decidedly modern technique.¹¹⁹ Like Dickinson in the nineteenth century, Jarrell employed a variety of personae, including females and children.¹²⁰ His personae, however, tend more toward the typical, reflecting something more like a classical use of personae; his critics often classify his poetic voices.¹²¹

As a critic Jarrell is also linked to both modernism and postmodernism. He cites thirteen characteristics of modernism and declares its demise.¹²² Yet, as Charolette Beck points out, Jarrell himself fits into nearly every one of his

¹¹⁸See Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 9-11. See also Steven K. Hoffman, "Impersonal Personalsim: The Making of a Confessional Poetic," *Journal of Literary History* 45 (1978): 687-91.

¹¹⁹Charlotte H. Beck, "Randall Jarrell's Modernism: The Sweet Uses of Personae," *South Atlantic Review* 50 (1985): 67.

¹²⁰Beck, "Jarrell's Modernism," 68-70.

¹²¹Beck, "Jarrell's Modernism," 68-70. Beck herself illustrates four of Jarrell's typical personae: soldiers, children, women and observers.

¹²²See Randall Jarrell, "The End of the Line," in *Critical Essays on American Modernism* (eds. Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy; New York: G. K. Hall, 1992), 79.

modern characteristics.¹²³ Thus based both on his poetry and reflections on poetry, critics locate Jarrell “on the fence between modernism and postmodernism.”¹²⁴

A Postmodern Persona

Revolutions are Never Peaceful: Skeptics of Persona

It is perhaps in keeping with the characteristics of the modern era that the “science” of impersonality (as Pound called it) was articulated in such a vigorous and absolute manner. While the impersonal theory and its use of persona certainly dominated modern literary production and criticism, such hegemony did not go unchallenged. From the start, the idea of persona was abhorrent to some critics.¹²⁵

Published in 1960, Bertrand Bronson’s *In Search of Chaucer* attacks the persona theory. Bronson argues without hesitation that the “current fashion” to analyze poetry from a persona-critical standpoint was in large part “misguided and palpably mistaken.”¹²⁶ Focused primarily on Chaucer studies – in particular the analysis by Kittredge and the hermeneutic trend it precipitated – Bronson’s

¹²³Beck, “Jarrell’s Modernism,” 68.

¹²⁴Beck, “Jarrell’s Modernism,” 67.

¹²⁵Elliott, *Persona*, 13.

¹²⁶Bertrand H. Bronson, *In Search of Chaucer* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), 26.

essential complaint is that the application of this hermeneutical tool was anachronistic. To assign Chaucer the ability to use personae was to “impute to him a state of mind that would only develop in later eras.”¹²⁷ Bronson does not dispute the theoretical plausibility of persona, but rather contends that it “could only have arisen in a time when authors would habitually think of themselves as completely separable from their books, and from their audiences.”¹²⁸ This, Bronson concludes, was not the practice of Chaucer. To account for the apparent gap between the sophisticated Chaucer and the naïve narrator, Bronson argues that the first-person narration is an ironic game of self-mockery, a function of Chaucer’s humor.¹²⁹ This sense of humor was a necessary part of his personal allusions, to save them from becoming offensive.¹³⁰ But by no means was the narrator a separable fiction:

In perhaps no other poetry ever written has an author established between himself and his audience a bond so immediate, so personal, so amusing, so teasingly full of nuance, so deceptively transparent, so delicately elusive – in a word, so highly civilized.¹³¹

¹²⁷Bronson, *In Search of Chaucer*, 26. Bronson suggests that Kittredge gave the misconceived persona a “powerful impulse” with his analysis of *The Book of the Duchess*, and subsequent critics had carried the idea “far beyond the point where Kittredge dropped it” (28-29).

¹²⁸Bronson, *In Search of Chaucer*, 26, 28.

¹²⁹Bronson, *In Search of Chaucer*, 30.

¹³⁰Bronson, *In Search of Chaucer*, 30.

¹³¹Bronson, *In Search of Chaucer*, 30. In his summary of the debate sparked by Spitzer and others, Dieter Mehl offers his final analysis of the controversy by way of citing this comment by Bronson. The passage appears to have a particular appeal to opponents of persona criticism within Chaucer studies. See

For Bronson, a discussion about Chaucer's personae is not simply an interpretive error; the approach denies the reader access to the basic value of Chaucer's work. Reducing the narrator to a mere fictional character deprives us "of the source of our keenest enjoyment."¹³²

One of the most notable critics of persona is Irvin Ehrenpreis. In his 1963 essay "Personae," he notes that after a quarter century of increasing usage, the concept of persona had become the mark of one "furnished with sharp critical method."¹³³ He posits the following presuppositions of the persona theory: 1) a literary work should be regarded as separate from the author's personality; 2) as a consequence, sentiments expressed in a literary work are not to be attributed to the author, but assigned to an intermediate figure – a persona; 3) the use of persona by a writer is an indication of skill or talent; 4) the recognition of persona by the critic is likewise a sign of hermeneutical skill; 5) finally, knowledge of persona enhances the reader's capacity to appreciate a literary masterpiece.¹³⁴

Dieter Mehl, "Erscheinungsformen des Erzählers in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales," in *Chaucer und seine Zeit: Symposion fur Walter F. Chirmer* (ed. Arno Esch; Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1968), 206.

¹³²Bronson, *In Search of Chaucer*, 30.

¹³³Irvin Ehrenpreis, "Personae," in *Literary Meaning and Augustan Values* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974), 50.

¹³⁴Ehrenpreis, "Personae," 50-51. See also Walker Gibson, *Persona: A Style Study for Readers and Writers* (New York: Random House, 1969), 51.

Even when a poet represents him or herself within a poem, Ehrenpreis observes, *persona* critics suggest that a separate literary voice is still at work – in fact, such instances represent the most subtle and skilled use of *persona*.¹³⁵ Even when the poet supplies his or her true name along with reliable biographical details, that information is still part of a *representation*, a portrayal. The poet may suppress or even distort that representation in order to conform to the purpose (rhetorical or otherwise) of the poem. The public portrait is thus merely derived from the private self, and only the novice among scholars would confuse the two.¹³⁶

Ehrenpreis does not deny the presence of *personae* in poetry, even when the poet appears to write autobiographically. In fact, he considers it an inherent aspect of poetry, insofar as “this kind of rhetorical pose is absolutely inseparable from all language and communication.”¹³⁷ Therein lies the problem for Ehrenpreis, who argues that *persona* “has no status as art in itself, unless we admit such art to be congenital in humankind.”¹³⁸ For Ehrenpreis, *persona* is a pedestrian feature of human discourse and hardly warrants any accolades or critical attention. The concept of *personae* thus affords no real merit for poet,

¹³⁵Ehrenpreis, “*Personae*,” 51.

¹³⁶Ehrenpreis, “*Personae*,” 51.

¹³⁷Ehrenpreis, “*Personae*,” 51.

¹³⁸Ehrenpreis, “*Personae*,” 50-51.

poem, or reader.¹³⁹ To over-emphasize the irrelevant fact that we misrepresent ourselves in every communication act, and thus assume *a priori* that the reader cannot take a poet at his or her word, is to force the poet to “defy the polite rules of language.”¹⁴⁰ The persona critic turns “genius into a fool” by assuming the poet writes in a way that contradicts the basic assumptions that make communication possible; what the poet says is what *the poet* says, and, apart from evidence to the contrary, what the poet means.¹⁴¹

Ehrenpreis voices other concerns about persona. The concept is subject to abuse when it functions as a shielding agent between poet and poem. By postulating an intermediate persona, the author can avoid charges of vanity or culpability. Such decorum erodes the responsibility of the poet for the content of his or her poem.¹⁴² Persona is also the “main instrument” of critics who are guilty of confusing genres in their work: “narrative fiction is treated as drama; the didactic essay is treated as narrative fiction; lyric, didactic, and narrative poetry are treated as drama or rhetoric.”¹⁴³

¹³⁹Ehrenpreis, “Personae,” 50-56.

¹⁴⁰Ehrenpreis, “Personae,” 52, 54.

¹⁴¹Ehrenpreis, “Personae,” 52, 55-56, 60.

¹⁴²Ehrenpreis, “Personae,” 52-54.

¹⁴³Ehrenpreis, “Personae,” 50.

For the reasons outlined above, persona criticism is for Ehrenpreis an elusive idea and catalyst for hermeneutical error.¹⁴⁴ One may note, however, two aspects to this scholar's critique. First, his criticism seems to fall primarily on the application of persona criticism by modern scholars rather than the existence of personae in poetry. Indeed, the idea that persona is a ubiquitous phenomenon of poetry forms the basis for one of his primary critiques. Second, Ehrenpreis does not completely dismiss personae, but simply suggests that "it would be a service to literature to distinguish the helpful from the misleading applications of the persona in methods of scholarship and criticism."¹⁴⁵ The scholar suggests "that the most illuminating applications are made to works whose structure depends on the speaker's having an ambiguous character."¹⁴⁶

Ehrenpreis' essay spurred a great deal of debate. In 1966, a symposium on the persona theory included over two dozen participants; the published papers

¹⁴⁴Ehrenpreis, "Personae," 50, 57-60. See also Elliott, *Persona*, 14.

¹⁴⁵Ehrenpreis, "Personae," 57. See also Clifford, "Eighteenth Century," 121.

¹⁴⁶Ehrenpreis, "Personae," 57. The ambiguity of the psalmist will become quite apparent in subsequent chapters. Here, however, Ehrenpreis means a kind of ironic mask that functions as a parody until it is finally exposed as such: the disguise is deliberately intended to be penetrated by the reader. Despite this clear difference between the psalmist and Ehrenpreis' ironic mask, it is nonetheless noteworthy that for one of persona criticism's strongest critics, the ambiguity of poetic voice justifies the application of persona criticism.

constituted nearly sixty-five pages of debate.¹⁴⁷ On the one hand were advocates such as Anderson, D. J. Greene, and Guy Davenport, who argued that 1) Ehrenpreis was attacking a “straw man;” 2) that no real controversy existed between him and proponents of persona criticism; 3) that his approach was too simplistic; or 4) that his approach had the same basic outcome as persona criticism, albeit with different, more cumbersome terminology.¹⁴⁸ On the other hand, supporters of Ehrenpreis considered his work a healthy corrective. Without altogether denying the presence of persona in poetry, they generally maintain in their work that the concept is not valid according to its normative use by critics.¹⁴⁹ Symposium participant Norman Knox best identifies the paradox of persona: “I [do not] see how one can deny that every artistic utterance is to some degree a mask as well as a revelation.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷W. S. Anderson, “The Concept of Persona in Satire: A Symposium,” *Satire Newsletter* 3 (1966): 89-153. See also Elliott, *Persona*, 14-15. As Elliott observes, the “joy in unloading formalisms . . . has been manifest” (15).

¹⁴⁸Anderson, “Symposium,” 89, 91, 101, 119.

¹⁴⁹Anderson, “Symposium,” 94, 128, 133. As symposium participant Edward Rosenheim writes, “Yes, a persona may, in a sense, be found in all writings. But in the great majority of cases—including the present one—I suggest you forget him. And in these sentiments, I can assure you, my author entirely agrees” (133). Among academics such parody is no doubt the hallmark of an idea that has become, at least in some sense, cliché.

¹⁵⁰Anderson, “Symposium,” 125.

In 1972, notable critic Lionel Trilling applauded the work of Donald Davie¹⁵¹ and his call for a return to sincerity and a more Romantic aesthetic. He admits that the notion of persona was initially a much-needed remedy, forcing critics to recognize “the simple truth that criticism is not gossip.”¹⁵² What began as a necessary counteraction, however, eventually became a strict doctrine that denied critics permission to “remark the resemblances” between author and literary voice.¹⁵³ Despite the efforts of what he calls “classic modern literature,” he contends that in reading their poetry these poets “figure in our minds exactly as persons, as personalities,” rather than the voice of a literary persona.¹⁵⁴ Trilling, like other critics, also objects to the use of persona as a standard of etiquette.¹⁵⁵ For Trilling, then, persona criticism amounted to an “elaborate, ambiguous, and arbitrary game,” as well as a paradoxical devaluation of a poet’s sincerity.¹⁵⁶

For this reason, Trilling suggests, many poets of the late 1950s and 1960s “scuttled” the notion that the poet in the poem had an “exclusively aesthetic

¹⁵¹See Donald Davie, “On Sincerity: From Wordsworth to Ginsberg,” *Encounter* 31 (1968): 61-66.

¹⁵²Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 8.

¹⁵³Trilling, *Sincerity*, 8.

¹⁵⁴Trilling, *Sincerity*, 7-8.

¹⁵⁵Trilling, *Sincerity*, 8.

¹⁵⁶Trilling, *Sincerity*, 6-8.

existence.”¹⁵⁷ In their abandonment of this New Critical article of faith, these poets represented a “striking reversal of doctrine” that essentially returned to the Romantic veneration of sincerity.¹⁵⁸ Trilling affirmed this reversal, arguing that even when the poet presents a self in the poem that differs from the empirical author, that self is authentic, and thus the poem is a sincere expression of the poet.¹⁵⁹

Suspicion of persona eventually reached classical scholarship. Famous classical scholar Gilbert Highet expressed a decidedly negative evaluation of persona, at least insofar as scholars had employed it within satire criticism.¹⁶⁰ In his essay “Masks and Faces in Satire,” Highet argues that the idea of persona reduces classical satire to a “ventriloquist with his dummy,” a method that inevitably produces a distorted interpretation; in the case of ostensibly

¹⁵⁷Trilling, *Sincerity*, 8.

¹⁵⁸Trilling, *Sincerity*, 8-9. See also Davie, “On Sincerity,” 61-66; Elliott, *Persona*, 17.

¹⁵⁹See Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 2.

¹⁶⁰See Gilbert Highet, “Masks and Faces in Satire,” in *The Classical Papers of Gilbert Highet* (ed. Robert J. Ball; New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 268-86. Highet is responding to proponents not only of persona, but of the idea that one should interpret classic satire independent of the author’s personal life. See, for example, H. F. Cherniss, *The Biographical Fashion in Literary Criticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1943); C. S. Lewis and Eustace M. W. Tillyard, *The Personal Heresy: A Controversy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965); A. B. Kernan, *Cankered Muse: Satire of the English Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959); Anderson, “The Roman Socrates,” 1-37; Anderson, *Anger in Juvenal and Seneca*. Like Ehrenpreis, Highet complains that persona invites critics to confuse genres: “nonnarrative first-persona monologue satire becomes either drama or rhetoric” (275).

autobiographical satires, the theory simply does not work.¹⁶¹ Furthermore, confining oneself to the boundaries of the text is hermeneutically deficient. One should instead use any available evidence about the biography and personality of the author as a means to interpret the poem, even if the available evidence about the historical individual is limited to his or her lyrics.¹⁶²

Yet like Ehrenpreis, Highet also concedes that human communication inherently involves inconsistency, a misrepresentation of the empirical self.¹⁶³ To this extent a satirical poet may present a kind of “pose” that “may perhaps be called a persona.”¹⁶⁴ Horace, for example, may adopt a naïve or ignorant pose in his *Sermones*, although this persona should never “be separated and distinguished from Q. Horatius Flaccus.”¹⁶⁵ And for all his condemnation of the distinction between poet and literary voice, Highet remarks in another article that the “satirist must be able . . . to transcend the particular and forget his

¹⁶¹Highet, “Masks and Faces,” 274, 283. See also Elliott, *Persona*, 15.

¹⁶²Highet, “Masks and Faces,” 267-78, 278, 285.

¹⁶³Highet, “Masks and Faces,” 277.

¹⁶⁴Highet, “Masks and Faces,” 282.

¹⁶⁵Highet, “Masks and Faces,” 282. One may observe that this naïve persona is not unlike Chaucer’s naïve Dreamer in *The Book of the Duchess*, or the Pilgrim in *The Canterbury Tales* that Kittredge suggests.

individual feelings," an expression not entirely incompatible with Eliot's Doctrine of Impersonality.¹⁶⁶

"Revolutions," Elliott remarks, "are never peaceful."¹⁶⁷ The critical loathing of persona makes this uprising no exception. What started as revolution eventually became an establishment to overthrow. In an epistolary dialogue between Canadian author and professor Rawdon Wilson and Australian poet Vincent Buckley, the two trade disparaging remarks over the use of the term persona. Both agree that the word is "oppressively opaque" and "conceptually empty," offering little more than a "cynical and simplistic" view of the creative process.¹⁶⁸ While both reluctantly concede that persona has legitimate uses in literary criticism (however limited), they vent their frustration over the fact that the notion of persona had become ubiquitous, overused, even tyrannical.¹⁶⁹ This exchange perhaps best represents the sentiment of the postmodern period.

And so the stone wall that the modern era had erected between poet and persona became an oppressive barrier, and it was perhaps inevitable that a literary revolt would attempt to knock it down. To the emerging post-New

¹⁶⁶ Gilbert Highet, "The Philosophy of Juvenal," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 80 (1949): 255.

¹⁶⁷Elliott, *Persona*, ix.

¹⁶⁸Robert Rawdon Wilson and Vincent T. Buckley. "Vincent Buckley and Robert Wilson: Persona: The Empty Mask (An Exchange)," *Quadrant* 19 (1975): 81-82.

¹⁶⁹Wilson and Buckley, "Empty Mask," 82, 86-87 and throughout.

Critical poets and critics, the strict formalism and the “incipient facelessness” of high modernist poetry represented the call for a change in aesthetic perspective.¹⁷⁰ The New Critical movement had become associated “with an exclusive focus on the isolated work to the neglect of its relations to its author, its audience, and the language of which it is representative.”¹⁷¹ The cost of this focus was an unhealthy emphasis on “the discontinuity of the poem and the experience appropriate to it, rejecting any continuity with the experiences of its creator and its reader or its continuity with discourse in general.”¹⁷² As a result, one finds many poets of the early postmodern period taking up the avant-garde role of “exacting retribution upon the New Criticism for its excesses.”¹⁷³ Toward this end, the so-called “confessional” poets sought to reclaim the territory of their own poetry.

Confessions of a Postmodern Poet: The Rise of Post-New Critical Poetry

Resistance against modernist orthodoxies brought with it a powerful compulsion not simply to close, but to eradicate the gap between historical author and literary voice. Many early postmodern poets wrote in an explicitly personal, autobiographical mode that marked a clear return to a more Romantic

¹⁷⁰See Elliott, *Persona*, 13.

¹⁷¹Murray Krieger, *Poetic Presence and Illusion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 170.

¹⁷²Krieger, *Poetic Presence and Illusion*, 170.

¹⁷³Krieger, *Poetic Presence and Illusion*, 170.

aesthetic and challenged the very notion of a distinction between historical author and literary voice.¹⁷⁴ In an ironic reversal of fortune, it seemed the persona was now at risk of being banished from the poem.

Alan Williamson defines “personal” poetry as early postmodern and contemporary poetry that is principally informed by “images of the self – or the nature and quality of subjective experience.”¹⁷⁵ It is based on the “romantic premise that the inner self is the source of our understanding of, as well as our blindness toward, what lies beyond us.”¹⁷⁶ Indeed, these two characteristics – a Romantic aesthetic and inward focus – are the two main features of early postmodern personal poetry.¹⁷⁷ There are, however, some differences between the postmodern and Romantic aesthetic. First, although both share an interest in the self as a primary subject matter, “never has the concern for self so completely dominated any period of poetry, any style,” as it has for postmodernity.¹⁷⁸ Second, the severe discrepancy of status predicated by the “superb manner” of Romantic poetry voice does not correspond to the postmodern confessional

¹⁷⁴Elliott, *Persona*, 16-17; Krieger, *Poetic Presence*, 170; Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 2; Alan Williamson, *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 1.

¹⁷⁵Williamson, *Introspection*, 1. See also Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 2; Holden, *Old Formalism*, xiv.

¹⁷⁶Williamson, *Introspection*, 1.

¹⁷⁷Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 22-23. See also Hoffman, “Impersonal Personalism,” 687-90.

¹⁷⁸Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 23.

mode, where the speaker in the poem is often “mired in seemingly insoluble difficulties” and “typically functions close to the level of the reader.”¹⁷⁹ In this regard, postmodern poetry does in fact bear a closer connection to the modern aesthetic.¹⁸⁰ Thus while we may conclude that the “most recent ancestor” to early postmodern personal poetry is “nineteenth century Romanticism,” we must also acknowledge that “there is a considerable gulf between them.”¹⁸¹

Of course, modern poets did not entirely avoid writing personal poetry, and neither do all postmodern poets write solely in that mode – we have already

¹⁷⁹Hoffman, “Impersonal Personalism,” 690.

¹⁸⁰See Hoffman, “Impersonal Personalism,” 689-91. Hoffman concludes that early postmodern personal poetry is “firmly rooted in both the Romantic and modern traditions,” even going so far as to declare “Eliot as a direct precursor” (690). Thus for Hoffmann this poetry “synthesizes the inclination to personalism and consciousness building of the nineteenth century with the elaborate masking techniques and objectifications of the twentieth” (688). At the same time, one should not underestimate the differences between modern and personal poetry. The latter had a different subject matter, style, and technique. In point of fact it was conceived as a direct rejection of the modern aesthetic (even if this conception would finally prove erroneous). Furthermore, in keeping with the characteristically fragmentary nature of postmodernity, poetry of this period does not represent the same kind of unified literary school of thought one finds in earlier eras. Without denying the historical interconnectedness of all literature or the ultimately artificial quality of periodic boundaries, we may here acknowledge a marked shift in aesthetic mode. See Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 6, 9, 18-20; Hoffman, “Impersonal Personalism,” 687; James Breslin, *From Modern to Contemporary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 15; Ralph J. Mills, *Cry of the Human: Essays on Contemporary American Poetry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 4-5.

¹⁸¹Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 23; Hoffman, “Impersonal Personalism,” 690.

acknowledged the artifice of periodic boundaries.¹⁸² Nonetheless critics often credit the 1959 publication of *Life Studies*, a collection of poetry by Robert Lowell, as the inauguration of this kind of personal poetry.¹⁸³ Lowell's *Life Studies* does in some sense reflect the beginning of a general movement by poets away from the Doctrine of Impersonality and its emphasis on literary personae, a movement that other authors such as Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, W. D. Snodgrass, and Randall Jarrell embraced. In the decade following *Life Studies*, poetry in a similar vein began "popping up" everywhere as anthologies began "acknowledging the shift and accepting the break as common practice."¹⁸⁴

Personal poetry in this tradition, however, is more commonly labeled "confessional," a term probably first coined by M. L. Rosenthal in his review of

¹⁸²See Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 6, 18. See also above.

¹⁸³Holden, *Old Formalism*, xiv-xv; Elliott, *Persona*, 16-17, Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 1-2. Again, Lowell did not invent the idea behind his poetry. A year prior to *Life Studies* Robert Bly was already calling for a break with the New Critical tradition and its emphasis on objectivity in poetry. See Robert Bly, "Five Decades of Modern American Poetry," in *The Fifties* (eds. William Duffy and Robert Bly; Geneva, NY: Hobart & William Smith College Press, 1958). See also Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 12.

¹⁸⁴Holden, *Old Formalism*, xiv-xv, 12-14. See also Steven Gould Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 111-12; Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey, eds., *Naked Poetry: Recent American Poetry in Open Forms* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969); and Mark Strand, *The Contemporary American Poets: American Poetry since 1940* (New York: World Publishing Company, 1969).

Life Studies.¹⁸⁵ Rosenthal characterizes this powerfully self-revealing collection as a successful effort to excise the impersonal ghost and its emphasis on persona:

Lowell removes the mask. His speaker is unequivocally himself, and it is hard not to think of *Life Studies* as a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal.¹⁸⁶

In the above comment, Rosenthal alludes to an important characteristic of confessional poetry: a tendency to breach the boundaries of decorum by disclosing extremely private and often risqué autobiographical content. In another ironic twist, what had once been off limits according to the decorum of New Critical poetry, had now become “the only proper subject for literature.”¹⁸⁷ Whereas the modernist poets advocated the extinction of the poet’s self, the confessional poet insistently seeks a direct expression of the self, “however painful that expression may prove.”¹⁸⁸ The profound personal cost of this extreme self-revelatory mode is perhaps evidenced by the fact that several confessional poets, including Plath, Sexton, and Jarrell, bore out a literal extinction of the self by ending their own lives.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁵See Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 4-5.

¹⁸⁶Macha L. Rosenthal, “Poetry as Confession (Critical Responses in Arts and Letters),” *Nation* 189 (1955): 154.

¹⁸⁷Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 12. See also Thomas Clarke, “Allen Ginsberg,” in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, Third Series* (eds. William S. Burroughs, et. al.; New York: Viking, 1967), 288.

¹⁸⁸Robert Phillips, *The Confessional Poets* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), 8.

¹⁸⁹See Holden, *Old Formalism*, xv.

In reference to one of *Life Studies*' poems, "My Last Afternoon," Steven Axelrod more forcefully articulates the historical veracity of Lowell's confessional poetry:

It abandons personae, masks, and anonymity of Modernism in order to reestablish the self as a realm of primary literary interest. More, the poem is not merely personal in the manner of most lyric poetry; it is frankly autobiographical, with real-life characters and elements of plot. It seems to maintain a scrupulous factuality throughout, specifying names, dates, and places. . . . Time is recorded with Franklinesque precision . . . so that the reader is firmly placed in the world of historical time and objective event. The poem cleaves not to the timeless and universal sphere of the imagination but to the literal, particular, time-bound world of fact.¹⁹⁰

Rosenthal and Axelrod are not alone in their declarations: in general, the work of confessional poets convinced readers of their sincerity, inviting the assumption that these poets had abandoned the use of persona and wrote only according to their authentic, historical self.¹⁹¹

A Mythology of the Self: Voice and Autobiography in Confessional Poetry

Thus in what Elliott calls "the most powerful poetry of its time," the literary persona is apparently absent.¹⁹² A close analysis of the relationship between confessional poets and their work, however, suggests a different conclusion.

¹⁹⁰Axelrod, *Life and Art*, 111.

¹⁹¹Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 5-6.

¹⁹²Elliott, *Persona*, 16-17. See also Krieger, *Poetic Presence*, 170.

The “world of fact” presented in Lowell’s poetic confessions does not finally circumvent a formal, stylized literary representation. In short, verity is subject to creativity – at least with regard to poetry. In an interview with Frederick Sidel, Robert Lowell characterizes his poems in this manner:

They’re not always factually true. There’s a good deal of tinkering with fact. You leave out a lot, and emphasize this and not that. Your actual experience is a complete flux. I’ve invented facts and changed things, and the whole balance of the poem was something invented. So there’s a lot of *artistry*, I hope, in the poems.¹⁹³

For Lowell, the goal of a confessional poem is simply for “the reader to say, this is true,” for the reader “to *believe* [he or she] was getting the *real* Robert Lowell.”¹⁹⁴ Thus a successful confessional poem is one that, in some sense, achieves the *effect* of personal disclosure – an idea not entirely unlike Aristotle’s ideal rhetorician. The autobiographical facts of history may be shaped or even altered by the author so long as the factual style of presentation “gives the poem the *impression* of being true.”¹⁹⁵

This creative license is in effect, for example, in Lowell’s “The Skunk Hour,” a poem that relates the poet’s voyeuristic observation of lovers in a

¹⁹³Frederick Sidel, “Robert Lowell,” in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, Second Series* (ed. George Plimpton; New York: Viking, 1963), 348 (emphasis added). In his review of *Life Studies*, Rosenthal himself said that the collection was a “beautifully articulated poetic sequence” (154). Of course, many critics and advocates of the persona theory agree that the poet is only artistically represented in the poem. Cf. Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 8; Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 2-3; Gibson, *Persona*, 4; Holden, *Old Formalism*, xiii.

¹⁹⁴Sidel, “Robert Lowell,” 348 (first emphasis added).

¹⁹⁵Axelrod, *Life and Art*, 112 (emphasis original).

parked car. While critics claim that that the “I” of “Skunk Hour” and the author are “unequivocally the same,” and that “the poet enters undisguised,” Lowell himself confesses (pun intended) in an interview that the historical basis for the poem “was not mine, but from an anecdote on Walt Whitman in his old age.”¹⁹⁶ Elliott best explains the difficulty with what seems a minor discrepancy:

If we take “Skunk Hour” as an example of confessional poetry, as in some sense it unquestionably is, it is possible to suppose that Lowell takes upon himself, in the poem, a perverse action attributed in an anecdote to Walt Whitman (an action of which Lowell himself was, in a literal sense, innocent) in order to evoke some truth about himself. Such an act might be undertaken in the name of the higher sincerity. At a grubbier level, however, we have sheer unescapable embarrassment. Do we really want to ask if Lowell was *sincere* when he wrote “I watched for love-cars”? Lionel Trilling says that telling the truth about oneself to oneself and to others, including the shameful truth, constitutes sincerity in French literature. The English require of the sincere person, he says, only communication without deceiving or misleading. By either standard Robert Lowell fails. But if Lowell is not sincere, do we want to go on and say that he lied in confessing to something he did not do? Or that he lied when, in his comment on “Skunk Hour,” he denied that the act of voyeurism was his? Are these the appropriate questions to be putting to a major poem and a major poet? Assuredly they are not.¹⁹⁷

The confessional movement’s thesis – that the poet can eliminate persona leaving only the authentic, explicit, and direct expression of the historical author – seems

¹⁹⁶Richard Wilbur, “On Robert Lowell’s ‘Skunk Hour,’” in *The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic* (ed. Anthony Ostroff; Boston: Little, Brown, 1964), 86; David Kalstone, *Five Temperaments* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 50; Robert Lowell, “On ‘Skunk Hour,’” in *The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic* (ed. Anthony Ostroff; Boston: Little, Brown, 1964), 109-10.

¹⁹⁷Elliott, *Persona*, 57. Regarding the reference to Trilling, see *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 58.

problematic. Who better to refute the basic claims of the confessional movement than its progenitor?

But Lowell is hardly alone. In an interview with William Packard, confessional poet Sexton rejects the idea that her poetry fully corresponds to her self:

I've heard psychiatrists say, "See you've forgiven your father. There it is in your poem." But I haven't forgiven my father. I just wrote that I did.¹⁹⁸

In his analysis of Bruce Weigl's "The Impossible," a poem that presents sexual abuse as a metaphorical expression for war, Jonathan Holden reaches a conclusion not unlike Elliott's treatment of Lowell:

although the events related so clearly in the poem . . . could have happened to Weigl, my sense is that they were made up. . . . Possibly the poem is a composite of sexual details from various heterosexual episodes; what "authenticity" it exhibits would spring from those. . . . My guess is that Bruce Weigl, as he sought to find an objective correlative to what the war did to him, invented this – the most disgusting and irreversible initiation that he could. I know Bruce. I could ask him. But I won't. I shouldn't have to. Reading "naively," I should either accept the poem and wince or, if I reject it, reject out of disillusionment – by being unable to suspend belief.¹⁹⁹

In the same manner Holden analyzes William Stafford's "Traveling in the Dark," in which the poet relates his experience of discovering a dead deer with a living

¹⁹⁸William Packard, "Craft Interview with Anne Sexton," in *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics* (ed. J. D. McClatchy; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 46. See also Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 5.

¹⁹⁹Holden, *Old Formalism*, xvi-xvii.

fawn in its womb. Holden relates a conversation about the poem with a scientist (and friend), who insisted that the story was physiologically impossible:

I could not persuade him to accept the poem as what Stafford *thought* he remembered. But one of the reasons why Stafford is so widely admired is precisely *because* he remembered it that way. It was part of his character. Rather it was part of the character of his persona in the poem.²⁰⁰

Robert Phillips sums up this aspect of confessional poetry:

While a confessional poem is one which mythologizes the poet's personal life, it has elements of fancy like any other. It does not constitute, certainly, a mere recitation of fact for fact's sake, nor should the "facts" recited be mistaken for literal truth. If they were, one would be positive that Anne Sexton had a brother killed in the war (she hadn't) and that Jerome Mazzaro has a twin sister who is a nun (equally untrue).²⁰¹

Samuel Maio's *Creating Another Self* brings such discrepancies into sharp critical focus, following their implications to an alternative estimation of confessional poetry. Maio maintains that the critical status quo in the decades following the advent of confessional poetry, which "disclaims any meaningful separation of a poet from his or her speaker" and "almost universally" maintains that a confessional poet discloses his or her authentic self, is in error.²⁰² Thus it is "not quite right" to suggest that Lowell, for instance, "removes the mask" and "unequivocally" presents himself in his poetry.²⁰³

²⁰⁰Holden, *Old Formalism*, xviii.

²⁰¹Phillips, *The Confessional Poets*, 11.

²⁰²Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 1, 4-5.

²⁰³Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 5. Cf. Rosenthal, "Poetry as Confession." See also Hoffman, "Impersonal Personalism," 687. Hoffman notes that the "poets themselves have had to resort to unnecessarily elaborate defenses, when,

Instead, Maio argues that confessional poets – like the modernists against whom they so fervently revolted – reject the self in their poetry and ultimately employ a persona:

Although “subjective experience” serves as a useful phrase (in that it is sufficiently broad) to describe the representation of the poet’s self in poetry, my thesis is that the poet creates a persona – one called “I” or by a proper noun – to act as the personal poet’s speaker, and it is this speaker’s self which is defined by the poem’s “images of the self,” and only to the extent they are depicted in the poem. Therefore the personal poet, consciously or not, substitutes for his or her literal, historical self a *literary* self as voice of the poem, one that is sincere but not altogether authentic.²⁰⁴

It is important to note how Maio’s terminology functions, in particular his distinction between the “authentic” and “sincere” self. The authentic self for Maio denotes the historical individual. On the other hand the sincere self is the “persona presented publicly as poetic voice,” who is “confined to the poem exclusively.” A sincere self is one or part of one aspect of the authentic self, and can never fully represent the authentic self of the poet.²⁰⁵ Thus a poet, as Pound discovered and Elliott later affirmed, “is of course a compilation of selves.”²⁰⁶

in point of fact, none of the major confessionals . . . are solely ‘confessional’ in the limited and generally pejorative sense that has gained such wide currency” (687). See also Adam Kirsch, *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), ix-xv. Kirsch’s monograph deals specifically with this issue, and he (ironically) links the confessional poets to Eliot’s approach to poetry.

²⁰⁴Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 2; see also 1, 3.

²⁰⁵See Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 3.

²⁰⁶Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 3. See also Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 28, and “The Psychology of Composition” below.

In short, “the authentic self, the poet, does not address anyone by a poem.”²⁰⁷ Even in the most confessional poems there is a persona, one that is “a formalization of . . . experience,” separated from the poet by the “chasm that differentiates art from life.”²⁰⁸ The formal aspect of poetry necessarily shapes the voice (or voices) of a poem—personification, onomatopoeia, metonymy, hyperbole, oxymoron, and many other devices all “deliberately misstate the ‘facts’ of human experience.”²⁰⁹ The historical discrepancies of confessional poetry represent a false dilemma: the “truth” or “sincerity” of the poem is not subject to the facts of history because the historical poet and confessing persona are simply not identical. The “scientific verifiability of the fact is nothing compared with the poetic rightness of the image.”²¹⁰ For these reasons it is probably premature to conclude that confessional poets and their critics have “scuttled” the persona theory. Elliott best captures the irony: “if anything, confessional poetry established the persona’s indispensability.”²¹¹

²⁰⁷Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 5.

²⁰⁸Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 8, 29.

²⁰⁹Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 24.

²¹⁰Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 24, 37. On the “false dilemma” of historicity in poetry, see Elliott, *Persona*, 80.

²¹¹Elliott, *Persona*, 59.

Ye Old Curiosity Shoppe of Aesthetics: The Doctrine of Sincerity

Until the English nineteenth-century Romantic era, *sincerity* was primarily a religious term; it was up to the central Romantic figure William Wordsworth to extend its semantic range to poetics, where it would become a primary mode of evaluation.²¹² This criterion shifted the grounds on which poetry appeals, emphasizing poetry as primarily self expression: poetry was “true” insofar as it corresponded to the poet’s state of mind.²¹³ In fact, by the early twentieth century sincerity had been so elevated that simply to strive for classical ideals of form and style could open a poet to the charge of insincerity.²¹⁴

Modernity, of course, with its insistence on the depersonalization of poetry, would temporarily weaken the privileged position of sincerity. Patricia Ball, who in the early 1960s chronicled *sincerity* as a critical term, observed that the word eventually came to mean just the opposite: critics began using the term as a pejorative descriptor for inferior or inadequate poetry.²¹⁵ To say a poem was

²¹²Elliott, *Persona*, 36, 48; David Perkins, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Sincerity* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), 1, 33. See also Joan Webber, *The Eloquent “I”: Style and Self in Seventeenth-Century Prose* (Milwaukee, Wis.: University of Wisconsin, 1968), 12-13; Meyer Abrams II, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford, 1953), 319.

²¹³Abrams, *Mirror and the Lamp*, 217; Perkins, *Poetry of Sincerity*, 1.

²¹⁴Perkins, *Poetry of Sincerity*, 2-3.

²¹⁵Patricia Ball, “Sincerity: The Rise and Fall of a Critical Term,” *Modern Language Review* 59 (1964): 7.

“sincere” was a modernistic way of saying that it was a genuine but finally inadequate attempt.

If the Doctrine of Impersonality is a classical ideal that the modern era resurrected and took to new heights, then by the same token the “doctrine of sincerity” is a Romantic principle that the postmodern era resuscitated and employed to an unprecedented extreme.²¹⁶ Whereas Pound and Eliot saw the “fierce renunciation of the self” as the only antidote to Romantic individualism, the confessional poets saw the fierce revelation of the self as the only response to the stranglehold of modern impersonality.²¹⁷ One is hardly surprised that the confessional poets and their critics saw their work as a return to a more Romantic aesthetic. With their work sincerity would indeed enjoy renewed significance.²¹⁸

As one may observe, however, from the above analysis of the postmodern confessional movement, “sincerity” is a problematic ideal. Critics argue that the term, while value-laden, is hopelessly ambiguous: Richard Peyre counts it “among the vaguest and loosest in the old curiosity shop of psychology and

²¹⁶Peyre, *Literature and Sincerity*, 2-3, 14-15; Elliott, *Persona*, 36, 47, 52; Ball, “Sincerity,” 4-5; Abrams, *Mirror and the Lamp*, 319; Perkins, *Poetry of Sincerity*, 1; Misch, *Autobiography in Antiquity*, 193. Perkins says that there is no more remarkable development in Romantic literature than this criterion of poetic value (1).

²¹⁷See Ellmann, *Impersonality*, 4.

²¹⁸Elliott, *Persona*, 52; Perkins, *Poetry of Sincerity*, 1; Ball, “Sincerity,” 4-5; Ivor A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1939), 282.

aesthetics.”²¹⁹ The ambiguity of the critical term is rooted not only in the semantic multivalency that has developed over the years, but in the impossibility of sincerity as a literary standard. The introduction of self-consciousness invites the poet to ask, “Is the emotion genuinely my own?” “Do I really mean what I say?” As soon as such questions are raised, David Perkins observes, “we are no longer sure.”²²⁰ To reproduce a personal historical event means that the poet “becomes still more entangled in scruples” as he or she is forced to confront “the problem of combining open sincerity with aesthetic value.”²²¹ Ironically, to write with “sincerity,” one must devise (as the Romantics and confessional poets did) an appropriate style or technique: sincere poetry “must be learned as an art with traditions and conventions of its own.”²²² Sincerity, insofar as it suggests a pure congruence between poet and poetic voice, is impossible. Poet and persona stand on either side of the aforementioned chasm “that differentiates art from life.”²²³

Thus with Donald A. Russell one may suggest that “we must make a clean break with the ‘Romantic’ view that ‘sincerity’ in the sense of correspondence

²¹⁹Peyre, *Literature and Sincerity*, 2. See also Elliott, *Persona*, 52; Ball, “Sincerity,” 4-7; Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 280-91.

²²⁰Perkins, *Poetry of Sincerity*, 2.

²²¹Perkins, *Poetry of Sincerity*, 2, 33.

²²²Perkins, *Poetry of Sincerity*, 4.

²²³Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 29.

with the writer's personal experience is the unique hallmark of good poetry."²²⁴ The inquiry into the correlation between empirical poet and poetic voice is not only irrelevant, but impossible in the case of ancient poetry.²²⁵ It is more appropriate to think of these poets as those convincingly (or not) representing the personality and emotions native to the speaker of the poem. Whether or not this task is accomplished according to the poet's own experience is secondary: in any case such personal experience is "remembered and generalized, gathered and separated into a series of episodes bearing little relation to the time-sequence of its original form."²²⁶ In short, the poet creates. As we have seen, this condition is precisely the case with the confessional poets, and even corresponds to the few classical examples of personal expression. Wordsworth himself was critical of those who analyzed the historical facts of his poetry, and in fact his autobiographical poems manipulate facts and in some cases are based very little on his own experience.²²⁷ "No matter how closely the poetry is about the poet," Elliott concludes, "the gap is there."²²⁸ This gap makes persona a constant of

²²⁴Donald A. Russell, "Rhetoric and Criticism," in *Oxford Readings in Ancient Literary Criticism* (ed. Andrew Laird; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 282. See also Peyre, *Literature and Sincerity*, 2-3. Peyre counts himself among those "who refuse to subscribe to the sentimental criteria of the romantics."

²²⁵Russell, "Rhetoric," 282.

²²⁶Russell, "Rhetoric," 282-83.

²²⁷See Elliott, *Persona*, 77-78.

²²⁸See Elliott, *Persona*, 58.

poetry, and the call to sincerity a perplexing exhortation.²²⁹ As virtually all poets have recognized, to expect a personal truthfulness in poetry is naïve.²³⁰ One can, however, affirm with Perkins:

There is, it seems to me, only one sense in which it is even possibly appropriate to say that a poem must be sincere. It may be that in order to write well a poet must deeply feel the emotion he expresses as he creates the poem, though he need not feel it ever before or after.²³¹

Thus a sincere poet is one that can accurately conduct the emotions into an aesthetic representation in the poem – a criterion not entirely at odds with Eliot’s view of the poet. In representing those emotions the poet must create a persona appropriate to the poem. Elliott observes the irony: “In the interests of a genuine sincerity, that is, the writer must create a persona.”²³²

New Words on Old Problems: Persona in Antiquity Revisited

Recently the persona debate has again focused on its earliest expressions. As Bruce Gibson points out in his 2006 reception-analysis of Ovid’s *Tristia*, “the whole issue of personae in ancient literature is one [that] is currently being debated.”²³³ Gibson does not enter into the debate, but does suggest that in at

²²⁹See Perkins, *Poetry of Sincerity*, 2.

²³⁰Perkins, *Poetry of Sincerity*, 3.

²³¹Perkins, *Poetry of Sincerity*, 3.

²³²Elliott, *Persona*, 62.

²³³Bruce Gibson, “Ovid on Reading: Reading Ovid. Reception in Ovid, *Tristia 2*,” in *Oxford Readings in Ancient Literary Criticism* (ed. Andrew Laird; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006): 360.

least some instances of ancient literature “there is an attempt to draw a distinction between an author and the character of his works.”²³⁴ Gibson cites, for example, the following passage from Ovid’s *Tristia* (2.353-6):

Believe me, my morals are different from my song – my life is modest, my Muse is playful. The greater part of my works is lying and feigned: it allowed itself more license than its composer.²³⁵

Ovid’s apparent capacity for literary personae does not restrain him, however, from using the writings of earlier authors as an interpretive basis for their character and lifestyle.²³⁶

Jon W. Iddeng reviews the theory of persona in antiquity, as articulated by its progenitor, Anderson. Iddeng does not deny the plausibility of the idea that there is some distance between poet and poetic voice, nor does he reject the persona theory as a viable concept within ancient literature.²³⁷ He also recognizes Anderson’s aptitude in pointing out the “erroneous and fruitless” program of Hightet in “seeking autobiography in every line of Juvenal’s *Satires*.”²³⁸ But Iddeng argues that Anderson simply goes too far, that he greatly

²³⁴Gibson, “Reception in Ovid,” 360.

²³⁵See Gibson, “Reception in Ovid,” 360. Gibson also notes a similar reference in Catullus 16.5-6: “For a pious poet himself should be chaste, but his verses need not be so at all.”

²³⁶Gibson, “Reception in Ovid,” 360.

²³⁷Jon W. Iddeng, “Juvenal, Satire and the Persona Theory: Some Critical Remarks,” *Symbolae Osolenses* 75 (2000): 121, 127.

²³⁸Iddeng, “Persona Theory,” 109.

overstates his case and postulates *too much* distance between poet and persona: Anderson's satirical persona appears wholly separate from the poet, essentially unreliable and in opposition to the empirical author.²³⁹

Roland G. Mayer surveys Greek and Roman poetry, and Roman satire in particular, focusing on the persona theory. His summary of how critics have applied the persona theory is instructive:

Poets who compose in the personal genres of lyric, elegy, and satire do not always address their audience in their own person. We find right from the start in the earliest Greek lyric that some writers – we should more properly call them “singers” – played a role, and in their poem, or song, they assumed a character with its appropriate personality. This technique of self-masking was perhaps easily enough recognized by an audience at a symposium, and even later readers of texts in antiquity had no serious problems of interpreting the use of the mask. . . . It was left to readers and critics of the last century to “problematize” the use of the mask or persona, and for good reason: the persona became a prominent strategic device among modernist writers, for instance, Ezra Pound, who entitled a collection of his poems *Personae* (1926), and the Portuguese Poet Fernando Pessoa, whose very name (under which he never published) weirdly, means “persona.” The use of the mask in modernist lyric prompted critics during the past half century to reread personal forms of classical poetry in the belief that a similar persona or mask could be found in them. Such a rereading seemed valid just because the Greeks and Romans themselves had a notion of the authorial persona and a concept of the use to be made of literary masks. There are particular passages in Catullus, Ovid, and Martial which seem to anticipate the modern view, that the writer could distinguish himself from his work, even when he used the first person singular.²⁴⁰

²³⁹Iddeng, “Persona Theory,” 110, 113-18, 120-22, and throughout.

²⁴⁰Roland G. Mayer, “Persona (I) Problems: The Literary Persona in Antiquity Revisited,” *Materiali e discussioni* 50 (2003): 56-57.

The problem, however, is that for Mayer the ancient and modern notions of persona do not actually correspond. He maintains that “there is little or nothing to suggest that an ancient reader was in a position to recognize the sort of generic persona a modern critic postulates as a matter of course.²⁴¹ Since the modern concept of persona was “demonstrably unavailable” to the ancient audience, their response to or interpretation of poetic persona was necessarily different.²⁴² When faced with a persona, the ancient audience was inclined “to take the character’s words as representing the writer’s view, unless it was otherwise clear that the writer was indulging in *ethopoeia*.²⁴³ Therefore, Mayer concludes that persona-critical readings of classical poetry are irrelevant and misapplied.²⁴⁴

Mayer is correct to point out that classical studies have typically postulated generic, categorical persona (i.e., the elegiac lover or mistress, the didactic writer, the satirist, to use Mayer’s examples²⁴⁵). There is also a good deal of merit to the observation that one cannot, at least by default, assume that antiquity’s personae are identical to the modern literary device that Pound used

²⁴¹Mayer, “Persona (I) Problems,” 78.

²⁴²Mayer, “Persona (I) Problems,” 57, 78.

²⁴³Mayer, “Persona (I) Problems,” 78. According to Hermogenes, *ethopoeia* is “an imitation of the character of a persona supposed to be speaking,” an aspect of rhetoric that Theon collapses with *protopoeia* and *eidolopeia*. See Hermogenes, *Preliminary Exercises*, and Theon, *Exercises*, as well as Kennedy’s comments in *Progymnasmata*, 47-49, 84-85.

²⁴⁴Mayer, “Persona (I) Problems,” 57, 78.

²⁴⁵Mayer, “Persona (I) Problems,” 78.

in his *Personae*. Finally, Mayer is right to suggest that the classical audience would have “seen through the mask” so to speak; so much is true in any case.

The modern view of persona, however, does not universally postulate generic personae – there is more texture to the theory. Furthermore, contrary to Mayer’s estimation, the function of persona is at least in some sense inherent to the creative process, involved in the authorship and experience of poetry in any era, even when not emphasized and consciously applied in the manner of Pound – indeed persona seems to be at work even in the most forceful attempts at circumvention.²⁴⁶ Finally, the persona theory does not prohibit a reciprocal relationship between poet and poem; the persona inevitably reveals something of the poet.²⁴⁷

The Persona Paradox: Conclusion to the History of Persona

The history of persona, then, is something of a conundrum. Critics have typically portrayed persona as subject to the sentiments of the period; they have also portrayed the relationship between these literary periods as basically antagonistic, with the persona theory embroiled at the shifting points of each.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁶Cf. Mayer, “Persona (I) Problems,” 78.

²⁴⁷Holden, *Old Formalism*, 13; Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 3; Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 22, 27, 29, 37.

²⁴⁸Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 29, 32-33, 51; Christopher Beach, “Ezra Pound and Harold Bloom: Influences, Canons, Traditions, and the Making of Modern Poetry,” *Journal of Literary History* 56 (1989): 463; Clifford Siskin, “Personification

Opponents of the theory can never seem to expunge it finally, and advocates always come short of a completely autonomous persona. Generally speaking, the classical and modern literary periods emphasize persona, placing a higher value on the autonomy and impersonality of poetry. The Romantic and postmodern eras clash with this emphasis, affording a greater significance to the notion of sincerity and diminishing the distinction between poet and persona.²⁴⁹ In any case, persona is present; the variability derives from the relationship between the poet and the literary voice he or she creates:

Literature is made up of words, composed by writers, and spoken by personae. In some works the distinction between poet and speaker is obvious; in others it seems an extravagance to call attention to a distinction so thin that it can hardly be said to exist. Its existence is nevertheless a matter of fact. The persona may share much with his creator – a point of view, an attitude toward life, certain historical circumstances, certain intellectual qualities; but the persona is part of the poem, and the poet exists outside of it. The author dies; the persona has a permanently potential existence, realized whenever the work in which he appears is read.²⁵⁰

It is this “permanently potential existence” that one reckons with in a persona-critical analysis.

and Community: Literary Change in the Mid and Late Eighteenth Century,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 15 (1982): 374.

²⁴⁹See Elliott, *Persona*, 32.

²⁵⁰Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 22. See also Elliott, *Persona*, 32.

Persona: Definition, Theory

No Persona 'till Personae? The Psychology of Composition

Although we must admit that, for whatever reason, the fields of biblical criticism and psychology do not frequently interact, it nonetheless remains that the whole problem of persona “is closely related to the problem of the nature of human personality.”²⁵¹ We have already referred to the poet as a compilation of selves. What, exactly, does such nomenclature indicate?

Mark Sadoski analyzes “some of the most formidable concepts in modern philosophy, psychology, social psychology, and rhetorical theory” in an effort to “more fully understand the psychology of composing.”²⁵² Sadoski argues that mental imagery and imagination are not only involved but fundamental to composition. Indeed, Sadoski considers imagination a key mechanism in all human communication, but in particular with regard to “sophisticated uses of language.”²⁵³ Imagination, Sadoski goes on to assert, is also the basis of the concept of persona.²⁵⁴

²⁵¹Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 1.

²⁵²Sadoski, “Imagination,” 276.

²⁵³Sadoski, “Imagination,” 266.

²⁵⁴Sadoski, “Imagination,” 266.

Sadoski begins by analyzing philosophical and psychological scholarship related to the “generalized other.”²⁵⁵ This generalized other is a separate but integral aspect of human personality – it is at once “other” and “coterminous” with self:

when we think inner speech, who are we talking to? When we write a sentence and immediately revise it because it doesn’t communicate our meaning well, to whom does it fail to communicate?²⁵⁶

Sadoski connects this psychological and philosophical *generalized other* to literary notions of the audience and *internalized other*, as well as the closely related concepts of implied audience and implied author.²⁵⁷

After harmonizing the fields of philosophy, psychology, and literary criticism according to the key notes of mental imagery and imagination, Sadoski

²⁵⁵Sadoski sees a direct correspondence between the “affirmation of imagination” in the philosophies of Bronowski, Langer, and especially Mead and the concept of persona, while the psychological theories of Paivio explain the processes by which the author converts “images, feelings, and motives” into language and back again by the audience (273). Cf. Jacob Bronowski, *The Origins of Knowledge and Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978); Bronowski, “The Reach of Imagination,” in *A Sense of the Future* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1977); Bronowski, “The Speaking Eye, The Visionary Ear,” in *The Visionary Eye: Essays in the Arts, Literature, and Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978); Susanne K. Langer, “Speculations on the Origins of Speech and Its Communicative Function,” in *Philosophical Sketches* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962); and George H. Mead, *Mind, Self, & Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934).

²⁵⁶Sadoski, “Imagination,” 276.

²⁵⁷Sadoski, “Imagination,” 272. Cf. Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *Rhetorique et Philosophie* (Paris: Preses Universitaires de France, 1952); Eric D. Hirsch, *The Philosophy of Composition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

focuses his symphony of disciplines on the theory of persona. He defines persona as “a particular self image, part of a multitude of personae, or self-images, that can be constructed from our overall personality, or mental life.”²⁵⁸

Therefore as a psychological mechanism

persona is a temporary aspect of the author’s cognition that serves as a governor to regulate and manipulate the images, affects, and language that mentally represent the subject to the author into rhetorical forms that seem to best succeed in evoking appropriate images, affects, and language in another aspect of the author’s cognition, the generalized other, or imagined audience. Persona is the vehicle by which mental acts are carried out in the minds of both authors and audiences through author’s imaginings of themselves as both authors *and* as audiences, and the consequent feedback loop of rhetorical decisions necessitated to effect the most desirable verbal encodings.²⁵⁹

According to Sadoski, when we write we assume a persona, one that is an aspect of our personality – actual or imagined, and one that we choose to project to the reader in an effort to achieve a desired effect.²⁶⁰ Sadoski essentially describes in social-scientific terms what Maio, Elliott, Pound, and others have all identified according to their literary-critical vantage points: human beings compose

²⁵⁸Sadoski, “Imagination,” 273. See also Gibson, *Persona*, 51.

²⁵⁹Sadoski, “Imagination,” 273. The idea of persona is pervasive not only as a function of human psychology but, not surprisingly, as a fundamental sociological mechanism. See for example Robert E. Park, *Race and Culture* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1950), 249-50; Robert Champigny, “Main Intentions in the Use of Language,” *Journal of Philosophy* 56 (1959): 528-29; Jonah Goldstein and Jeremy Rayner, “The Politics of Identity in Late Modern Society,” *Theory and Society* 23 (1994): 381; Mauss, *Sociology and Psychology*, 78; Jean Duvignaud, “The Theatre in Society: Society in the Theatre,” in *Sociology of Literature and Drama* (eds. Elizabeth Burns and Tom Burns; Baltimore: Penguin, 1973), 95.

²⁶⁰Sadoski, “Imagination,” 273.

according to a formalized representation that is both part of and separate from the self: a constructed voice, a persona. This process is fundamental to all human communication, but is particularly operative in sophisticated forms of language. That poetry is among the most sophisticated forms of human discourse hardly needs illustration. Sadoski leaves us with little room for alternative: persona is a human phenomenon, one that is at work in poetic literary events. To argue that one must restrict persona-criticism to poetry subsequent to its “invention” by critics and poets is to underestimate its inherent nature. Should we deny persona until *Personae*? By the same token one could argue that the various stages of grief did not exist until Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’ *On Death and Dying*.

The Poet in the Poem

As a literary term *persona* is almost exclusively confined to poetry.²⁶¹ This confinement, however, goes no further. Definitions range as from east to west:

To put it as simply as I can: the word *persona* is used by literary interpreters in an effort to clarify the relationship between the writer – the historical person – and the characters the writer creates.²⁶²

A *persona* is the invoked being of the muse; a siren audible through a lifetime’s wax in the ears; a translation of what we did not know that we knew ourselves: what we partly are.²⁶³

²⁶¹See Mayer, “Persona (I) Problems,” 61. Mayer is here referring only to classical literature, although the statement is generally true in any case.

²⁶²Elliott, *Personae*, x.

²⁶³Richard P. Blackmur, “The Language of Silence,” in *Language: An Enquiry into Its Meaning and Function* (ed. Ruth Nanda Anshen; New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 150.

Setting these two definitions of *persona* adjacent – the first by Elliott, the second by Richard Blackmur – demonstrates the polysemous nature of the word. On one hand it can have a hermeneutical focus, essentially a tool for the reader to manage the complex and sometimes paradoxical aspects of voice. On the other hand, it is a creative mechanism, an “apparatus for giving a perspective on the surface actions and the events of the poem.”²⁶⁴ In any case, a *persona* is the metaphor of the mask, derived originally from the ancient stage, which denotes the literary voice within a poem. The “voice” of a poem is the character the poet creates, who speaks the words of the verse that the audience experiences.²⁶⁵ This *persona* is distinct from the historical author – to whom the reader may or may not have access. Finally, this poetic *persona* is hermeneutically significant.

Although *persona* is consistently used as the nomenclature for discussions of poetic voice, there is some conceptual overlap with two significant narratological terms, *implied author* and *narrator*. In his classic analysis of fictional narrative, Wayne Booth analyzes “the intricate relationship of the so-called real author with his various official versions of himself.”²⁶⁶ Booth recognizes that the historical author creates a “self” suited for the purposes of the narrative, but struggles to identify the correct language for this process:

²⁶⁴Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 29.

²⁶⁵Eliot, “Three Voices of Poetry,” 89. See also Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 1.

²⁶⁶Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 71.

It is a curious fact that we have no terms either for this created “second self” or for our relationship with him. None of our terms for various aspects of the narrator is quite accurate. “Persona,” “mask,” and “narrator” are sometimes used, but they more commonly refer to the speaker in the work who is after all only one of the elements created by the implied author and who may be separated from him by large ironies. “Narrator” is usually taken to mean the “I” of the work, but the “I” is seldom if ever identical with the implied image of the artist.²⁶⁷

This lack of terminology leads Booth to coin the term *implied author*,²⁶⁸ an expression that is now well established among literary and biblical scholars. In his introductory definition of terms for *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, R. Alan Culpepper explains that the “implied author is always distinct from the real author and is always evoked by a narrative.”²⁶⁹ According to Culpepper, the distinguishing factor between the implied author and narrator is that “unlike the narrator, the implied author has no voice and never communicates directly with the reader.”²⁷⁰ At the same time, however, Booth seems to suggest that the implied author, or “second self,” may be given an “overt, speaking role in the story.”²⁷¹

²⁶⁷Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 73.

²⁶⁸See especially Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 74-75.

²⁶⁹R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 15.

²⁷⁰Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 16.

²⁷¹Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 71.

Culpepper defines the *narrator* as the “voice that tells the story and speaks to the reader.”²⁷² Thus a narrator is a “rhetorical device” that “may be dramatized as a character in the story, or left undramatized.”²⁷³ Culpepper further delineates the function of the narrator:

[The narrator] may serve as the implied author’s voice or the voice of a character whose perspective differs from the implied author’s. The narrator may also be more or less present and audible in the narrative. The more overt the address to the reader, the stronger is our sense of the narrator’s presence.²⁷⁴

From these descriptions of the implied author and narrator one can see several points of connection with our foregoing discussion of the literary persona. First, the relationship between the “real author” and the “implied author” reflects the same kind of relationship that exists between the historical poet and the literary persona he or she creates. Second, the role a literary persona plays in a poem may be similar to the role a narrator plays in prose: it is the voice the reader encounters. The literary persona seems to capture both the notions of the implied author and narrator – and indeed, from the explanations of Booth and Culpepper it is apparent that the implied author and narrator are closely related concepts. When the distance between poet and persona is minimal, the concept of the literary persona seems to overlap more with the notion of the implied author. When the distance between poet and persona is significant, the persona

²⁷²Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 16.

²⁷³Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 16.

²⁷⁴Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 16.

operates more as an artifact within the poem and thus overlaps more with the notion of the narrator.

While a narrator is nearly always a kind of “persona,” in the sense that it functions as a created character speaking to the reader, a poetic persona often functions in a way that a narrator normally does not. A poetic persona may communicate an experience directly and unmediated through any kind of plot (i.e., “I am elated,” or “This experience is elating”), whereas the narrator portrays a story that the reader engages. Of course, there are many possible rhetorical situations in which this distinction blurs, such as a narrator who speaks in the first person and relates a story as personal experience – or even a poetic persona whose presence is minimal and who functions primarily to relate the world of the poem.

In any case, the hermeneutical consequences of these concepts – persona, implied author, and narrator – are similar. Booth comments that the creation of this “second self” is “one of the author’s most important effects.”²⁷⁵ As Booth later remarks, “no amount of quotation, no amount of plot summary, can possibly show how fully the implied author’s character dominates our reactions to the whole.”²⁷⁶ Indeed, the same is true of the poetic persona, whose voice shapes the reader’s vision of the poem’s world. Furthermore, Booth points out

²⁷⁵Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 75.

²⁷⁶Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 215.

that the idea of a constructed literary self allows interpreters to better manage issues of authorial sincerity and authenticity:

What is more, in this distinction between author and implied author we find a middle position between the technical irrelevance of talk about the artist's objectivity and the harmful error of pretending that an author can allow direct intrusions of his own immediate problems and desires.²⁷⁷

Booth's *implied author* separates the historical author from the constructed author that readers encounter. The implied author is hermeneutically dependent upon the world of the text, rather than the reader's knowledge of or access to the real, historical author. Likewise, the literary *persona* separates the historical poet from the constructed speaker that readers encounter. A persona is hermeneutically dependent upon the world of the poem, rather than the historical poet.

George Wright elaborates the persona theory to some extent, postulating that a poem exhibits not one but two "selves," the persona and the "implicit poet" (neither the empirical poet).²⁷⁸ The implicit poet is a "monumental consciousness" encountered by the reader, the "passionate intelligence pounding disparate experience into the permanence of poetic form."²⁷⁹ The persona, on the other hand, "is only a piece of the rock out of which the whole has been

²⁷⁷Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 75.

²⁷⁸Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 29, 58. In some instances Wright refers to the implicit poet as simply "the poet" though he is always careful to distinguish this poet from the historical individual.

²⁷⁹Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 58.

formed.”²⁸⁰ While further complicating an already complex relationship, this division is particularly interesting insofar as it corresponds to the narratological concepts of the implied author and narrator. Wright further divides persona, however, into “elemental” and “civilized” personae, the former “fumbling in [its] grasp of the structure of moral reality” and “consistently ignorant even of the socially accepted versions of the physical bases of the universe,” the latter aware of conventional manners and morality.²⁸¹ The elemental persona may be an aspect of the civilized or autonomous, but in any case they represent opposing viewpoints – one that orders the world according to “rational structures,” the other according to “affective structures.”²⁸² Thus for Wright “it can be said that in any poem there is not one persona but several.”²⁸³

While Wright is otherwise unequivocally helpful in articulating the theoretical fundamentals of persona, this multi-layered scenario is probably overzealous. Dividing a persona into a rational and affective dichotomy is artificial and unnecessary. At the same time, Wright’s notion of an “implied poet” and “persona” as two layers or aspects of a constructed voice may provide useful language for interpreting a collection of poetry as a whole. The “persona” would denote the constructed voices of the various poems; the “implied poet”

²⁸⁰Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 58.

²⁸¹Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 25-26.

²⁸²Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 26.

²⁸³Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 23.

would denote the collective authorial identity the reader constructs through the experience of reading the poems together.

Admittedly, this application extends the theories of Booth, Culpepper, and Wright beyond their original function. Booth and Culpepper describe the implied author as the identity the reader constructs when hearing the voice of the narrator through the act of reading; the terms are restricted to the boundaries of a single narrative.²⁸⁴ Likewise, Wright postulates an implied poet behind the persona of a single poem. If there is sufficient evidence, however, to see a group of poems as a connected, interrelated whole, the notion of an “implied poet” behind the various personae provides hermeneutically articulate language for analyzing the aspect of voice in a collection of poetry. Thus in the Psalter, the “psalmist-persona” would identify the various speakers in the psalms, while the “Psalter-persona” would identify the implied editorial/authorial consciousness of the canonical Psalter.

If anything, a comparison of persona with its narratological cognates illustrates just how complex, how intricate and variable the relationship between poet and persona may become. Elliott, however, observes that the heated debate over the persona theory indicates that it “goes far beyond matters of critical method.”²⁸⁵ Beneath the surface, fundamental issues are at stake: questions

²⁸⁴See especially Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 72-73.

²⁸⁵Elliott, *Persona*, 17.

“about the nature of the self, about sincerity and its values, about the truth claims of literature.”²⁸⁶ He suggests that the controversy finally comes down to semantics:

Writers who attack the persona are likely to think the term entails a complete separation between the author and the pose he assumes: the mask having nothing to do with the wearer of the mask. Proponents have a much more flexible idea of the relation between persona and author, mask and wearer becoming almost indistinguishable at times.²⁸⁷

It is this more flexible notion of persona that is here advocated. This project does not aim to re-resurrect the high modernist aesthetic, but neither does it “add to the collective moan” offered by recent opponents.²⁸⁸ Instead, one may assert a more temperate view that persona is a simple but inherent aspect of poetry, one that may affect the overall interpretation of a poem or collection of poems.

Although persona is a phenomenon of poetry, the relationship between poet and persona is highly variable. A persona may bear a high degree of resemblance to its creator; it may be decidedly imaginary. This relationship is further subject to and complicated by the literary sentiments and conventions contemporary to both the poet and the reader. The only reliable constants are the two extremities of a broad gamut: on one hand, a persona is always derivative and can never be wholly separate from the poet; on the other, it is

²⁸⁶Elliott, *Persona*, 17.

²⁸⁷Elliott, *Persona*, 17.

²⁸⁸Holden, *Old Formalism*, xiv-xv.

always a voice created for the world of the poem and can never be fully equated with the poet.

It is a persona that the reader of a poem encounters. This encounter occurs whether an “I” or “you” appears in the poem – whether or not the persona is explicit.²⁸⁹ As Wright illustrates, the phrase “This rock is black” is meaningful because the points of reference represented by “I,” “you,” and “it” are understood. He points out that the “actual appearance of the pronoun or of inflected personal ending is only a formalization that makes . . . the referents of the situation publicly available.”²⁹⁰ In the same manner, the expression “The righteous flourish like the palm tree” (Ps 91.12) is an utterance of the understood “I” of the poem, the persona.

The nature of this encounter between persona and reader, however, is also highly variable. The reader may be beneath the persona, as is often the case with the sublime personae of Romantic-era poetry. The reader may also encounter a limited persona, in which the reader “sees the persona in a context of which the latter is unaware.”²⁹¹ The reader may thus feel that he or she is “morally or intellectually superior to the persona,” or at least “has access to more

²⁸⁹Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 11. He goes on to point out that “even if the poet is in love to distraction, the poem is always finally addressed to us” (20).

²⁹⁰Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 11.

²⁹¹Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 54.

information."²⁹² One may also encounter an equality of reader and persona.²⁹³ Finally, the reader may be invited to identify with the persona, "as imaginative co-creator" with the poet."²⁹⁴ In this relationship readers search their "own experience, both human and literary, to find the frame of reference and significance to which the poem applies."²⁹⁵

Personae are not inherently insincere. Rather than constituting authorial evasion or obfuscation, rather than comprising a "lapse in the poet's integrity," a persona can reveal more significant aspects of reality and create "truth of transcendent validity."²⁹⁶ The legitimacy of a persona – even one bearing an explicitly close identification with the poet – is not determined by historical veracity or any other criteria external to the poem. The persona in "The Skunk Hour," however much an artistic creation of the poet, is nonetheless a legitimate (and, one might say, profoundly successful) expression of Robert Lowell. The same may be said of the chorus of voices found in Pound's *Personae*.²⁹⁷

²⁹²Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 54.

²⁹³Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 35.

²⁹⁴Ed Block, Jr., "Lyric Voice and Reader Response: One View of the Transition to Modern Poetics," *Twentieth Century Literature* 24 (1978): 154; Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 29.

²⁹⁵Block, "Reader Response," 163.

²⁹⁶Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 21-22; Elliott, *Persona*, 71.

²⁹⁷See Todd, *Dickinson*, xii; Gibson, *Persona*, 3, 51; Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 6, 21-22, 29, 58; Elliott, *Persona*, 69, 71; and, of course, the discussion throughout this chapter.

All of this leads us to ask with Holden, "How has the poet chosen to present him- or herself to the world? Why? Does this evaluation of the persona's character fit in the critical enterprise? Where?"²⁹⁸ In an ideal hermeneutical situation, Holden "envisages a reader alone with the voice of a book," preferring "to consider poems as if we did not know their authors personally and had never seen them in person; for the test of the ethos of a poetic persona is whether it can rely entirely on *verbal* means of persuasion."²⁹⁹

Thus the "total effect of a poem is due both to what it says about the world and the persona or personae . . . that is, its semantic element, and to what it says about its own language."³⁰⁰ Of course, a poem's persona does in some sense involve at least an implied reference to the poet, but this relationship is never simple and has predicated a vast history of hermeneutical confusion.³⁰¹ The "doctrine of persona," as Elliott calls it, serves critical discourse as a tool "to cope with some of the most exigent difficulties" arising from this relationship.³⁰²

²⁹⁸Holden, *Old Formalism*, xviii-xix.

²⁹⁹Holden, *Old Formalism*, 5.

³⁰⁰Morton W. Bloomfield, "Stylistics and the Theory of Literature," *New Literary History* 7 (1976): 280.

³⁰¹Bloomfield, "Theory of Literature," 280; Elliott, *Persona*, x.

³⁰²Elliott, *Persona*, x.

The analysis of persona, then, fits squarely at the center of the critical enterprise, insofar as it allows the interpreter to deal with and evaluate the nature and quality of the speaker in a poem, a speaker who inevitably shapes the poem's overall effect. *What* the poem says is rendered in part by *who* says it—and it is precisely the persona who speaks. While the foregoing analysis may seem rudimentary to literary critics in general, it is nonetheless a cue Hebrew Bible critics have generally failed to take. The persona theory, as we will see, provides not only a valid but meaningful framework to encounter the verses of the psalmist.

To state specifically, then, our working definition of the “persona theory,” the following points are key. First, a literary persona is a creation of the poet, a formalized representation of the poet's cognition and result of the poet's aesthetic design that functions to govern, regulate, and manipulate the imagery, affective qualities, and language that constitute the “subject” or material of the poem. In this way the poet projects a literary voice that best achieves a desired effect. Because this process is fundamental to poetry, the literary persona is an inherent phenomenon of poetic literary events. Second, a poem's persona, as an aesthetically created aspect of the poem, has a permanently potential existence: like a narrator or implied author in a story, the literary persona survives and is continually realized in the experience of readers. Third, a literary persona is paradoxically derivative of, and yet autonomous from, the historical poet. This paradox is a consequence of the creative process; the poet designs a literary

persona according to a rhetorical or aesthetic end, and in that act produces something at once “other” and “co-terminous” with the poet’s “self.” Fourth, this paradoxical relationship also allows for a high degree of variability: depending on the rhetorical or aesthetic goals of the poet, the literary persona and poet may be highly consonant or exceedingly discordant.

These four points primarily identify the relationship between the historical poet and the literary persona. These points provide the basis, however, for the final and most important point. The idea of drawing a line of separation or distinction between historical author and literary voice is significant because it means that a poem’s speaker is hermeneutically bound to the text, in the sense that it relies on the world of the poem rather than the reader’s knowledge of or access to the historical author. In short, a persona is predicated by the world of the poem, not by its author.

To state specifically how the present project will apply this theory in a critical reading of poetic texts, a few points are essential. First, we will allow poetic personae to rely on verbal means of persuasion, which is to suggest that we will hear a poem’s speaker from within the world of the poem. As Holden suggests, we will engage our poetry as though alone with the voice of the persona. Indeed, as we will see, this is precisely the hermeneutical situation in which readers of the Psalter find themselves. Second, we will attend to this voice according to several basic lines of inquiry: What information does the persona disclose about his or her character or identity, either implicitly or explicitly?

What is the content of the persona's discourse and how is that content presented? To whom does the persona speak? In what manner or tone does the persona speak? What relationship (if any) may be identified between the persona and historical author? How does the persona affect the reader's understanding of the "world" of the poem? How does the world of the poem affect the reader's perception of the persona? Finally, if the reader has sufficient reason to read multiple poems in relation to one another, how does one poem's persona affect another? What overall, or collective effect do the related poems have in terms of voice? While we will use "persona," "psalmist-persona," "speaker," and "poetic voice" all to refer to the basic aspect of literary voice within a given psalm, the expression "collective voice" or "Psalter-persona" will be used to refer to the implied editorial and authorial identity the reader constructs through the act of reading Book IV as a collection of psalms within the canonical Psalter.

Before engaging these essential interpretive questions with regard to the literary persona of the Psalter, a third point must be addressed. Appropriating this critical enterprise to the ancient poetry of the Psalter requires additional methodological considerations. Toward this end, we must situate the Psalter according to the unique parameters of its historical context, which involves not only an analysis of parallel poetic texts, but also the historical circumstances of its formation—its "shaping." We must also attempt to account for the Psalter as a canon of poetry within the Hebrew Bible—its "shape." Finally, a brief discussion of general methodological concerns related to poetics will establish and develop

the connection between persona criticism and the interpretation of the Psalter,
paving the way for a persona-critical reading of Book IV.

CHAPTER THREE

Persona and the Ancient Text

Poetry is not just a set of techniques for saying impressively what could be said otherwise. Rather, it is a particular way of imagining the world.

— Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*

Conjurers, Gods, and Supplicants: Personae of the Ancient Near East

In his analysis of ancient autobiographical texts, Longman advocates what he calls the “contextual approach” to comparative studies, which conducts a balanced comparative analysis by giving consideration both to similarities and differences between cultures.¹ With regard to personae, the literatures of Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Ugaritic, and Hebrew cultures do in fact bear both similarities and differences. What is apparent, however, is that literary personae— not only as an inherent poetic phenomenon but also as an explicit literary device— appear in the earliest literature. The literary persona is an old instrument, and hardly the invention of Eliot or the classic poets. The

¹Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, 28-29. For a clear and concise explanation of the basic principles, pitfalls, and benefits of comparative analysis, see Longman, 30-36. See also William W. Hallo, “Biblical History in its Near Eastern Setting: The Contextual Approach,” in *Israel’s Past in Present Research* (ed. V. Philips Long; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1999): 77-97.

Akkadians, for example, produced an impressive corpus (and the earliest extant examples) of fictional autobiographical narratives.²

Longman's volume on fictional Akkadian autobiography surveys and analyzes the extant examples of this genre. Although the origin of autobiographical literature is a matter of some controversy, Longman recognizes the validity of ancient autobiography and defines the genre fairly strictly as 1) a first-person account of an individual; 2) written by the individual and reflecting on a whole past; and 3) distinct from a diary or self-portrait though comparable to a *res gestae* or memoir.³ Other scholars who confirm ancient autobiography – Georg Misch and Saul K. Padover for example – tend to view it as stilted, stereotyped, or exceedingly traditional in character.⁴ Longman concludes that

²Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, 203.

³Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, 39-43. The debate over the origins of autobiography has at least two major perspectives. Some scholars link the genesis of autobiography with the beginning of a sense of individuality, usually understood to be a product of European civilization. Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*, for example, has been identified as an early autobiographical work. Not all anthropologists, however, consider individuality to be an invention of European culture. Some historians push the origins of autobiography back much further – even to the literature of the Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, and Sumerians. See also Elliott, *Persona*, 23; Mauss, *Sociology and Psychology*, 78, 80; Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (New York: Garland, 1985); G. May, *L'autobiography* (Paris: University of France, 1979); W. C. Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); Misch, *History of Autobiography in Antiquity*; Saul K. Padover, *Confessions and Self-Portraits: 4600 Years of Autobiography* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries, 1957), xiii.

⁴Padover, *Confessions and Self-Portraits*, xiii-xx; Misch, *History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, 193.

there is a tendency among modern critics to treat as autobiographical only those compositions that contain a certain conception of individuality. According to these critics autobiography exists exclusively in those writings where the author, who is also the subject, portrays himself or herself as separate from others. Stated from another perspective, autobiography is the story of a *unique* individual. This sense of the uniqueness of an individual emerges only in the late eighteenth century with writers like Rousseau. Since autobiography is bound up with peculiarly modern ideas of individuality and historiography, many critics see autobiography as a modern and “Western” form of literature. Accordingly, early first-person narrative is excluded from the genre and often dealt with as second-class literature.⁵

Longman’s attempt to rescue ancient autobiography from scholarly disinterest is focused not simply on autobiography in general, but *fictional* autobiographies in particular. Admittedly, this designation is inherently subjective since the historicity of ancient texts is often a difficult matter. Still, the “folkloristic” quality or “fanciful atmosphere” of Longman’s included texts has been recognized by many scholars who have otherwise designated them as historical legends, *narû*-literature, poetic autobiography, *steles imaginaries*, pseudo-autobiography (most common among scholars), and *res gestae*.⁶

Longman concludes that ancient fictional autobiography is present within Egyptian and Akkadian literature.⁷ Egyptian fictional autobiography is both royal and non-royal, whereas Akkadian examples are primarily royal. Apart from one partial example, Akkadian fictional autobiography is prose—a striking observation considering that much of Akkadian literature is poetic. Fictional

⁵Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, 41.

⁶Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, 47.

⁷Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, 201-03.

autobiography is absent from Sumerian and Northwest Semitic literary remains, apart from two impressive examples from the Old Testament: Qoheleth's speech in Ecclesiastes and the poetic text of Proverbs 8, which Longman suggests "may be aptly described as the 'Autobiography of Wisdom.'"⁸

If Akkadian and Egyptian authors were capable of employing a fictional, first-person character in an autobiographical narrative, then we must recognize the ancient capacity of drawing a distinction between a historical author and an artistically constructed literary voice – the fundamental ingredient for personae. If the Hebrew wisdom traditions deployed the literary persona as a poetic voice, then we have identified a biblical example of the concept of personae as presented in this dissertation. Of course, ancient personae may not, on the whole, bear the rich topography of Eliot's *Personae*. They are nonetheless artistically constructed literary voices distinct from the historical author. Some ancient personae are more three-dimensional than others, as we will see below.

While the focus here is on poetry, one example from Longman's fictional autobiographies will serve to illustrate an additional point. Although some scholars have identified the "Uruk Prophecy" as a third-person prophecy, Longman is reasonably certain that it is best understood as a first-person

⁸Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, 202. We will analyze these texts in more detail below.

narrative.⁹ One reason for this first-person designation is that the *narratee* is addressed in a personal manner: “you.” The second-person personal usage

reveals the personal nature of the reader (or audience or narratee), which points to the personal nature of the writer (speaker, narrator) “I.” A personal narrator (“I”) addresses a personal narratee (“you”), whereas an impersonal narrator (“he”) addresses an impersonal narratee (“they”). . . . There must be a personal “I” speaking to a personal “you” in order for a second-person pronominal suffix such as “your” to be employed Thus the appearance of [second-person language] indicates the first-person nature of the text.¹⁰

This principle applies to both prose and poetry. A poem (ancient or otherwise) that is primarily concerned with addressing another, as is often the case with biblical psalms that address Yahweh, exhibits a literary “I” that is distinct from the empirical “I.” As we have observed, Wright illustrates that even a statement such as “this rock is black” still implies a persona in the poem.¹¹ In short, the ancient poetic persona is present whether or not an “I” is explicitly stated in the text. Second- and third-person language illuminate poetic voice, even if they are not as overt as an explicitly stated “I.”

In a good many ancient poems, the implicit or explicit “I” of the text functions primarily as narrator, who generally reports or introduces the direct speech of the poem’s (often numerous) characters. In short, much of ancient

⁹See Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, 146-47.

¹⁰Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, 162-63. See also T. Todorov, *Introduction to Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1981), 40; Gerald Prince “Introduction to the Study of the Narratee,” *Reader-Response Criticism* (ed. J. P. Tompkins; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 7-25.

¹¹See ch. 2, “Persona: History and Theory.”

poetry is dramatic in nature. Of course, Wright and others have argued that *all* poetry is dramatic in nature, and in view of the cult-functional theory of psalm composition, Susan Gillingham has characterized the poets who authored the biblical psalms as gifted dramatists.¹² The focus here, however, is on poetry that is explicitly dramatic in content – poetic texts that contain dialogue between distinct characters. A few examples illustrate this characteristic of ancient poetry.

The Sumerian text “Dumuzi and Enkimdu: The Dispute Between the Shepherd-God and the Farmer-God”¹³ is an example of ancient dramatic poetry in which a narrator reports the speech of four characters: the goddess Inanna; her brother, the sun-god Utu; the divine shepherd Dumuzi; and the divine farmer Enkimdu. In this poem, the words of the characters are nearly always introduced via the narrator, with terse, almost utilitarian expressions:

Says [to] the pure Inanna: (11)
The shepherd Dumuzi / . . . to speak . . . (37-8)
The [sh]epherd Dumuzi in his plain starts a quarrel with him. (73)

¹²See Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 7; Todd, *Dickinson*, xii. Susan E. Gillingham, *Poems and Psalms of the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 184.

¹³See Isaac Mendelsohn, ed., *Religions of the Ancient Near East: Sumerian-Akkadian Religious Texts and Ugaritic Epics* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1955), 11-14.

In the Akkadian creation epic “Enuma Elish”¹⁴ such terse introductions often precede direct speech:

Said unto *resplendent* Tiamat:
“Their ways are verily loathsome unto me.
By day I find no relief, nor repose by night.
I will destroy, I will wreck their ways,
That quiet may be restored. Let us have rest!” (I, 36-40)

In other examples the narrator becomes slightly more present by indirectly reporting speech and including additional information:

As soon as Tiamat heard this,
She was wroth and called out to her husband.
She cried out aggrieved, as she raged all alone,
Injecting woe into her mood: (I, 41-44)

In a few cases direct speech must be inferred. After the Igigi (a collective name for the gods of heaven) enjoy a lavish banquet to “fix the decrees” of Marduk (III, 38), the narrator describes what follows:

They erected for him a princely throne.
Facing his fathers, he sat down, presiding.
“Thou art the most honored of the great gods,
Thy decree is unrivaled, thy word is Anu.
Thou, Marduk, art the most honored of the great gods,” (IV, 1-5)

Though not explicitly stated by the narrator (as is often the case), the Igigi are clearly speaking to Marduk, as it follows naturally from the scene that the

¹⁴Mendelsohn, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, 17-46. See also Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 19-30, 231-37, 244-56; N. K. Sandars, *Poems of Heaven and Hell from Ancient Mesopotamia* (New York: Penguin, 1971), 117-65.

narrator has set. The addressee (Marduk) is not explicitly identified until the third line of the speech (IV, 5).

The “Laments for Ur,” “Inanna’s Journey to Hell” and its Akkadian parallel “Descent of Ishtar to the Nether World,” “The Epic of Gilgamesh,” “The Creation of Man by the Mother Goddess,” as well as the Ugaritic “Baal and Anath Cycle” and “The Tale of Aqhat” are examples in which the primary persona recedes into a narrating role, inhabiting the backstage of the poem, while the dramatic characters of the poem represent the vast majority of speech and action.¹⁵

Here the comparative analysis of ancient Near Eastern poetry reveals a noteworthy difference. Poetry in which a “continuous narrative” is “presented through a poetic medium” is absent from Hebrew poetry.¹⁶ Gillingham considers the dearth of Hebrew epic poetry from an otherwise “great variety” of forms to be significant, and suggests that the liturgical context for Hebrew poetry may be one reason why “Israel possessed no epic poetry as such.”¹⁷

Some shift in voice with regard to cultic poems does appear in prayers, hymns, and incantations. This shift is evident in cultures that produced epic poetry as well. The New Year’s Festival – probably the most important holiday

¹⁵See Mendelsohn, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, 47-115. See also Todorov, *Introduction to Poetics*, 38-40.

¹⁶Gillingham, *Poems and Psalms*, 37. Cf. Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1984), 83-85.

¹⁷Gillingham, *Poems and Psalms*, 37.

in Mesopotamia that lasted several days and involved the entire population of a given community – included a re-enactment of creation “in order to insure the stability of the cosmos for the coming year.”¹⁸ This re-enactment is reflected in the “Temple Program” for the Babylonian festival:¹⁹

On the second day of the month Nisannu, two hours of the night (remaining?), the *urigallu*-priest shall arise and wash with river water. He shall enter into the presence of the god Bel, and he shall . . . a linen *gadalū* in front of Bel. He shall recite the following prayer:

O Bel, who has no equal when angry,
O Bel, excellent king, lord of the countries,
Who makes the great gods friendly,
O Bel, who fells the mighty with his glance . . .

On the fourth day of the month Nisannu, three and one third hours of the night (remaining?), the *urigallu*-priest shall arise and wash with river water. A linen *gadalū* he shall . . . in front of the god Bel and the goddess Beltiya. He shall recite the following prayer, while lifting his hand, to the god Bel:

I am the *urigallu*-priest of the temple Ekua, who *blesses* you.
My Lord is my god, My Lord is my lord. Who, except for you, is
lord?

In some sense, this prayer is similar to the examples above in which the speaker is introduced. Yet the introductions are apparently not an organic part of the poem proper, and in these examples the prose text itself reflects more a

¹⁸Mendelsohn, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, 129.

¹⁹Lines 1-11, 216-221, 245, 316. See Mendelsohn, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, 129-32.

parenthetical stage direction than narrator.²⁰ The poem proper is a first person address to Bel, and the persona musters much enthusiasm to extol Bel's majestic authority while simultaneously highlighting priestly devotion. What is clear from the prose directions is that the speaker is not likely the author. An anonymous historical poet constructed a voice suitable to the *urigallu*-priest, who would recite the poem on a recurring basis. In some extant temple programs, such as the "Program of the Pageant of the Statue of the God Anu at Uruk," the text includes no poetry but only directions to recite several different incantations: "After the blessing, the *mašmašu*-priests shall recite four times the incantation (entitled) '*Lugale anika lugaltaea*' when they are in the Street of the Gods."²¹ The numerous incantation titles and directions for cultic use suggest that such invoking lyrics were traditionally or liturgically employed by priests, and from this usage one may infer that at least a functional distinction was to be drawn between author and persona.

Of course, many extant prayers bear no introduction and simply present an unqualified direct address to a deity. Here the persona achieves a full presence similar to what one finds in the Psalter. The "Prayer of Lamentation to

²⁰Other prose sections of the text do exhibit in a much stronger sense the voice of a narrator. See, for example, lines 335-75 in Mendelsohn, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, 136-37.

²¹Lines 10-11. See Mendelsohn, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, 143.

Ishtar,"²² for example, exhibits a supplicant persona not unlike that of a biblical psalm of lament, although this example features a kind of royal *inclusio*:

I pray to thee, O Lady of ladies, goddess of goddesses.
O Ishtar, queen of all peoples, who guides mankind aright,
O Irnini, ever exalted, greatest of the Igigi,
O most mighty of princesses, exalted is thy name. (1-3)

How long, O my Lady, shall my adversaries be looking upon me,
In lying and untruth shall they plan evil against me,
Shall my pursuers and those who exult over me rage against me?
How long, O my Lady, shall the crippled and weak seek me out?
One has made for me long sackcloth; thus I have appeared before thee.
The weak have become strong; but I am weak.
I toss about like flood-water, which an evil wind makes violent.
My heart is flying; it keeps fluttering like a bird of heaven.
I mourn like a dove night and day. (56-64)

How long, O my Lady, wilt thou be angered so that thy face is turned
away?
How long, O my Lady, wilt thou be infuriated so that thy spirit is
enraged?
Turn thy neck which thou hast set against me; set thy face [toward] good
favor.
Like the water of the opening up of a canal let thy emotions be released.
(93-96)

Ishtar indeed is exalted; Ishtar indeed is queen;
The Lady indeed is exalted; the Lady indeed is queen.
Irnini, the valorous daughter of Sin, has no rival. (103-105)

According to a colophon of the text, the poem was the property of temple Esagila in Babylon.²³ It does not seem justifiable to deny *a priori* the ancient audience the

²²See Mendelsohn, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, 155-59. See also Robert William Rogers, *Cuneiform Parallels to the Old Testament* (New York: Abingdon, 1926), 153-64.

²³Mendelsohn, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, 155.

capacity to draw a distinction between the author of the poem and the voice the poet created. The poem above is an anonymous literary *tradition*; credit for authorship could go to one or many – the culture that produced it took little interest in documenting such contributions. It seems unlikely that the readers or hearers of this poem would have heard the voice of the empirical author in this temple lament. Indeed, the only voice *to* hear is the persona that generations of priests or supplicants reenact through speech or reconstruct through reading.

N. K. Sandars provides a colorful introductory note on the Akkadian “Prayer to the Gods of the Night”:

An Old Babylonian prayer of the first half of the second millennium, its source is not known; but the scene is night in any one of the packed sweltering cities of Mesopotamia during the few hours of quiet when nothing seems to stir, and the great stars look exceedingly clear.²⁴

The full text of the poem is as follows:

They are lying down, the great ones.
The bolts are fallen; the fastenings are placed.
The crowds and people are quiet.
The open gates are (now) closed.
The gods of the land and the goddesses of the land,
Shamash, Sin, Adad, and Ishtar,
Have betaken themselves to sleep in heaven.
They are not pronouncing judgment;
They are not deciding things.
Veiled is the night;
The temple and the most holy places are quiet and dark.
The traveler calls on (his) god;
And the litigant is tarrying in sleep.
The judge of truth, the father of the fatherless,

²⁴Sandars, *Poems of Heaven and Hell*, 173. See also Mendelsohn, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, 173-74.

Shamash, has betaken himself to his chamber.
O great ones, gods of the night,
O bright one Gibil, O warrior, Irra,
O bow (star) and yoke (star),
O Pleiades, Orion, and the dragon,
O Ursa Major, goat (star) and the bison,
Stand by, and then,
In the divination which I am making,
In the lamb which I am offering,
Put truth for me.²⁵

This address to the nocturnal gods reveals a decidedly rich persona. While the world slumbers, the persona observes. Mortals and deities alike have locked their doors and gone to bed; the persona is alone. The activity of interaction between gods and mortals (deciding, pronouncing) has ceased, and the setting for such interaction is vacant (temple and most holy places, quiet and dark). The anonymous traveler making supplication is the exception that proves the rule, like the cricket chirp that highlights a terrible silence. The persona's observation of all this is predicated by his or her unique setting – the persona is awake and watching. This unique setting provides unique knowledge and thus warrants unique status. The persona alone keeps company with the great gods of the night, and on the basis of this relationship offers an act of sacrifice and requests a

²⁵See Sandars, *Poems of Heaven and Hell*, 175. For an incantation with a similar theme, though more imprecatory in focus, see the *Shurpu* in Bill T. Arnold and Bryant E. Beyer, *Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 219-20.

significant blessing: "Put truth for me." Three stanzas from Robert Lowell's

"Skunk Hour" echo these verses:²⁶

One dark night,
my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull;
I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down,
they lay together, hull to hull,
where the graveyard shelves on the town. . . .
My mind's not right.

A car radio bleats,
"Love, O careless Love. . . ." I hear
my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,
as if my hand were at its throat. . . .
I myself am hell;
nobody's here —

only skunks, that search
in the moonlight for a bite to eat.
They march on their soles up Main Street:
white stripes, moonstruck eyes' red fire
under the chalk-dry and spar spire
of the Trinitarian Church.

This persona (the most appropriate designation, considering the discussion in chapter two) is also the lone observer in the night, save the foraging skunk and her offspring. Whereas the ancient persona gazes at the divine constellations of the sky, the modern persona voyeuristically studies lovers in a parked car. The observing act of the former highlights her special devotion; the latter his great personal distress. In any case the dimensions of these personae are not all that dissimilar; they both illuminate the powerfully introspective and revealing

²⁶Robert Lowell, *Life Studies* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1959), 89-90.

experience of observing a scene from the vantage point of solitude. In each case the persona is precisely the catalyst for the poem's literary brilliance.

In other examples the personae is more clearly a constructed voice. The poem "I will Praise the Lord of Wisdom"²⁷ expresses the lamentations of a misfortunate persona:

I have arrived, I have passed beyond life's span. (II, 1)

Death [pursued me] and covered my whole body.
If someone asking for me calls me, I do not answer.
My people weep, I myself no longer exist.
In my mouth a gag is placed,
I hold back the word of my lips.

. . . .

Wheat, even though putrid, I eat.
Beer – life divine! – I have eliminated from me.
Extremely long has lasted the distress.
Through starving my appearance
My flesh is flaccid, my blood is [going].
My bones are *smashed*
My muscles are inflamed
I took the bed to the jail, they have blocked (my) exit.
My prison – that is what my house has become.
My hands have been cast into fetters – (i.e.) my flesh;
Into my own chains have my feet been thrown.
My *wheals* are sore, the wound is serious.
The lash striking me is filled with *terror*.
They have pierced me with a goad, the sting was fierce.
All day a pursuer purses me.
At night he does not let me draw my breath for a moment.
Through straining my sinews have been loosened,
My limbs are wrecked, hit aside

²⁷Mendelsohn, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, 187-96. See also Arnold and Beyer, *Readings from the Ancient Near East*, 177-79; Walter Beyerlin, *Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 137-40.

I spend the night in my dung, like an ox.
I was soaked like a sheep in my excrements. (II, 15-42)

Deprived of his favorite drink and smeared in his own waste, the persona laments. The language is hyperbolic, but this quality only highlights the fictionality of the persona: the poem is something invented, with a great deal of *artistry* in it.²⁸

Finally, "The Sumerian Underworld" portrays a divine persona singing a song of self-praise:²⁹

There stands a house under the mountain of the world,
a road runs down, the mountain covers it
and no man knows the way. It is a house
that binds bad men with ropes
and clamps them into a narrow space.
It is a house that separates the wicked
and the good; this is a house from out of which
no one escapes, but just men need not fear before its judge,
for in this river of spent souls the good
shall never die although the wicked perish.
This is my house, on its foundations stand
the mountains of the sunrise, but who shall see
into the pit? It is a house that separates
the wicked and the just; it is a house
that smothers in clay the souls that come to it.
It is the house of the setting sun,
the pallid god in livid splendour; the sill
is a monster with jaws that gape
and the jambs of the doors are a sharp knife
to slash down wicked men. The two rims

²⁸Cf. Robert Lowell's comment on "Skunk Hour," in Sidel, "Robert Lowell," 348. The persona of the poem is actually named, but as we have already seen this brings us no closer to a historical author within the poem. See also below.

²⁹See Sandars, *Poems of Heaven and Hell*, 113-15.

of the river of hell are the rapier thrust
of terror, a raging lion guards it
and who can face his fury? Here also lie
the rainbow gardens of the Lady.

The poem is magnificent. What is noteworthy, however, is that while the poem is ostensibly focused on the characteristics of the house, the poem actually turns on the character of the persona: “This is *my* house.” The river of spent souls and the rainbow gardens – the terror and splendor – aesthetically traverse the gamut of this persona’s divinity. The characteristics of the house metaphorically define a fictional, artistically constructed persona.

There are other ancient personae of interest, such as more familiar or “stock” personae, including the father or master who bestows wisdom to a son or servant – frequently appearing in wisdom or didactic texts.³⁰ For the majority of ancient texts, however, there is no sense in which we have “the author” before us; they are most often anonymous.³¹ A given poem could be the product of a single temple employee, a common devotee, or a complex history of authorial and editorial contributions. These ancient cultures neither perceived nor valued authorship in the same sense as the modern West. If the ancient world took such little interest in preserving the identity of the historical author, had a fluid

³⁰Example texts include “Instruction of Ptahhotep,” “Instruction of Merikare,” “Instruction of Any,” and “A Pessimistic Dialogue Between Master and Servant.” See Mendelsohn, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, 196-99; Arnold and Beyer, *Readings from the Ancient Near East*, 182-85.

³¹See Nancy DeClaisse-Walford, *Introduction to the Psalms: A Song from Ancient Israel* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 31-32.

literary tradition, and employed cultic texts on a regular basis, how then could they have *avoided* drawing a distinction between the empirical, historical author and the voice of the text? Generally speaking, it does not seem plausible that they would have had much concern about the actual author at all. Some scholars, as we have seen, deny personae in ancient verse insofar as it applies to a modern theory to an ancient text. Yet the literary persona was at home in the ancient world. Ironically, to otherwise restrict ancient poetry and its reception by an ancient audience is to impose a modern criterion on an ancient text.

Of course, some ancient poems do preserve authorship. “A Dialogue About Human Misery” – the so-called “Babylonian Ecclesiastes” – is an acrostic poem in which the acrostic records the identity of the author: “I, Shagil-kinam-ubbib, the conjurer, bless god and king.”³² The Babylonian Ecclesiastes may indeed reveal something about its author. Yet even in such instances we are no closer to eliminating the persona, as the examples of modern and postmodern poetry – in which authorship is fully documented – have illustrated. Even if we knew all the facts of authorship in the ancient Near East (we do not), the poems would nonetheless invite readers to hear a literary persona. Robert Lowell could

³²Mendelsohn, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, 196-99; Arnold and Beyer, *Readings from the Ancient Near East*, 199-204. The poet’s name means “O Esagil, pronounce the righteous pure!” (Esagil was the temple of Marduk in Babylon). Other examples include Egyptian personal prayers such as “Votive stele of the pointer Neb-Re, Dedicated to Amun-Re,” “Votive Stele of the Worker Nefer-Abu for the Mountain Peak,” and “Prayer Stele of Nefer-abu to Ptah.” See Beyerlin, *Near Eastern Religious Texts*, 32-36.

not circumvent the phenomenon; neither could the ancient poet. Shagil-kinam-ubbib is a conjurer indeed – of a literary persona.

Teacher, Wisdom, Prophet, and Lovers: Biblical Personae Beyond the Psalter

As we have already mentioned, Longman identified the speech of Qoheleth as the fictional autobiography of a wise man as a striking example of fictional autobiography in ancient Northwest Semitic literature.³³ He furthermore characterized the poetry of Proverbs 8 as the fictional autobiography of wisdom: “here wisdom introduces herself in the first person (v 12), recounts her attributes (vv 12b-21), and gives a narration of events in her past (particularly her role in creation, vv 21-31).”³⁴ Longman notes that additional texts in Proverbs “are very similar to fictional autobiographies with a didactic ending (the so-called ‘Instructions’).”³⁵ Thus in Ecclesiastes and Proverbs one finds a speaker that is not consonant with the author(s)/editor(s), but rather a product of authorial/editorial design: a persona.

Persona language is precisely what Athalya Brenner and Fokkeli van Dijk-Hemmes use in their analysis of Proverbs, which specifically focuses on

³³Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, 10, 202.

³⁴Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, 202.

³⁵Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, 202. In his analysis, Longman categorizes fictional Akkadian autobiographies according to their ending; in addition to fragmentary texts and those with didactic endings, there are blessing and/or curse endings, donation endings, and prophetic endings (see 53-195).

gender in relation to literary voice.³⁶ Dijk-Hemmes writes that it “is generally accepted that the I persona speaking in Proverbs 1-9 is that of a wisdom teacher who speaks to his student son or sons like a father does.”³⁷ In putting forward her hypothesis that the “I persona” is potentially female in character (particularly with reference to Proverbs 7), Dijk-Hemmes describes the literary voice as “the I persona-in-the-text” and the “textual persona.”³⁸

In her analysis of Proverbs 1-9, Brenner suggests that the text does not reflect a male persona that intermittently quotes a female voice, but that the text itself reflects a female persona.³⁹ In this case her work is perhaps best described as a

³⁶Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Brill, 1993).

³⁷Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts*, 57.

³⁸Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts*, 57, 61; Brenner uses a similar reference in describing her co-author’s work (114).

³⁹Cf. Claudia V. Camp, “Woman Wisdom as Root Metaphor: A Theological Consideration,” in *The Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in Honor of Roland E. Murphy* (ed. Kenneth G. Hoglund; Sheffield: JSOT, 1987): 45-76; “Wise and Strange: An Interpretation of the Female Imagery in Proverbs in Light of Trickster Mythology,” in *Reasoning with the Foxes: Female Wit in a World of Male Power*, ed. J. Cheryl Exum and Johanna W. H. Van Wijk-Bos; *Semeia* 42 (1988): 14-36; “What’s so Strange about the Strange Woman?” in *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Norman K. Gottwald on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (ed. David Jobling, Peggy L. Day, and Gerald T. Sheppard; Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1991): 17-31; Carol A. Newsom, “Woman and the Discourse of the Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1-9,” in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (ed. Peggy L. Day; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989): 142-60; G. A. Yee, “‘I Have Perfumed My Bed with Myrrh’: The Foreign Woman (‘iššâ zārâ) in Proverbs 1-9,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 43 (1989): 53-68.

persona-critical analysis of Proverbs 1-9, focusing in particular on gender and its relationship to the ideological or rhetorical perspective of the text.

One of the most comprehensive uses of the concept of persona by a biblical scholar is Timothy Polk's *The Prophetic Persona*. As a matter of methodological clarification, Polk distinguishes between the "Jeremiah of history" and "the Jeremiah rendered by the text."⁴⁰ Indeed, Polk's complaint is that the latter "has been virtually forgotten," and his goal is to bring the "Jeremiah rendered by the text" into detailed focus.⁴¹ Polk appropriately defines and refers to this Jeremiah-of-the-text as a persona.⁴²

In Polk's view, the project is warranted by the fact that many scholars have overlooked a valuable hermeneutical insight by attempting to reconstruct the prophetic personality *behind* the text, at the expense of analyzing the personality *of* the text:

It seems never to occur to them that the textual depiction is itself worth exploring or that it might have its own theo-logic and religious agenda.⁴³

In other words, Polk recognizes the hermeneutical significance of the persona in the Book of Jeremiah. Without entering into the full conversation, we may note that scholars have recognized a great deal of commonality between prophetic

⁴⁰Timothy Polk, *The Prophetic Persona: Jeremiah and the Language of the Self* (JSTOT Supplement Series 32; Sheffield: JSOT, 1984), 8.

⁴¹Polk, *Prophetic Persona*, 8-9.

⁴²Polk, *Prophetic Persona*, 10.

⁴³Polk, *Prophetic Persona*, 10.

and psalmodic texts.⁴⁴ If the personae of the former matter, perhaps the personae of the latter do as well.

Overall, biblical scholars have had the strongest sense of the literary persona with regard to Song of Songs, which has parallels in some Mesopotamian literature, but most directly with Egyptian love songs.⁴⁵ J. P. Fokkelman views the entire book of Song of Songs as a dialogue between a male and a female voice.⁴⁶ He consistently refers to speaking characters as “voices” and maintains that “we will lose the thread . . . if we do not first ask ourselves at the beginning of each verse: Who is speaking here?”⁴⁷ In asking and answering this question, Fokkelman illuminates the topography of these biblical personae.⁴⁸

In his comparison between the Song of Songs and ancient Tamil love poems, Abraham Mariaselvam makes the following observation:

The identity and the personality of the poets who composed the individual poems in the [Song of Songs] are not revealed in and through the poems. What they have expressed in their poems could be, but need not necessarily be, representative of their own personal love experience. The aspects of the love experience that are put as burden in the poems are at the same time universal and paradigmatical so that they are applicable to every lover. The love experiences revealed in these poems remain in the direction of universalized ideal. No wonder, then, that the identity or the individuality of the composers of the particular poems in the SS has

⁴⁴See, for example, W. H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms and Prophecy* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1984), 9-21.

⁴⁵Arnold and Beyer, *Readings from the Ancient Near East*, 192-93.

⁴⁶Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 199.

⁴⁷Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 199.

⁴⁸See, for example, his analysis on 199-206.

not come down to us. For that matter, even the compiler's name is not known.⁴⁹

Like the Psalter, the historical process of authorship of the Song of Songs is ambiguous, and at any rate cannot be simply equated with the literary voices of the text. According to Mariaselvam's view, the poet first "conceals [his or her] personality and secondly identifies [him- or herself] with the character or speaker of the poem and *becomes* the character itself."⁵⁰ Furthermore, in Mariaselvam's view the speakers are fictional characters, "poetic fiction," as he designates them, that have "no existence outside the poem, and its impression on the world."⁵¹ The characters are furthermore ideal or typological, and "could represent peasant-couples as well as couples from royal court or opulent society."⁵² In this way

⁴⁹Abraham Mariaselvam, *The Song of Songs and Ancient Tamil Love Poems: Poetry and Symbolism* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1988), 156.

⁵⁰Mariaselvam, *The Song of Songs and Ancient Tamil Love Poems*, 167. One may note that his view is not entirely unlike Cicero's view of the rhetorician (See *De Or.* 3.214 [Rackham, LCL], and above).

⁵¹Mariaselvam, *The Song of Songs and Ancient Tamil Love Poems*, 167, 178. See also Francis Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), 66-69. Landy frames the dialogue in the Song of Songs as "an interior dialogue, both in the poet and his personae, which we overhear" (66-67). According to Mariaselvam, the "poetic fiction" of the two lovers appears as "Royal Fiction" (not explicitly Solomonic) and "Solomonic Fiction." Mariaselvam views references to Solomon as a literary motif, serving as a poetic fiction or a kind of archetype for the lover and the beloved in the Song of Solomon (178-80). See also Marcia Falk, *Love Lyrics from the Bible: A Translation and Literary Study of the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1982), 108.

⁵²Mariaselvam, *The Song of Songs and Ancient Tamil Love Poems*, 167.

the lovers in the [Song of Songs] reflect the society, while at the same time they remain unknown. We can see in fact that the poems have survived the poets, that the lovers emerge from the poems to speak out their love-experience and then disappear or go to the background, leaving only the impression of love-sentiments in the real world of the readers!⁵³

Perhaps the most helpful expression of the persona theory with regard to the Song of Songs comes from Michael V. Fox. In his comparative study between the Song of Song and ancient Egyptian love songs, Fox makes the following observation with regard to literary voice:

The speakers in the Egyptian love songs and the Song of Songs, are, as a rule, *personae*, created characters through whom the poets speak but who are not to be identified with them. While I have seen no explicit discussion of this issue in the scholarly literature, my impression is that commentators tend to assume that the words spoken in the Egyptian love songs and the Song of Songs are direct expressions of their author's emotions and experiences. This issue is important for interpretation, for if the speakers are *personae* we must ask not only what the lovers are like, but also how the poets view them and present them to us. The literary quality of these poems in itself tends to distinguish the speakers from the authors, particularly in the case of Canticles. It is highly unlikely that lovestruck young people such as those who appear in these poems could have produced lyrics of such artistic power and sophistication. This poetry seems rather to be the work of mature and practiced artists.⁵⁴

Similar to the argument offered by Kittredge in his analysis of Chaucer's Dreamer, and by Donaldson's reading of *Canterbury Tales*, Fox concludes that the literary sophistication of these ancient love poems cannot be the work of the

⁵³Mariaselvam, *The Song of Songs and Ancient Tamil Love Poems*, 167.

⁵⁴Michael V. Fox, *The Songs of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 253 (italics original). Fox also defines Qoheleth as a persona. See his commentary, *Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2004), x.

naïve persons they present. Furthermore, Fox suggests that an understanding of how the poet presents the poem's personae is hermeneutically significant. This idea connects to Wright's discussion of Robert Browning's poetry in so far as he suggests that "not the experience of the persona, but the experience of understanding [the persona], is what the poet invites the reader to share."⁵⁵ Finally, it is particularly noteworthy that Fox identifies a gap in biblical scholarship. He is right: biblical critics have largely ignored what Fox describes as one of "the most significant formal features of character presentation."⁵⁶ Ironically, Fox himself includes no explicit discussion about the long debate over the theory – even though in other matters he refers to T. S. Eliot himself, progenitor of the Doctrine of Impersonality!⁵⁷

Fox cites other "less impressionistic" signs that the speakers are personae, particularly with regard to the dramatic nature of the poetry found in the Song of Songs and Egyptian love songs.⁵⁸ Beyond the fact that the speakers are often those unlikely to be writing poetry, many poems "have two speakers, both of

⁵⁵Wright, *Poet in the Poem*, 48. Fox also uses the persona concept to place a decorous distance between author and poem. He refers to an Egyptian love song in which "a girl sits at home and fumes as she waits for her lover. If she is herself the author relating her immediate experience," Fox writes, "the poem is only a rather mean expression of jealousy, whereas if she is a persona, we can join the poet in looking at the young lover with humor" (254).

⁵⁶Fox, *The Songs of Songs*, 253.

⁵⁷Fox, *The Songs of Songs*, 275. Fox refers to Eliot's terminology, not to a specific text. "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is not cited in Fox's work.

⁵⁸Fox, *The Songs of Songs*, 254.

whom speak their thoughts, with neither speaker being quoted by the other.

Clearly both characters have been created and are controlled by an author who is not to be identified with either.⁵⁹ In other words, Fox observes that the presence of literary personae becomes explicitly clear in the case of dialogic or dramatic poetry.

Fox, however, views “expressive lyrics” that are not explicitly dramatic as ostensibly the voice of the historical, “real” author – instances where “the distance between speaker and poet is not perceptible,” and in which “there appears to be no reason why the speaker could not be the poet giving utterance to his own immediate experience in his own voice.”⁶⁰ In such instances “we do hear the poet’s voice, speaking to the lovers or commenting on them from a vantage point outside and above the reality of the poem.”⁶¹ Fox’s view is based largely on Ralph W. Rader, who distinguishes between “expressive lyric,” in which the poet speaks “in [his or her] own person out of the stimulus of a real situation,” and the “dramatic monologue,” in which “the poet simulates the activity of a person imagined as virtually real whom we understand as we would an ‘other’ natural person, inferring from outward act and expression to inward

⁵⁹Fox, *The Songs of Songs*, 254.

⁶⁰Fox, *The Songs of Songs*, 254.

⁶¹Fox, *The Songs of Songs*, 255.

purpose.”⁶² Without getting into a debate as to how one might delineate between the “real” voice of expressive lyric and the “virtually real” voice of dramatic monologue, it remains that Fox is either unaware of, or not concerned with addressing key literary scholars such as Eliot, Pound, Wright, Elliott, Maio, and numerous others who have articulated and supported a different theory of persona.

In any case the Song of Songs is a different thing altogether, creating “its world entirely through the words of the *dramatis personae*.”⁶³ Readers encounter this world “without preparation” (i.e., without a voice above the dramatic characters, like a narrator), having only the words of the dramatic characters as their guide to reconstructing the world of the text; as Fox observes, most verses are “too well integrated into the speech of the characters to allow us to attribute them to an external authorial voice.”⁶⁴ In short, the Song of Songs is dramatic lyric, though lacking the poetic equivalent of a narrator.

Generally speaking, the poetry of the Psalter is not explicitly dramatic as in the Song of Songs.⁶⁵ Yet like the Song of Songs, readers are thrown into the world of each psalm without preparation. Often readers must construct the

⁶²Ralph W. Rader, “The Dramatic Monologue and Related Lyric Forms,” *Critical Inquiry* 3 (1976): 150. See also Fox, *The Songs of Songs*, 254, n. 2.

⁶³Fox, *The Songs of Songs*, 255.

⁶⁴Fox, *The Songs of Songs*, 255.

⁶⁵Carleen Mandolof has shown, however, that many psalms are indeed dramatized, involving human-human, or “horizontal” dialog. See ch. 4 below.

world of the psalm based on the expressions of a single voice. It is very difficult to follow Rader and Fox and attempt to delineate psalms according to expressive lyric or dramatic monologue; the two terms ultimately identify the same creative phenomenon. As we have seen, even when poets intentionally try to eradicate any perceptible distance between themselves and the voices they create – even when they attempt to remove the mask and give utterance to their own immediate experiences in their own voice – one nonetheless encounters a literary persona.⁶⁶ Instead, we can approach the Psalter with the expectation that like the personae of Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Ugaritic verse, and like Qoheleth, wisdom, and the lovers of the Song of Songs, the poetry of the Psalter speaks to us by means of a voice – an artistically constructed literary aspect – that is properly identified as a persona and not to be equated with the historical author.

Our Bad Habit: The Psalmist in History

The identity of the psalmist is a matter of some debate among Old Testament scholars.⁶⁷ Much of the discussion has focused on psalms that explicitly employ the first-person personal pronoun; generally interpreters have not always recognized that the psalmist speaks even when the formal “I” is

⁶⁶See above, ch. 2.

⁶⁷Specific theories in addition to those noted below are numerous. For a concise summary of scholarship, see J. H. Eaton, “The Psalms and Israelite Worship,” in *Tradition and Interpretation: Essays by Members of the Society for Old Testament Study* (ed. G. W. Anderson; Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 255-60.

lacking.⁶⁸ In any case, the issue has been identified as one of the key controversies in the study of the Psalter, and despite several theories, the enigmatic psalmist continues to perplex scholars.⁶⁹ At least two factors contribute to the problem. First, identity of the speaker in a psalm is a fairly essential hermeneutical question:

In over 90 of the 150 psalms contained in the English Psalter the voice of an individual suppliant, an "I" is heard. The person who reads or sings or prays through the Psalms today wants and needs an answer to a very natural question: "Who is the 'I' who speaks in this or that psalm?" He or she may have been told the modern view that the Psalms are no longer seen as having been written by David; nor are they, for the most part, simple expressions of individual faith and experience but that they were composed for use in public worship. But these insights have served only to raise the question of the identity of the individual in a much sharper form, both for the ordinary reader of the Psalms and for the Old Testament scholar.⁷⁰

⁶⁸Mowinckel perhaps comes closest to this recognition when he mentions in a footnote that other scholars "are of course wrong in believing that personal piety in a psalm or a prayer proves that these cannot have a cultic or liturgical connexion. Both in books of common prayer and in the hymn books of the various denominations on almost every page we meet with the personal piety and religious experiences of the reformers and of the hymn writers of all ages, although we scarcely ever come across the formal 'I'. That they very often wrote their poems consciously for cultic use, is, however, a matter of plain fact." See Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (vol. 2; trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas; Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 126, n. 2.

⁶⁹See Croft, *Identity of the Individual*, 10; Eaton, "The Psalms and Israelite Worship," 255-60; John H. Hayes, *An Introduction to Old Testament Study* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 293-96; Gillingham, *Poems and Psalms*, 177; H. Wheeler Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 37.

⁷⁰Croft, *Identity of the Individual*, 11.

The question is quite natural, and thus one would expect it to form the basis for an essential aspect of the interpretation of the Psalter.

For biblical scholars, however, the answer to this question is frustrated by a second factor: the decidedly ambiguous character of the Psalter. Not only is the texture and character of Hebrew poetry ambiguous, but the psalms themselves also come to us anonymously, insofar as the scribes and editors themselves “usually obscured their own identities.”⁷¹ This historical vagueness, according to J. Alberto Soggin, is a function of the oral component of the transmission process, in which “the remembrance of the person of the author tends to become secondary,” and “the content is normally expressed in very general terms.”⁷²

Undaunted by the Psalter’s inherent ambiguity, scholars have cultivated an abundance of theories regarding the psalmist’s identity. At the turn of the twentieth century, critical psalm interpretation was accomplished in large part by assembling personal, autobiographical situations, drawn from allusions within the psalm. William H. Bellinger, Jr. has coined this approach as the

⁷¹Nancy L. DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning: The Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (Macon: Mercer, 1997), 9. See also Gillingham, *Poems and Psalms*, 177, 189; James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 23; Robert Alter, “Psalms,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987): 245, 255.

⁷²J. Alberto Soggin, *An Introduction to the History of Israel and Judah* (trans. John Bowden; Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1993), 430. The superscriptions are a noteworthy exception to the anonymity of the Psalter, although they are themselves secondary to and interpretations of the psalms they precede. See below.

“personal-historical” method.⁷³ Not surprisingly, the personal-historical method essentially defined the “psalmist” in “literal and particular” terms, as the individual historical poet:

The Psalter is a collection of religious lyrics. Lyric poetry is defined as “that which directly expressed the individual emotions of the poet”; and religious lyric poetry is the expression of those emotions and feelings as they are stirred by the thought of God and directed God-wards. This is the common characteristic of the Psalms in all their manifold variety.⁷⁴

In these words one can hear the sentiments of the Romantic aesthetic, of which equating the “psalmist” to the historical author is an inevitable consequence.

Gillingham has acknowledged that this approach, which dates to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was indeed influenced by Romanticism.⁷⁵

Even when the personal-historical method gave way to a more typological or genre-oriented method, some scholars retained the notion of a literal,

⁷³Bellinger, *Psalms*, 15-16; J. Clinton McCann, “The Book of Psalms,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible: 1 & 2 Maccabees; Introduction to Hebrew Poetry; Job; Psalms* (vol. 4; ed. Leander Keck, et. al.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1996): 643; Gillingham, *Poems and Psalms*, 174. Examples of the personal-historical method include works by W. M. L. de Wette (1823), H. G. A. Ewald (1866), H. Graetz (1882), B. Duham (1899), R. Kittel (1905), E. Balla (1912), and M. Lohr (1922), A. F. Kirkpatrick (1902), W. T. Davison and T. W. Davies (1904-6), and S. R. Driver (1915). The personal-autobiographical method is in many respects indistinguishable from pre-critical approaches to the Psalter. See Gillingham, *Poems and Psalms*, 174.

⁷⁴Alexander F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1902), x-xi; Gillingham, *Poems and Psalms*, 175. See also in particular Emil Balla, *Das Ich der Psalmen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1912). In his *Introduction*, Hayes notes that “this approach has scrutinized the psalms in search of the piety and genius of individual poets who sought to give expression to their inward feelings and emotional experiences” (288).

⁷⁵Gillingham, *Poems and Psalms*, 174.

historical, individual as the “psalmist” who speaks in the psalm. Form critic *par excellence* Hermann Gunkel emphatically supports this conception of the psalmist:

the explanation of the “I” as the poet is so natural, even self-evident, that any deviation from it should be perceived as a tasteless error and should be resisted with all one’s strength. In fact, in every other worldly and religious poetry, the “I” is always the poet with very few exceptions.⁷⁶

Of course, Gunkel could not have predicted that in a few short years, literary critics and the poets themselves would assert with matched passion exactly the opposite view. With the unfair advantage of hindsight, however, we might conclude that this passage is decidedly contestable.

Gunkel’s assertion in his *Introduction* was in some sense a reaction to another major theory of the psalmist’s identity, which we may term the corporate or community approach. This perspective was urged as early as 1888 by Rudolf Smend, and equated the “I” of the Psalter to the historical community of Israel.⁷⁷ Rather than an allegory or personification, the corporate “I” in the Psalter

⁷⁶Hermann Gunkel, *Introduction to the Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel* (trans. James D. Nogalski; Macon: Mercer, 1998), 122.

Unfortunately, this historical “I” of the Psalter remained elusive for Gunkel. He concedes that only the “class” of individual rather than the “specific person” is recoverable, and that the *Sitz em Leben* of the individual is “not so easy to recognize, since the poetry often proceeds with general expressions” (123).

⁷⁷Rudolf Smend, “Über das Ich der Psalmen,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 8 (1888): 49-147. See also Gillingham, *Poems and Psalms*, 176; Robinson, *Corporate Personality*, 37-39; Eaton, “Psalms and Israelite Worship,” 255. For a survey of scholarship on historical-critical approaches to the “I” of the Psalter, see Marko Marttila’s *Collective Reinterpretation in the Psalms: A Study of the Redaction History of the Psalter* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 1-36.

represents a uniquely primitive and Semitic category of thought – distinct from the modern “antithesis of the collective and the individual” – in which the individual maintains such a strong collective sense that he or she “can never wholly detach himself from the social horizon.”⁷⁸

This corporately-minded psalmist bears some connection to Sigmund Mowinckel’s cult-functional approach to the Psalter.⁷⁹ In *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, Mowinckel argues that

The creating of the psalms differs from what we moderns instinctively expect from poetry. The experiences and emotions to which the psalms give expression were not only those of an individual, but such common events, general experiences and feeling as custom demanded in the particular situation. The poet who wrote a psalm for use, for instance at the purification rites, placed himself in a common situation and expressed what all were expected to feel and accordingly say.⁸⁰

In short the “psalmist,” still defined in terms of the historical author, simply moved into the temple. Psalm composition was the work of the temple singers, who, to use Mowinckel’s language, were “the real ‘literary men’ and poets” of the day.⁸¹ As Gillingham rephrases the expression, they were “professional

⁷⁸Robinson, *Corporate Personality*, 38. Though he maintains the corporate view, Robinson acknowledges that the psalmist “is indeed always an individual and not a syndicate,” and that “it is also unnatural for a psalmist consciously to imagine himself as a community” (38).

⁷⁹On this connection see Robinson, *Corporate Personality*, 37-38. See also Gillingham, *Poems and Psalms*, 177-80.

⁸⁰Mowinckel, *Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, 126.

⁸¹Mowinckel, *Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, 94.

poets, gifted in the conventions of liturgy.”⁸² Mowinckel does not deny that psalms may contain a “personal element,” but maintains that the utility of a psalm was primarily for the community of the cult and the court to which it was connected.⁸³

One may also note, however, that Mowinckel explicitly argues for the practice of a historical author writing a psalm from a constructed perspective – in order that it might be “used” in a cultic setting by another whose situation or audience corresponded to the perspective of the psalm. In other words, Mowinckel posits an aesthetically constructed literary voice not necessarily to be equated with the historical author: a persona. The excerpt above comes from a chapter entitled “Traditionalism and Personality in the Psalms.” One cannot help but notice the ideological connection to T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in which the poet becomes a vessel for an aesthetic tradition.⁸⁴ Ironically, Mowinckel opens the door for the persona theory in the

⁸²Gillingham, *Poems and Psalms*, 181.

⁸³Mowinckel, *Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, 126; Gillingham, *Poems and Psalms*, 180. Gillingham notes that scholars from the 1960s onward continued Mowinckel’s cult-functional approach, but adapted it to include more “personal and independent liturgical activity,” such as professional composition of psalms for private or individual use. The shift in perspective was predicated in part by the benefits and influence of comparative studies by German scholars (184-85).

⁸⁴Mowinckel writes in the second volume of *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship* that in “ancient Israel personality with the quality of originality and uniqueness was neither an ideal nor a reality. The personality became conscious of itself through the common experiences and emotions in which the Israelite entirely merged” (126). This description, which Mowinckel employs in connection to the

Psalter, even as he addresses the question of the psalmist in wholly historical terms.

The psalmist takes center stage in Steven J. L. Croft's *The Identity of the Individual in the Psalms*. One benefit of Croft's work is that it documents the voluminous debate about whether this or that psalmist is "a Levite in exile in northern Israel," or an Israelite falsely accused, or the king "in a field campaign" or other situation of war.⁸⁵ He succinctly summarizes these specific historical reconstructions of the psalmist into three basic types: "one who is unjustly accused, or a sick man, or the king."⁸⁶

Croft's goal is to provide a thorough historical reconstruction of the psalmist. Essentially, Croft maintains that the Psalter is not a collection of "autobiographical accounts of personal experience but liturgies composed for the use of certain categories of persons in certain types of situations in the temple cult."⁸⁷ His reconstruction is therefore "based upon, and further substantiates" Mowinckel's theory of psalm composition, which according to Croft is accepted by most scholars in the field.⁸⁸ Like Mowinckel, Croft shifts the spotlight on to

historical psalm composer, is similar to T. S. Eliot's description of the historical poet, whose "impersonality" is the result of acting as a vessel through which the tradition of society and past poets can move.

⁸⁵See Croft, *Identity of the Individual*, 29, 32, 174, and throughout.

⁸⁶Croft, *Identity of the Individual*, 13.

⁸⁷Croft, *Identity of the Individual*, 12.

⁸⁸Croft, *Identity of the Individual*, 12-13.

the temple, reconstructing the psalmist in terms of historical individuals connected to the cult: the king, the ordinary worshiper, ministers of the cult, cultic prophets, wisdom teachers, and temple singers.⁸⁹ The temple then becomes a kind of sociocultural exchange point for traditions of the Psalter, a “medium for the transmission of the spiritual traditions” of 1) the actual authors of the psalms (temple poets, cultic prophets, wisdom teachers); 2) the performers who “deliver” the psalm in worship (the king, private person, or cultic minister); and 3) the congregation, who “would feed into, and be fed by” the contributions of the composers and performers.⁹⁰ The activity of the congregation feeds back into the tradition of psalmody, which in turn serves as the inspiration source for psalm composers.⁹¹ Croft’s diagram illustrates the complex cycle:

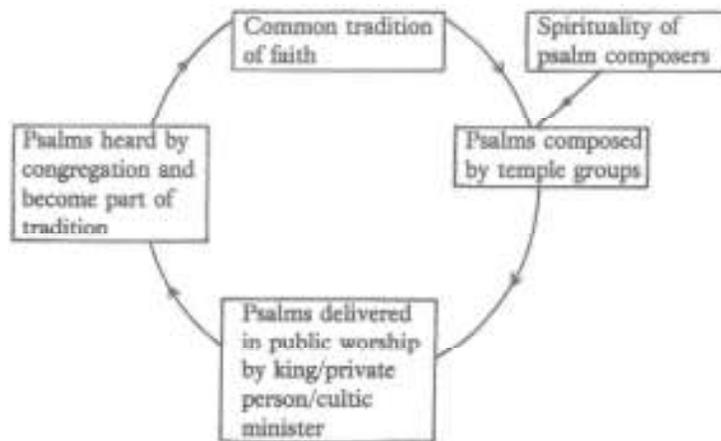


Figure 1: Croft's Cycle of Psalm Composition

⁸⁹Croft, *Identity of the Individual*, 12, 175-77.

⁹⁰Croft, *Identity of the Individual*, 175-77.

⁹¹Croft, *Identity of the Individual*, 177-78. For illustration, see 178.

In sum, Croft proposes a cyclical process of transmission in which the “psalmist” is typically a functionary of the cult.

The interpretive strategies of Gunkel, Mowinckel, Croft, and even the Romantic-like personal-historical critics, approach the question of the psalmist primarily as a matter of historical authorship. Of course, Gunkel and Mowinckel in particular provided significant advances in our understanding of the general historical settings in which psalmody took shape, even if their psalmists finally remain at large. Not surprisingly, then, the influence of these key scholars has gone a long way toward shaping subsequent scholarship on the Psalter. Indeed, modern study of the Psalter has generally equated the “psalmist” of the text with the historical poet, whoever that may have been.

Standing on the edifice of postmodern biblical criticism, the psalmist faces extinction. This predicament is not at all surprising, given the current trend of eroding confidence in historical-critical reconstructions of the biblical text.

Elizabeth Tanner recently brought the question of the psalmist into sharp focus:

Do any of us really know who this “psalmist” is? Is it as Mowinckel presented it, an ancient temple singer who wrote these prayer songs for use in the cult? Is it as Gunkel and Gerstenberger suggest, a representative Israelite who may or may not be from the temple circles? Is it some nebulous third person embodiment of humanity? We certainly often portray this psalmist as the one who crafted the words of the psalm. Yet we also portray the psalmist as the one who speaks or prays these words. We also portray the psalmist as the one going through the experiences and emotions the psalm emotes.⁹²

⁹²Elizabeth Tanner, “Learning Not to ‘Fix’ the Gap: A Different Way of Hearing the Prayers for Help” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the

Tanner then explores the possibilities of a “post-psalmist” world, in which biblical critics send the psalmist “away to retire peacefully with J and Q.”⁹³ Tanner’s objection is that the history of scholarship has created a psalmist that is essentially “pre-canonical,” a historical figure standing behind a given psalm. This historical psalmist suffers the same fate as the Yahwhist or the Priestly writer or the author of Q: such a psalmist can never be fully recovered or justified. As such, Tanner considers this psalmist “our bad habit.”⁹⁴

The Promising Sign of Hearing Voices: Carleen Mandolfo on Dialogic Psalms

Carleen Mandolfo’s *God in the Dock*, a 2002 study on individual psalms of protest or grievance (i.e., laments), suggests a different way to think about the psalmist. Mandolfo begins with the long-recognized feature of individual laments, in which the psalm exhibits a tonal shift from lament or complaint to praise or thanksgiving. What scholars have not sufficiently recognized, however, is that this tonal shift is “at times accompanied by a shift in voice, from first person to third person, respectively.”⁹⁵ This complementary shift in voice forms the focus of Mandolfo’s study.

national SBL. Philadelphia, Pa., November 21, 2005), 4. See also Gillingham, 176-77.

⁹³Tanner, “Gap,” 5-6.

⁹⁴Tanner, “Gap,” 6.

⁹⁵Carleen Mandolfo, *God in the Dock: Dialogic Tension in the Psalms of Lament* (London: Sheffield, 2002), 1.

Through an analysis of Psalms 4; 7; 9; 12; 25; 27; 28; 30-32; 55; 102; and 130, Mandolfo provides new insight into the dialogic dimension present within the Psalter. This insight is accomplished by sober attention to grammatical indicators, specifically related to the aspect of person and number, as well as shifts in content.⁹⁶ In many instances, Mandolfo observes the insertion of “a third person, didactic voice,” and horizontal, human-human dialogue.⁹⁷ Her study provides a way to make sense of difficult and conflicting movements within many psalms. Understood as a multi-voiced dialogue, the internal tension of these psalms is not glossed over, explained, or otherwise reduced, but highlighted as the creative means by which “members of Israelite society struggled to express their understanding of YHWH in a way that was loyal, yet authentic and attentive to the often ‘unfair’ challenges life presented.”⁹⁸ Thus the multiple voices Mandolfo demonstrates in the aforementioned psalms are engaged in a theological dialogue of testimony and counter-testimony: on the one hand is Israel’s normative theological position, with Yahweh as judge of a well-ordered creation (ultimately expressed in the idea of Yahweh as king); on the other hand is a voice that raises doubts about this theological position and

⁹⁶Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 7, 28-103.

⁹⁷See Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 28-103.

⁹⁸Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 3.

whose “experience of YHWH has not aligned with her expectations.”⁹⁹

Mandolfo calls this dialogue “a theology of paradox” and suggests that it perhaps “comes closest to Israel’s most authentic experience of its deity.”¹⁰⁰

A dialogic reading illustrates the affinity of these psalms for dramatic performance in liturgical settings and does so in a way that also invites the didactic function of the psalm into the cultic setting.¹⁰¹ At the same time, Mandolfo leaves open the question of origin regarding these shifts in voicing:

Whether the source for this dialogism can be found in the ancient worship practice for which they were surely composed cannot be determined for this study. It is certainly possible that multi-voicing is a literary convention, and not part of some ancient performative context in which liturgical participants spoke or sang these voices antiphonally. Still, at the least, these voices represent different consciousnesses; and the theological upshot of a dialogic reading is profoundly different than one that attributes the different voices to one speaker.¹⁰²

In short, Mandolfo shows that attention to voice in the psalms has hermeneutical significance. Although Mandolfo typically uses the terms *speaker* and *voice*, at one point she does equate these terms with the term *persona*.¹⁰³ Although she

⁹⁹Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 134-46. Mandolfo echoes Brueggemann in terms of his theological model of “testimony/counter-testimony,” which according to Mandolfo provides a useful blueprint for understanding the dialogic dimension of the psalms in her study (143, 137). See also Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 5.

¹⁰⁰Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 134.

¹⁰¹Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 5, 11.

¹⁰²Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 2.

¹⁰³Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 29.

does not employ literary-critical works that deal specifically with the theory of literary persona such as Wright, Elliott, and Maio, she does engage in a useful dialog with the socio-linguistic theories of Mikhail M. Bakhtin.¹⁰⁴ Mandolfo's study is concerned specifically with select multi-voiced psalms, only one of which coincides with the present inquiry (Psalm 102). She does document the scattered interest interpreters have occasionally taken in this regard, but characterizes the subject as essentially ignored. The insight and hermeneutical utility of Mandolfo's *God in the Dock* suggests that analysis of the aspect of voice in the Psalter requires further inquiry.

The Dreamer in London: The Psalmist in the Psalm

The identity of the psalmist has for much of modern scholarship been conceived as an essentially *historical* problem. Tanner may be right: such a quest for the historical psalmist may indeed prove futile. Regardless, I submit that rather than retiring the psalmist, it is appropriate to redefine the psalmist. If anything, this project illustrates the simple observation that the "psalmist" is not a historical problem but a literary feature. The psalmist that readers encounter is the *psalmist in the psalm*, a literary voice artistically created by the historical author(s)/editor(s). The psalmist is a literary voice *of* the text, rather than a historical author *behind* the text. To say it plainly, the psalmist is a persona. Whether or not the historical author is the king, a pious individual, professional

¹⁰⁴Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 156-96.

poet, or cult functionary is an important and related, but ultimately different question. Thus the empirical poets and the literary voices of the Psalter are not the same thing; to treat the question of the psalmist as a matter of historical inquiry is something like looking for Chaucer's Dreamer in London.

The persona concept has not been completely lost on biblical scholars. Interpreters like Dijk-Hemmes, Brenner, Mariaselvam, Fox, Polk, and Mandolfo are not alone in their efforts to identify personae in the biblical text. In fact, the persona concept has most recently become something of a trend: an entire session was devoted to the subject at the 2006 National SBL Meeting in Washington, D. C.¹⁰⁵ Yet despite all the interest, biblical scholarship has paid little attention to the literary personae of the largest corpus of poetry in the Bible. Ironically, it would seem that apart from Mandolfo (who does not specifically develop the theory of literary persona in dialog with her study), scholars have utilized the theory in every place save the most obvious.

On the whole, biblical scholars who do utilize the concept of a literary persona are ostensibly unaware of the incredibly complex and voluminous conversation regarding literary voice that has spanned – and even helped

¹⁰⁵The Biblical Hebrew Poetry session theme was entitled *Poetics of Persona*. Papers included, for example, David J. A. Clines, "How Many Voices Does It Take to Perform Isaiah 40?," Naama Zahavi-Ely, "The Poetics of Ambiguous Personae in Biblical Hebrew Poetry," Rolf Jacobson, "I Hear a Voice I Had Not Known," and Kenneth W. Shoemaker, "Psalm 137 Reexamined with a View to Voice" (papers presented at the annual meeting of the national SBL, Washington, D. C., November 20, 2006).

precipitate – multiple literary eras. The fact that scholarly work on biblical poetry remains largely unacquainted with broader work on poetry is a consequence of working in isolation.¹⁰⁶ In sum, the dearth of persona-critical content on the Psalter and the lack of interaction with core works related to the persona theory are striking.

The Year Hamlet Killed Claudius: The Imaginary World of the Psalmist-Persona

An analysis of the psalmist-persona requires some inquiry into the landscape of the Psalter itself. What is the nature of the world in which the psalmist-of-the-text speaks?

While it may seem an exercise in stating the obvious that the Psalter is in fact *poetry*, there is considerable debate on this issue. The catalyst for this debate is that “Hebrew poetry” is extremely difficult to define with any consistency. The Israelites themselves left no definition to work from: there are no extant texts dealing with Hebrew poetic theory nor any Hebrew nomenclature corresponding to “poetry” or “prose.”¹⁰⁷ If the ancient bards wrote poetry, apparently they did not write about it. The Masoretes, furthermore, did not as a

¹⁰⁶Petersen and Richards, *Hebrew Poetry*, 2, 6, 8.

¹⁰⁷James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 69; Petersen and Richards, *Hebrew Poetry*, 3; James L. Kugel, *The Great Poems of the Bible: A Reader’s Companion with New Translations* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 25. Cf. Tremper Longman III, “Biblical Poetry,” in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993): 80.

rule distinguish between poetry and prose in their scribal activity, preventing a clear understanding of how the poems may have been structured.¹⁰⁸ Scholarly attempts to recreate line forms are inconsistent and exhibit significant variation.¹⁰⁹

Not surprisingly, critical attempts to define Hebrew poetry are manifold, ranging from the impressionistic to the mechanical.¹¹⁰ For much of the history of critical scholarship, attempts have centered on parallelism and metrics, a direction influenced early on by Robert Lowth and his desire to characterize Hebrew poetry according to its own unique qualities—in segregation from the conventions and qualities of poetry from other cultures.¹¹¹ As we have already noted, this isolation, while a positive step toward recognizing the value of Hebrew poetry on its own merit, nonetheless contributed to a legacy of biblical

¹⁰⁸Petersen and Richards, *Hebrew Poetry*, 4. Petersen and Richards note that an exception to this rule is when tradition had already preserved a text in stichometric writing or in some other fashion.

¹⁰⁹Gillingham, *Poems and Psalms*, 19.

¹¹⁰For a sample of different definitions, cf. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 30-35; Gillingham, *Poems and Psalms*, 21-28; Freedman, *Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy*, 2-3; Freedman, "Another Look at Biblical Hebrew Poetry," in *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry* (ed. Elaine R. Follis; JSOTS 20; Sheffield: Sheffield, 1987): 11-28; Moshe J. Bernstein, "Poetry and Prose in 4Q371-373: Narrative and Poetic Composition," in *Liturgical Perspectives: Prayer and Poetry in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. Esther G. Chazon, Ruth Clements, and Avital Pinnick; Leiden: Boston, Brill, 2003): 20-21.

¹¹¹Robert Lowth, "Lecture III: The Hebrew poetry is Metrical," in *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (vol. 1; trans. G. Gregory; London: J. Johnson, 1787), 35-73; Kugel, *Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 12; Gillingham, *Poems and Psalms*, 14; Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 22.

scholarship that was not generally informed by broader scholarship on poetry.¹¹²

According to Fokkelman, up until the mid-1960s “Old Testament scholars entertained a rather inadequate view of Hebrew poetics” in particular and a “seriously flawed definition of poetry” in general.¹¹³

Two inherent difficulties have contributed to the quandary over Hebrew poetics. First, there is no clear or consistent key to the formal features of Hebrew poetry. The quest for a comprehensive solution to meter and poetic structure has proven futile, according to some scholars.¹¹⁴ Second, biblical poetry and prose overlap. There simply are no consistent, clear-cut criteria for distinguishing between them, and each may potentially share many features of the other.¹¹⁵

David N. Freedman suggests that while there is indeed some overlap, a distinction can and should be made. The difference, he suggests, is “often quantitative rather than qualitative,” a matter of “degree rather than kind.”¹¹⁶

Freedman goes on to ask a key question: If poetry and prose cannot be delimited with precision, why bother anyway?

¹¹²See Petersen and Richards, *Hebrew Poetry*, 6, 8, and the Introduction above.

¹¹³Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 22. Cf. George Buchanan Gray, *The Forms of Hebrew Poetry* (New York: Ktav, 1972), 3.

¹¹⁴Freedman, *Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy*, 6-7.

¹¹⁵Gillingham, *Poems and Psalms*, 19; Freedman, *Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy*, 4, 17; Bernstein, “Poetry and Prose in 4Q371-373,” 20; Kugel, *Great Poems of the Bible*, 25.

¹¹⁶Freedman, *Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy*, 2.

The answer is that in spite of some blending of types and blurring of the lines of demarcation, prose and poetry are basically two different ways of using language. Each has its own rules of operation, and it is obligatory to understand each category according to its own pattern, even if the dividing line is not always certain.¹¹⁷

In other words, the distinction is important because it has hermeneutical consequences. According to his “own experience as a reader,” Robert Alter contends that poetry “is an instrument for conveying densely patterned meanings, and sometimes contradictory meanings, that are not readily conveyable through other kinds of discourse.”¹¹⁸

In any case, the problem of describing poetry as a literary phenomenon is an old problem and not unique to biblical studies.¹¹⁹ The debate ensues in literary critical studies at large: what, exactly, makes poetry *poetry*? Barbara Smith has devoted a monograph to the question, attempting to develop a conception of poetry that distinguishes it from and relates it to “both nonpoetic discourse and other artforms.”¹²⁰ The distinguishing characteristic of poetry, Smith argues, is its “fictiveness,” or mimetic quality. Smith’s description applies to poetry “in the broad sense bequeathed by Aristotle, that is, to refer to the

¹¹⁷Freedman, *Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy*, 2.

¹¹⁸Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 113.

¹¹⁹Petersen and Richards, *Hebrew Poetry*, 2; Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *On the Margins of Discourse: The Relation of Literature to Language* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978), 40-43.

¹²⁰Smith, *Margins of Discourse*, 14.

general class of verbal artworks."¹²¹ Fictive discourse, over against "natural discourse" (utterances that constitute historical events), describes poetry as an imaginary world of the text that is essentially representative of but distinct from the historical world in some manner:

Shakespeare composed the play, let us say, in 1603, but in what year did Hamlet kill Claudius? In one sense, he kills Claudius every time the play is performed, whether in 1603 or 1970; but in another sense the slaying of Claudius is an act that never did, never will, and never can occur *in the historical world*.¹²²

Smith concedes a significant caveat, namely that her approach is "not intended to serve as a solution to the problems of definition . . . but, rather, as a diversion from them."¹²³ There are many "beguiling propositions" that complicate the mimetic aspect of poetry, and thus Smith's approach.¹²⁴

Smith does not solve the riddle of poetry's definition; neither is that our goal. Smith does, however, clarify the nature of the psalm in relation to the psalmist, the created world of the text in relation to the persona it presents.¹²⁵ In this regard, Smith's conception of poetry is instructive, and one that is echoed in some recent biblical scholarship. As an illustration of his conception of biblical

¹²¹Smith, *Margins of Discourse*, 14.

¹²²Smith, *Margins of Discourse*, 24. On the mimetic nature of the biblical text, see Adele Reinhartz, *"Why Ask My Name?" Anonymity and Identity in Biblical Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 10-12.

¹²³Smith, *Margins of Discourse*, 45.

¹²⁴Smith, *Margins of Discourse*, 50.

¹²⁵See also Todorov, *Introduction to Poetics*, 38-40.

poetry, Fokkelman analyzes Psalm 113. His method is essentially to describe “the lyrical world evoked” by the poem.¹²⁶ He later cautions readers to follow his method of poetic interpretation:

We allow our energy and attention to be sucked up by the historical world that is connected to the origin of the text, and somewhere hides the cause of its being written. That reality, or the reality of whichever century, has a different mode of being than a story as an accretive but finite string of language signs. Do not be tempted to speculate on “how it really was,” there and then, so far away and so long ago, in that utterly alien culture. The poem accommodates these far horizons in its own way, but never exclusively consists of referencing them. Through the medium of our attention and our act of reading, it constructs its own world in words, which has only a tenuous and indirect contact with what is irretrievably past and gone.¹²⁷

Walter Brueggemann refers to the formation of the Hebrew Bible as an “act of imaginative remembering,” which he later identifies as the “clue to valuing the Bible as a trustworthy voice of faith while still taking seriously our best critical learning.”¹²⁸ Brueggemann maintains that this “traditional process of retelling” is a canonical process that does not intend to linger over old happenings, but intends to recreate a rooted, lively world of meaning.¹²⁹ While Brueggemann is here speaking more broadly of the biblical text, his comment nonetheless supports the basic conception of a psalm as an imaginative, literary world. Both

¹²⁶Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 20.

¹²⁷Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 207-8.

¹²⁸Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 8.

¹²⁹Brueggemann, *Introduction*, 8.

in terms of the process of canonization and the act of reading, a psalm evokes and constitutes an imaginative literary world. As Alter explains, in the hands of the Hebrew poets the psalm “became an instrument for expressing . . . a distinctive, sometimes radically new, sense of time, space, history, creation, and the character of individual destiny.”¹³⁰

Admittedly, the foregoing consideration of Smith, Freedman, Brueggemann, and Alter does not bring us any closer to distinguishing poetry from any other literary art form. The “fictiveness” or mimetic nature of poetry does not formally demarcate a psalm from, for example, the Book of Ruth, or any other prose text that an interpreter could feasibly classify as a verbal artwork. The mimetic nature of poetry however, does provide the necessary conceptual framework for a persona-critical reading of the Psalter’s poetry, insofar as it provides the hermeneutical point of reference for a psalm’s persona. The “fictiveness” of a poem necessarily involves its various elements, including the speaker. Thus a poem’s speaker is created, part of a verbal artwork, and may be interpreted accordingly. In sum, while the “imaginary world” of the text is not unique to poetry, it is the medium through which the reader experiences, and ultimately forms his or her understanding of, the persona.

Poetry, however evasive the exact lines of demarcation may be, is in fact a suitable term for those texts crafted on the “formal” end of biblical Hebrew’s

¹³⁰Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 113.

stylistic continuum.¹³¹ Despite the inherent difficulties, scholars widely recognize the presence of poetry in the Hebrew Bible – forty percent by one estimate – and the Psalter is, of course, the clearest candidate.¹³² As poetry, a psalm is an imaginative literary world that a reader engages through the act of reading.

Rousing the Slumbering Book: The Canonical World of the Psalmist-Persona

If a psalm is a poem, then the Psalter is a collection of poetry with an overarching hermeneutical design. Recent developments in scholarship suggest that the Psalter is a purposeful arrangement of poetry that readers may interpret canonically. Scholars have come to emphasize the so-called “shape and shaping” of the Psalter in which the historical process of canonization has resulted in a final form that is hermeneutically “greater than the sum of its parts.”¹³³

Brueggemann considers this new scholarly focus a fairly fresh insight:

For the most part, Psalm study has considered the Psalms *ad seriatim* without reference to the placement of the Psalms in relationship to each

¹³¹See Kugel, *Great Poems of the Bible*, 25.

¹³²Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 1; W. H. Bellinger, Jr., *The Testimony of Poets and Sages: The Psalms and Wisdom Literature* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1998), 5-6; Kugel, *Great Poems of the Bible*, 25; Adele Berlin, “Introduction to Hebrew Poetry,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible: 1 & 2 Maccabees; Introduction to Hebrew Poetry; Job; Psalms* (vol. 4; ed. Leander Keck, et. al.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1996): 302; Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 111; Kugel, *Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 69.

¹³³See J. Clinton McCann, ed., *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1993), in particular David M. Howard, Jr., “Editorial Activity in the Psalter: A State-of-the-Field Survey,” 52-70; DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 2.

other. More recent study has proposed that there are patterns of arrangement of the Psalms. . . . It is likely that such canonical investigations will continue to refine our awareness of the theological shaping of the tradition of the Psalter.¹³⁴

Gerald Wilson is often credited as the progenitor of this new approach, whose work has begun to illuminate the editorial purpose of the Psalter and the message it conveys as a whole.¹³⁵ Wilson's early work focuses in part on shaping activity at the so-called "seams" of the Psalter — the "editorially induced" divisions of Books I-IV and the existence of "thematic correspondences between

¹³⁴Brueggemann, *Introduction*, 290. See also J. Clinton McCann, Jr., "Books I-III and the Editorial Purpose of the Hebrew Psalter," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* (ed. J. Clinton McCann, Jr.; Sheffield: Sheffield, 1993), 91; Patrick D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); 14.

¹³⁵See Gerald Henry Wilson, "Evidence of Editorial Division in the Hebrew Psalter," *Vetus Testamentum* 34 (1984): 336-52; *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1985), 9, 11, and throughout; "The Use of 'Untitled' Psalms in the Hebrew Psalter," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 97 (1985): 404-13; "The Use of the Royal Psalms at the 'Seams' of the Hebrew Psalter," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 35 (1986): 85-94; "The Shape of the Book of Psalms," *Interpretation* 46 (1992): 129-42; "Understanding the Purposeful Arrangement of Psalms in the Psalter: Pitfalls and Promise," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (ed. J. Clinton McCann, Jr.; Sheffield: Sheffield, 1993), 42-51; "Shaping the Psalter: A Consideration of Editorial Linkage in the Book of Psalms," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (ed. J. Clinton McCann, Jr.; Sheffield: Sheffield, 1993), 72-82; "King, Messiah, and the Reign of God: Revisiting the Royal Psalms and the Shape of the Psalter," in *Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception* (ed. Peter W. Flint *et al*; Boston: Brill, 2005), 391-46; "The Structure of the Psalter," in *Interpreting the Psalms* (ed. David G. Firth and Philip S. Johnston; Downers Grove: IVP, 2005), 229-46. DeClaisé-Walford acknowledges that Wilson "convincingly demonstrates that the Psalter evidences purposeful editing" and tells a "story" of theological significance for the ancient exilic community (*Reading from the Beginning*, 5).

the beginning and ending” of some of those books.¹³⁶ Taken together, Wilson found in these seams “editorial activity which sought to impart a meaningful arrangement which encompassed the whole.”¹³⁷ He concludes that Books I-III give the impression “of a covenant remembered, but a covenant *failed*.”¹³⁸ At the conclusion of Book III the Davidic covenant – introduced to readers in Psalm 2 – “has come to nothing,” and thus “the combination of the three books concludes with the anguished cry of the Davidic descendants.”¹³⁹ Wilson sees in Book IV “the editorial ‘center’ of the final form of the Hebrew Psalter,” which functions to “answer” the problem of the failure of the Davidic monarchy.¹⁴⁰ The answer, namely that Yahweh is king and refuge for the post-exilic community, is also a prominent theme in Book V.¹⁴¹

Thanks to Wilson, scholars have now begun to recognize a broad hermeneutical coherence in the Psalter:

The Psalter is shaped traditionally into five books which narrate a history of ancient Israel. Books One and Two celebrate the reigns of David and Solomon; Book Three laments the dark days of oppression during the divided kingdoms and the Babylonian exile; and books Four and Five look forward to and rejoice in Israel’s restoration to the land and in the reign of

¹³⁶Wilson, *Editing*, 199.

¹³⁷Wilson, *Editing*, 199.

¹³⁸Wilson, *Editing*, 199 (emphasis original).

¹³⁹Wilson, *Editing*, 213.

¹⁴⁰Wilson, *Editing*, 215.

¹⁴¹Wilson, *Editing*, 227.

YHWH as king. With the surety of the story of the Psalter . . . , the postexilic Israelite community could continue to exist as an identifiable identity in a world it no longer controlled.¹⁴²

Details regarding the forging of the Psalter's final shape (or even the smaller collections on which it is based) are lost.¹⁴³ History, however, has left a few clues. Available evidence suggests that the process of forging the final shape of the Psalter did not draw to a close until the end of the first century CE.¹⁴⁴ This

¹⁴²DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 5; see also *Introduction*, 56-72. See also James L. Crenshaw, *The Psalms: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 98-99; Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms of the Life of Faith* (ed. Patrick D. Miller; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 213. Other scholars detect an emphasis on Torah piety in the final shaping of the Psalter. See, for example, James L. Mays, "The Place of the Torah-Psalms in the Psalter," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 (1987): 3-12; Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1965), 250-58. On the basis of lack of evidence, Roger N. Whybray rejects the theory of the purposeful arrangement of the Psalter outright. See *Reading the Psalms as a Book* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 119-24.

¹⁴³DeClaissé-Walford, *Introduction*, 36, 43.

¹⁴⁴Evidence from New Testament references (1 Cor 14:21; Matt 7:12; Luke 24:27, 44), *The Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach*, Josephus' *Against Apion*, the Babylonian Talmud, and manuscripts found at Qumran suggest that the process of the canonization of the Hebrew Bible, which began during the five centuries leading up to the Common Era, did not crystallize until the first and second centuries CE. Evidence suggests that Books I-III became fixed prior to Books IV-V. See DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 15-20; Jean-Marie Auwers, *La Composition Littéraire du Psautier: Un Etat de la Question* (Paris: Gabalda, 2000); Gerald Henry Wilson, "A First Century CE Date for the Closing of the Book of Psalms?" *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 28 (2000): 102-10; Wilson, *Editing*, 121; William Lee Holladay, *The Psalms Through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 101, 134-46; Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51-100* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 1.

final forging began as early as the fourth century BCE.¹⁴⁵ In between, of course, lies the post-exilic community. Thus it is not surprising that the catalyst for the final shape of the Psalter was the historical circumstances of the post-exilic community:

What was the hermeneutical underpinning of the story of the Psalter? The postexilic Israelite community was vassal to one immense empire after another – the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans. The people could not continue as a separate, identifiable entity in the only form they had known – as a nation with an independent king and court. The days of the Davidic monarchy were gone forever. Therefore, the key to survival was to transcend traditional ideas about nationhood and recognize YHWH as king over the new “religious nation” of Israel.¹⁴⁶

Thus the “story” of the Psalter carries a message of survival, predicated by a redefining of the post-exilic community’s conception of itself.¹⁴⁷ In some sense the Psalter, and in particular Book IV, is a performative evolution in the identity of a community.¹⁴⁸ This evolution is primarily theological: the Psalter asks, “If

¹⁴⁵DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 26.

¹⁴⁶DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 29. See also James A. Sanders, “Adaptable for Life: The Nature and Function of Canon,” in *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text: Canon as Paradigm* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 18.

¹⁴⁷Philip Davies calls this final shaping process a “massive exercise in self-definition.” See *In Search of “Ancient Israel”* (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1992), 116. See also DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 29; Walter Brueggemann, *Israel’s Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 13-15; Sanders, “Adaptable for Life,” 18.

¹⁴⁸By *performative* I mean to suggest that the Psalter in some sense functions as a kind of illocutionary act, in the J. L. Austin sense. In other words, “the text shapes community as much as community shapes text” (DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 6). DeClaissé-Walford is here referring to the dynamic canonization process described by Sanders. See Sanders, “Adaptable for Life,” 11-39; *Canon and Community*, 21-45. For a detailed definition and

our Davidic/Solomonic kingdom is lost, then who are we?" and answers, "We are the community that takes refuge in Yahweh, who was our refuge in the days of Moses and who is our king in the present."

The shaping of Israel's traditional cultic literature in this manner means that the psalms themselves were recast, functionally and hermeneutically. The loss of the temple worship, which Mowinckel and others have shown factored quite heavily in the production and use of psalms, required "that these performance pieces intended for communal worship came to be regarded as private prayers and were used instead as models for the personal prayers of the faithful."¹⁴⁹ As the final shaping of the Psalter responds to the problem of "extreme cultural dislocation," an individual psalm finally participates in a larger hermeneutical structure that is not necessarily consonant with the individual psalm's original purpose.¹⁵⁰ Thus in the adaptation of the individual

explanation of "performative" language, see John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962). For a sociological explanation of how discourse shapes community, see Carol A. Newsom, *The Self as Symbolic Space: Constructing Identity and Community at Qumran* (Boston: Brill, 2004), 6-12, and throughout.

¹⁴⁹Gerald Henry Wilson, *Psalms: Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 26. See also Eugene Ulrich, "The Notion and Definition of Canon," in *The Canon Debate* (ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 24-25; Sanders, *Canon and Community*, 22. According to Sanders, "repetition of a community value in a context other than of its 'original' provenance . . . introduces the possibility, some would say the necessity, of *resignification* of that value to some limited extent" (22).

¹⁵⁰Wilson, *Psalms*, 26. See also Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 521; Joseph P. Brennan,

psalms, the text becomes multivalent in character.¹⁵¹ In the final shape of the Psalter a given psalm achieves hermeneutical significance beyond the scope of the cultic system.¹⁵²

These new insights into the shape and shaping of the Psalter lead Nancy DeClaissé-Walford to conclude that Psalter scholarship has moved beyond the diachronic methodologies of Gunkel, Mowinckel, and Claus Westermann. Without becoming entangled in the debate over the current status of various historical-critical methods (and remaining open to the benefits of their analyses), we may nonetheless acknowledge that a new branch of investigation has come to fruition in the study of the Psalter – one that is more synchronic in character.

In terms of methodology, this new approach is primarily canonical. The study of the shape and shaping of the Psalter identifies the two major strands of the canonical-critical method. On one hand, the final shape of the text is the focus of “canon criticism” in the tradition of Brevard Childs. The historical communities and circumstances involved in the shaping of the text, on the other hand, is the focus of “canonical criticism,” an approach primarily associated with

“Some Hidden Harmonies in the Fifth Book of Psalms,” in *Essays in Honor of Joseph P. Brennan* (ed. Robert F. McNamara; New York: Saint Bernard’s Seminary, 1976): 127.

¹⁵¹Sanders, *Canon and Community*, 24.

¹⁵²See Gillingham, *Poems and Psalms*, 187-89; Bellinger, *Psalms*, 29.

James A. Sanders.¹⁵³ Thus the basic difference between these two approaches is that the former considers the historical process of canonization unrecoverable (or at least recoverable only on an exceedingly speculative basis), and therefore less relevant to interpretation, whereas the latter maintains that this process is discernible to some degree and hermeneutically significant.¹⁵⁴

Apart from this basic difference, the two strands have much in common. Both approaches understand the final form of the text as the primary, normative, hermeneutical locus, rather than the underlying traditions. While neither approach rejects outright the utility of historical-critical methods, both see the interpretation of the final literary product as the ultimate goal of biblical studies, rather than retracing individual textual fragments back to their original historical setting. Both Childs and Sanders see the historical dimension of biblical studies primarily in terms of the relationship between the final form of the text and the

¹⁵³DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 6; Sanders, *Canon and Community*, 21.

¹⁵⁴Childs, *Introduction*, 72-79; Childs, "Response to Reviews of *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 16 (1980): 54; James A. Sanders, "Canonical Context and Canonical Criticism," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 2 (1980): 173-97; Sanders, "Biblical Criticism and the Bible as Canon," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 32 (1977): 157-66; DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 11-12. We must be careful not to overstate this difference, however, as Childs nonetheless recognizes that the biblical text "cannot be isolated from its ostensive reference" (*Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989], 6).

historical communities that produced them.¹⁵⁵ Both scholars maintain that biblical scholars generally have, until recently, lost perspective on this ultimate goal; canonical criticism attempts to reclaim the proper focus of biblical criticism, which is the text as it is preserved.¹⁵⁶ Finally, both scholars agree that the canonical-critical method is a primary, irreducible approach to interpreting and understanding the biblical text.¹⁵⁷

In her *Introduction to the Psalms*, DeClaissé-Walford recounts the *Midrash* on Psalm 3. The exposition preserves the story of R. Joshua ben Levi who, when attempting to arrange the individual psalms in their proper order, heard a warning from above: “Do not rouse that which slumbers!”¹⁵⁸ Despite this heavenly caution, the recent inquiry into the shape and shaping of the Psalter has proven fruitful and is essential to a persona-critical reading of Book IV of the Psalter. First, we see that the individual psalms are hermeneutically influenced by their present literary context. In other words, one may interpret psalms together – within their canonical context. Psalm 1-89 and 91-150 are

¹⁵⁵See Sanders, *Canon and Community*, 18-19. This focus on historical communities, over against reconstructions of individual texts or individual scribal settings, is the characteristic that distinguishes canonical criticism from other historical-critical scholarship. See DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 12.

¹⁵⁶DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 11.

¹⁵⁷See Sanders, *Canon and Community*, 18; DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 5-14.

¹⁵⁸DeClaissé-Walford, *Introduction*, 46-47; See also William G. Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms* (vol. 1; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 3:2.

hermeneutically significant with regard to the interpretation of Psalm 90. This canonical relationship does not mean, however, that the personae of the psalms are identical; an individual psalm constitutes a discrete “imaginary world” with at least one distinct literary voice. Thus within the Psalter one encounters personae in concert, individually unique yet in the broadest sense contributing to a meaningful whole. In this sense we may describe the implied authorial/editorial literary voice in the Psalter, the “Psalter-persona” according to this project, as multivalent but canonically constrained.

Second, the shaping of the Psalter depends on the adaptability of psalms. The “multifarious”¹⁵⁹ character of the psalms has led to their detachment from their historical authors and original setting. In a very real sense the reader of the Psalter is left alone with the persona of the text; the historical author is lost (a situation consistent with much of ancient literature).

Finally, a persona-critical reading of Book IV is especially significant. If the penultimate division of the Psalter deals specifically with a re-orientation of the post-exilic community’s identity, then the identity of the speakers in those psalms becomes particularly relevant. One may expect the personae of Book IV to interact with or contribute to the assertion of a reformed identity under the kingship of Yahweh.

¹⁵⁹DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 13.

Conclusion

From both a historical-critical and literary-critical perspective, literary personae existed in the ancient world. Even a brief survey of comparative literature reveals that ancient poets employed personae and created literary voices for non-historical characters. Theoretical reconstructions by the foremost biblical scholars suggest that psalms were composed by temple functionaries for others to use and perform, requiring the creation of a suitable literary voice.

The “psalmist” should not be abandoned, but redefined as a literary aspect (as opposed to a historical enigma). The pre-canonical, historical author has evaded scholars and at any rate cannot be equated with the psalmist of the text. The psalmist in the psalm, however, is readily available and, at least according to Childs and Sanders, the proper focus of biblical studies. A rich history of scholarly reflection, and at times sharp debate, is available on the subject of persona. It simply remains to create an interpretive dialogue between the two—between the persona theory and the Psalter.

The Psalter is poetry and the psalmist-persona exists within the world created by the poem. As we have already noted in the introduction, modern tools of analysis are useful in the study of this poetry. Given the shape and shaping of the Psalter, we may interpret the psalmist-personae together, just as we hear the psalms together. Specifically with regard to Book IV of the Psalter, we may expect to find multivalent but canonically-constrained personae in search of a re-oriented identity under the kingship of Yahweh.

CHAPTER FOUR

Persona in Book IV of the Psalter

O, that today you would listen to Yahweh's voice!

— The Psalmist-Persona, *Psalms 95*

Hearing Voices: Introduction to Exegesis

The following exegesis is concerned with the canonical context and function of Psalms 90-106. Many scholars—in particular Gerald Wilson, David M. Howard, Jr., and J. Clinton McCann—have produced very thorough and useful studies of the relationships between these psalms. We will draw upon their strategy of identifying the manifold literary connections, including structural, lexicographical, and thematic links, in an effort to demonstrate the interrelatedness of the psalms in Book IV. These connections invite the reader to hear the personae of Book IV in relationship to one another. Not only will we benefit from these scholars on micro-canonical connections, but Howard in particular provides a helpful macro-framework for working within Book IV:

Indeed, it would appear that we can see in Book IV a tripartite division, consisting of Psalms 90-94, 95-100, and 101-106. There are overlapping links and echoes that jump across many psalms in Book IV, but these three groupings hang together especially well. Furthermore, within these groupings, Psalms 90-92 exhibit especially close links, as do Psalms 104-106. It would appear, then, that a concentric pattern of psalms exists in Book IV, centered on the core of the classic kingship of YHWH psalms.¹

¹David M. Howard, Jr., "A Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (ed. J. Clinton McCann, Jr.; Sheffield:

A second concern involves the “literary world” of the psalm. In chapter three we observed how the poetry of the Psalter creates “its own world in words”² that is completed in the act of reading. The literary world of each psalm constitutes an important frame of reference that gives shape and definition to its speaker. The imagery, setting, and presentation of a psalm offer insight into its literary voice.

These two components illuminate, in terms of each individual psalm and Book IV as a whole, the primary focus of this project: the speaker. Inquiry into the aspect of voice may involve one or more points of interest. First, one may simply ask, “Who speaks?” This basic question looks for what, if any, information the psalm offers with regard to the identity and character of the speaker. The speaker, for example, may be emphasized through self-reference or by disclosing personal viewpoints, emotions, settings, or experiences. In some cases, one may interpret the superscriptions as offering interesting ways of hearing a psalm’s persona. The question of who speaks also involves potential shifts in speaker.

A second and equally obvious question to ask is, “What does the persona say?” Does the speaker offer sage words, for example? Does the speaker tell a

Sheffield, 1993), 111. Howard credits H. V. D. Parunak as a catalyst for his thinking toward this structure.

²See Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 207-8, and ch. 3 above.

story, or perhaps press an idea? Is the focus of the persona on the acts of Yahweh or the condition of the community?

To whom the persona speaks constitutes a third line of inquiry that is critical to the aspect of voice. Does the psalmist-persona address Yahweh? Or is the addressee the community, a royal figure, some aspect of the psalm's literary world personified, or simply the reader/hearer of the poem? This concern also involves shifts in addressee as the persona directs speech to different participants in the literary world of the psalm.

Fourth, the reader should be sensitive to the tone of the speaker – in what manner does the persona speak? Is the manner of speech impatient, urgent, anguished, authoritative, didactic, unrestrained?

Finally, in some cases the literary persona's relationship to the psalm's historical context, such as the psalm's authors/editors and liturgical setting, may be noteworthy. All of these points of interest illuminate the psalmist-in-the-psalm. As each speaker takes shape and contributes to the collective voice of Book IV, we will observe how the literary aspect of voice functions canonically within Psalms 90-106 as a whole. In this sense our reading of Book IV will seek to understand how the various psalmist-personae relate to the "Psalter-persona" as expressed in the fourth book of psalms.³

³See ch. 2 above, "The Poet in the Poem."

A Persona Mosaic: The Multivalent Voice of Psalm 90

Psalm 90, as DeClaissé-Walford writes, is the beginning of the end.⁴ To understand how the psalm functions in this manner, one must look at the psalm in the context of the whole Psalter. Books I-III, as we have noted, remember the Davidic covenant and reign, finally lamenting the failure of both. Psalm 89 ends Book III on a decidedly tragic note, being “concerned with the terrible problem of the apparent failure of Yahweh to keep the obligations which he assumed for the Davidic dynasty.”⁵ The psalm is particularly poignant in its presentation of this failure. Following the superscription, the psalmist-persona opens with a declaration of praise to Yahweh, followed by a “quotation of Yahweh’s covenant commitment forever to David and to his offspring.”⁶ The psalm continues to extol Yahweh’s sovereignty and fidelity to the covenant, as well as the corresponding might of David.⁷ The reader, however, is not aware of the full

⁴DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 81.

⁵Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 419. Wilson sees Psalm 89 as one of the demarcating psalms of the “Royal Covenantal Frame” (Pss 2, 87-88, 89) that encloses Books I-III. The Royal Covenantal Frame is concerned with the institution, transmission, and failure of the Davidic covenant. See Wilson, “Shaping the Psalter,” 78. See also McCann, “Books I-III,” 93-107.

⁶Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 418-19.

⁷Tate notes numerous parallels between Yahweh and David in Psalm 89: 1) David possesses power proportional to Yahweh; 2) David is the highest king of the earth as Yahweh is the most exalted cosmic ruler; 3) Yahweh’s mighty arm and hand establishes and maintains his rule and at the same time empowers David against his enemies; 4) Yahweh and David both exercise power over the waters; 5) faithfulness and steadfast love “go before” Yahweh and are with David. See Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 423.

import of these verses until the marked shift in v. 39, signaled with the emphatic **וְאַתָּה זָנַחְתָּ**.⁸ Subsequent to this shift it becomes clear that the “high hopes and expectations gathered around the Davidic monarchy seem crushed to the speaker.”⁹ The psalmist-persona laments:

נִאֲרַתָּה בְּרִית עֲבָדֶיךָ חֲלַלְתָּ לְאֶרֶץ נִזְרוּ:
 עֲדִמָּה יְהוָה תִּסְתֵּר לְנִצָּחַ תִּבְעַר כְּמוֹ אֵשׁ חֲמַתְךָ:
 אֵיחָה חֲסָדֶיךָ הָרֵאשֻׁנִים אֲדַנִּי נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לְדָוִד בְּאִמּוֹנְתְּךָ:¹⁰

The psalmist-persona ends with a direct exhortation for Yahweh to **זָכַר**, but the closing words offer only a standard benediction. Thus the psalmist-persona of Psalm 89 is trodden by the “contradiction between old promises and understandings of the ways of God and the actuality of the developments of history.”¹¹ The psalmist-persona quite powerfully sounds out the discordance between theology and history. Psalm 89, according to McCann, “clearly suggests the need for reorientation that moves beyond the traditional Davidic/Zion theology.”¹²

⁸Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 427.

⁹Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 428. See also DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 81-82.

¹⁰Vv. 40, 47, 50.

¹¹Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 428.

¹²McCann, “Books I-III,” 99.

In its canonical context Psalm 90 functions to begin the response to the anguishing problem left hanging in Psalm 89 and turn the reader in a new direction.¹³ From a persona-critical standpoint, both the superscription and poem proper contribute to this interpretation.

The superscription **לְמוֹשֶׁה אִישֶׁהָאֱלֹהִים** is unique to the Psalter; no other psalm is ascribed to Moses. While at first blush this attribution may seem odd or out of place, there are a few noteworthy connections. First, other traditions such as Exodus 15 and Deut 31.30-32.47 associate Moses with songs and poetry.¹⁴ Second, linguistic parallels strengthen the link between the psalm and the Song of Moses, such as the use of **שְׁנוֹת** and **יְמוֹת** (cf. Ps 90.15; Deut 32.7), **פָּעַל** (cf. Ps 90.16; Deut 32.4; 33.11), and the descriptive appellation **אִישֶׁהָאֱלֹהִים** (cf. Ps 90.1; Deut 33.1; Josh 14.6; Ezra 3.2).¹⁵ Finally, Freedman makes the observation that Moses and Amos are the only biblical characters who, through their intercession, cause Yahweh to repent.¹⁶ In fact, Moses alone *tells* Yahweh to “turn . . . and repent” (Exod 32.12-14), an exhortation that is repeated with even

¹³DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 81. See also Thomas Krüger, “Psalm 90 und die ‘Vergänglichkeit des Menschen’,” *Biblica* 75 (1994): 191-219.

¹⁴Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 438.

¹⁵Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 438. See also Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 421.

¹⁶David N. Freedman, “Other than Moses . . . Who Asks (or Tells) God to Repent?” *Bible Review* 1/4 (1985): 59. See also Richard J. Clifford, *Psalms 73-150* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 97.

greater emphasis in Ps 90.13.¹⁷ Thus the psalm's "assignment to Moses required no extraordinary exegetical ingenuity."¹⁸

It is important to note, however, that the superscription is "undoubtedly the result of later (probably post-exilic) scribal *exegesis*."¹⁹ Superscriptions, as Bellinger points out, can "hint about how ancient Israel interpreted" the psalms they prefix.²⁰ It is precisely because of the superscription's hermeneutical value (rather than as historical evidence of authorship) that McCann suggests readers should take it seriously.²¹ He considers it likely that "the editors intended for readers to hear this psalm as a poetic imagining of how Moses might have spoken to the monumental crisis posed by the loss of land, Temple, and monarchy."²² In a similar fashion Freedman believes that the author of Psalm 90 "based it on the episode in Exodus 32 and imagined in poetic form how Moses may have spoken in the circumstances of Exodus 32."²³ Though Marvin E. Tate

¹⁷Freedman, "Other than Moses," 58, 59.

¹⁸Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 438.

¹⁹Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 438 (emphasis added). See also Eugene Boring, "Psalm 90: Reinterpreting Tradition," *Mid-Stream* 40 (2001): 120.

²⁰Bellinger, *Psalms*, 9.

²¹McCann, "Book of Psalms," 1040. See also Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 438.

²²McCann, "Book of Psalms," 1041.

²³Freedman, "Other than Moses," 59. McCann notes that the Targum's superscription ("A prayer of Moses the prophet, when the people of Israel sinned in the desert") supports this conclusion ("The Book of Psalms," 1041).

recognizes that “the scribal interpretation of the psalm as Mosaic naturally took the time of affliction and distress in v. 15 as a reference to the servitude of Israel in Egypt,” he nonetheless concludes that “the experience of exile . . . is much more probable” as a background for the psalm.²⁴

The content of the psalm itself reflects a wise persona. Scholars typically classify the psalm as either a community lament, or (more often) a wisdom psalm reflecting a late wisdom tradition.²⁵ Tate describes the psalm as a “literary composition” deriving from the “learned psalmography” tradition, the work of sages and skilled scribes for individuals and groups, to be used in particular for personal piety and devotion.²⁶ Weiser notes that the psalm’s “nobility and comprehensiveness give it an authority [that] is not easy to evade.”²⁷ The voice of wisdom can be heard prominently in vv. 2-12, in which the psalmist-persona eloquently weighs the difference between the everlasting divine and withering

²⁴Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 438.

²⁵McCann, “The Book of Psalms,” 1041; Richard J. Clifford, “Psalm 90: Wisdom Meditation or Communal Lament?” in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception* (ed. Peter W. Flint and Patrick D. Miller; Boston: Brill, 2005), 190-205; Gerhard Von Rad, *God at Work in Israel* (trans. John H. Marks; Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 221; Bruce Vawter, “Postexilic Prayer and Hope,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 37 (1975): 462; Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, 102; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150: A Continental Commentary* (trans. Hilton C. Oswald; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 214-15; Craig C. Broyles, *Psalms* (NIBC; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 359.

²⁶Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 439.

²⁷Weiser, *Psalms*, 595.

mortals.²⁸ Whereas Yahweh was present for the birth of the mountains, humans are transient, fading like new grass and heaving a final sigh before returning to dust (vv. 2, 5-6, 9).²⁹ The reward of understanding human finitude is a “wise heart” (v 12).³⁰ In these verses one clearly hears the voice of the wise persona.

The content of the psalm also reflects a troubled persona. The distressed inquiry עֵרַךְ־נַחְתִּי (v. 13), as well as the request in v. 15 that future days of gladness equal the days and years of affliction and evil already endured, suggests a perspective of long-lasting distress; the “speaker and the community appear to have lived close to death for an extended time.”³¹ Though there is a notable shift

²⁸See Wilson, *Editing*, 215; Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 125; Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms* (Berit Olam; ed. David W. Cotter; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001), 225-26; Von Harald Martin Wahl, “Psalm 90,12: Text, Tradition und Interpretation,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 106 (1994): 116-17.

²⁹On the text-critical and exegetical difficulty of vv 5-6, see Thijs Booij, “Psalm 90:5-6: Junction of Two Traditional Motifs,” *Biblica* 68 (1987): 393-96; Hans-Peter Müller, “Sprachliche Beobachtungen zu Ps. XC 5f,” *Vetus Testamentum* 50 (2000): 394-400; Matitiah Tsevat, “Psalm XC 5-6,” *Vetus Testamentum* 35 (1985): 115-17.

³⁰Cf. Richard J. Clifford, “What Does the Psalmist Ask for in Psalms 39:5 and 90:12?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119 (2000): 65, who suggests that the psalmist is rather asking to know the duration of divine wrath.

³¹Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 438. Wilson observes that the inquiry in v. 13 picks up the question in 89.46, though in v. 13 it “stands in the new context of Israel’s sin rather than YHWH’s refusal to honor the Davidic covenant.” See Wilson, *Editing*, 215.

beginning in v. 13, Yahweh's wrath is also present in previous verses (vv. 7-9, 11).³²

The reader is left to choose from an assortment of voices. Do we have a Moses persona responding to the crisis of Exodus 32? Should we hear a poetic imagining of how Moses might have prayed regarding the predicament of the post-exilic community? Is this persona the voice of a wise person? Or is it simply a speaker lamenting the distress of the post-exilic community? I submit that the answer is *yes*. Rather than selecting from this montage of poetic voices, one may understand the psalm as multivalent, taking the superscription seriously while still locating the psalm in a post-exilic context.

The sage but haunting rumination on the transience of life connects with the Mosaic-persona in the sense that time was precisely Moses' problem—his was too short.³³ Because God was angry (עבר, Deut 3.26) with Moses, the man of God dies before reaching the promised land; likewise the days of the mortal

³²Kraus notes that some interpreters consider Ps 90 to reflect the combination of two songs (vv. 1-12 and 13-17), though he concludes that "the psalm as a whole is one unit." See Kraus, *Psalm 60-150*, 214. See also Robert G. Bratcher and William D. Reyburn, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Psalms* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991), 792; James Luther Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 290.

³³McCann, "Book of Psalms," 1041.

pass beneath the wrath (עברה) of God in Ps 90.9. In this way Moses “became a paradigm for Israel’s existence and human existence.”³⁴

To hear the poetically imagined voice of Moses in Psalm 90, according to McCann, has canonical significance:

Book III is heavily weighted with prayers that lament the destruction of Jerusalem, and Psalm 89 concludes Book III with the announcement of God’s rejection of the covenant with David and with the anguished questions of vv. 46 and 49. Thus it seems more than coincidental that Book IV immediately takes the reader back to the time of Moses, when there was no land or Temple or monarchy. Indeed, book IV can be characterized as a Moses-book, and in response to the crisis of exile and its aftermath, it offers the “answer” that prefaces the Psalter and forms its theological heart: God reigns! In short, even without land, Temple, and monarchy, relatedness to God is still possible, as it was in the time of Moses.³⁵

In this way Psalm 90 may function hermeneutically according to the so-called “primacy effect,” a term borrowed from psychology to identify the literary phenomenon in which a reader’s interpretation of a text may be shaped by preceding texts.³⁶ Beginnings create “first impressions” and “focus readers’

³⁴McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1041.

³⁵McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1040. See also Wilson, *Editing*, 215; William J. Urbrock, “The Earth Song in Psalms 90-92,” in *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets* (ed. Norman C. Habel; Sheffield: Sheffield, 2001), 65-66; William J. Urbrock, “Psalm 90: Moses, Mortality, and the Morning,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 25 (1998): 26.

³⁶The primacy effect can be quite strong for readers, who tend to preserve initial constructs and expectations until enough conflicting data predicate revision (i.e., the “recency effect”). A number of scholars have discussed the phenomenon of the primacy effect, and interpreters have utilized the theory for both poetry and prose, including biblical narrative and the poetry of the Psalter. See Perry Menakhem, “How the Order of a Text Creates Its Meanings (With an

attention on what is about to happen."³⁷ Thus Psalm 90 shapes one's view of Book IV, as McCann has suggested above. DeClaissé-Walford concurs that the poetic voice of Moses comes at an important juncture in the Psalter. By turning the reader's/hearer's attention "away from David and the monarchy" and back to the beginning of ancient Israel's relationship with Yahweh (i.e., the Exodus event), the Psalter communicates that the "key to Israel's survival in exile is precisely what it was in the Exodus – complete reliance upon Yahweh."³⁸

What is positively striking in this psalm is that its vital canonical role turns on the superscription, which itself reflects an interpretation of the psalm *according to a poetically imagined voice*. The shapers of the Psalter understood the significance of the psalm in terms of its literary voice. Through the addition of the superscription, the shapers recast that voice, which they identified in part through the psalm's literary connections to the Pentateuch. In other words,

Analysis of Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*)," *Poetics Today* 1 (1979): 53-61; Boris Upensky, *A Poetics of Composition: The Structure of the Artistic Text and Typology of a Compositional Form* (trans. C. Zavarin and S. Wittig; Berkeley: University of California, 1973); Mikeal C. Parsons, "Reading a Beginning/Beginning a Reading: Tracing Literary Theory on Narrative Openings," *Semeia* 52 (1990): 11-31; Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic, 1975), 5; Manfred Jahn, "Frames, Preferences, and the Reading of Third Person Narratives: Towards a Cognitive Narratology," *Poetics Today* 18 (1997): 441-68; W. H. Bellinger, Jr., "Reading from the Beginning (Again): The Shape of Book I of the Psalter," in *Diachronic and Synchronic: Reading the Psalms in Real Time: Proceedings of the Baylor Symposium on the Book of Psalms* (ed. Joel S. Burnett, W. H. Bellinger, Jr., and W. Dennis Tucker; New York: T & T Clark, 2007): 114-26.

³⁷Bellinger, "Reading from the Beginning (Again)," 114.

³⁸DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 7. See also Wilson, "Shaping the Psalter," 75.

Psalm 90 itself reflects an ancient form of persona criticism. If Book IV does indeed constitute the “editorial center”³⁹ of the Psalter and its theological heart, and if Psalm 90 turns the reader toward this center, then the aspect of literary voice plays a critical role at the hermeneutical core of the Psalter – a book that as a whole may be said to form the religious heart of the Old Testament. At the very crux of things, *persona* plays an essential part.

The Drama of Conventional Wisdom: Psalm 91

The essential consequence of a canonical approach to the Psalter is that the literary environment shapes or even determines the hermeneutical process: texts are read in relationship to their context. As we have seen, our understanding of Psalm 90 depends upon the broad context of the Old Testament story, on Books I-III of the Psalter, and on Psalm 89. From a persona-critical and canonical standpoint, Psalms 90 and 91 may be interpreted in close relationship with one another.

In his analysis of the concentric groupings of Book IV, Howard observes that Psalms 90-92 “exhibit especially close links.”⁴⁰ Likewise William J. Urbrock suggests that these three psalms together provide the first expression of the new focus that carries through Book IV.⁴¹ Alexander F. Kirkpatrick proposes that

³⁹See Wilson, *Editing*, 215.

⁴⁰Howard, “Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94,” 111.

⁴¹Urbrock, “Earth Song,” 66.

Psalm 90-92 belong together, and in particular sees Psalm 91 as a response to Psalm 90 – an interpretation that McCann echoes.⁴² Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger see Psalms 90-92 as a thematic unit, presented in a sage manner, which carries out a “*lament-divine promise-thanks-giving*” sequence:

In the style of Wisdom instruction, the first utterance comes from a fictional/anonymous speaker (a Wisdom teacher or, at the level of the composition in Psalms 90-92, “Moses”), directed to a not otherwise described “thou” (the “Wisdom student” or, at the level of this composition, “Israel”), giving assurance that YHWH is a saving refuge for those who rely on him in trust. Psalm 91 then culminates in the promise of a long life and a salvation (יְשׁוּעָה) given by YHWH, constituted as direct divine discourse. That this promise is not an empty word, but is fulfilled in those who trust in it, is emphasized in the succeeding thanksgiving Psalm 92, whose opening is closely linked to the divine oracle in Psalm 91.⁴³

This sequence is “underscored by common or related motifs.”⁴⁴ Indeed, linguistic, structural, and thematic correlations link Psalm 90 and Psalm 91. Psalm 91 bears no superscription, and a few interpreters have combined it with the opening psalm of Book IV.⁴⁵ The metaphor of Yahweh as shelter or refuge (סֹתֵר, 91.1; מִחֹסֶה, 91.2, 9; חָסֶה, 91.4; מְעֹן, 91.9) that is pervasive in Psalm 91 echoes the opening words (following the superscription) in Psalm 90 (מְעֹן, 90.1).

The link between 90.1 and 91.9 is noteworthy due to the appearance of the

⁴²See Kirkpatrick, *Book of Psalms*, 553-54; McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1047. McCann specifically references Kirkpatrick.

⁴³Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 424.

⁴⁴Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 424.

⁴⁵Wilson, *Editing*, 214.

“relatively rare” word **נִעֲוֶן** in both verses.⁴⁶ McCann observes⁴⁷ an even more striking connection insofar as Psalm 91 directly responds to petitions voiced in Psalm 90:

Satisfy us (**שִׁבְעֵנוּ**) in the morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. (Ps 90.14)

Let your work be manifest (**יִרְאֶה**) to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children. (Ps 90.16)

With long life I will satisfy them (**אֲשַׁבֵּיעֵהוּ**),
and show them (**יֵאֲרֶאֱהוּ**) my salvation. (Ps 91.16)

Furthermore, that Yahweh will satisfy those seeking refuge with “a length of days” (**אֲרֶךְ יָמִים**, v. 16, NRSV “long life”) is a well-suited response to the lamentation over the ephemeral and transient nature of humanity expressed in Psalm 90.⁴⁸

From a persona-critical stand point, Psalm 91 is complex. Who speaks in Psalm 91? Solutions to this question are manifold. Historical-critical analyses offer manifold proposals—a “potpourri of answers” according to Tate.⁴⁹ From vv. 1-2 it is clear to Hans-Joachim Kraus that the speaker is one who has “entered the protective area of Yahweh, the sanctuary,” and subsequently offers a

⁴⁶McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1047.

⁴⁷McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1047.

⁴⁸McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1047.

⁴⁹Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 451.

confession of thanksgiving, possibly at the behest of the priest.⁵⁰ Other theories include thanksgiving from a supplicant who has recovered from sickness, a temple entrance liturgy, a liturgy for the king before battle, testimony from a recent convert to Yahwism, and even a verbal accompaniment to the purification rituals prescribed in Leviticus 14 for restoration of persons into the community.⁵¹ While the psalm may indeed derive from one (or more) of these historical situations, the psalm has been recast in its final literary setting to respond to the problem highlighted in Books I-III and Psalm 89 in particular, in conjunction with Psalm 90.⁵²

Like Psalm 90, the psalmist-persona of Psalm 91 speaks with a sage voice.⁵³ The character of this sage voice, however, is somewhat different. With eloquence equal to the dirge on human transience in Psalm 90, the voice of wisdom in Psalm 91 reflects the conventional view of security for those who seek

⁵⁰Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 221.

⁵¹See McCann, "Book of Psalms," 1047; Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 451; Herbert J. Levine, *Sing Unto God a New Song: A Contemporary Reading of the Psalms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 67-68.

⁵²The complexity and ambiguity of this psalm lends itself to multi-functionality and the ability to be "recast" in new environments, both literary and historical. See McCann, "Book of Psalms," 1046-7; Andreas Wagner, "Bekennntnis zu Jahwe," in *Primäre und sekundäre Religion als Kategorie der Religionsgeschichte des Alten Testaments* (ed. Andreas Wagner; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 97. In some sense this literary-canonical "recasting" is predicated by the primacy effect (see above).

⁵³Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 452; Howard, "Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94," 111.

refuge in Yahweh; outside of refuge in Yahweh wait many threats. The psalmist-persona uses temporally comprehensive imagery to convey such threats: “terror of the night,” and “the arrow that flies by day” (v. 5), “the pestilence that stalks in darkness,” and “the destruction that wastes at noonday” (v. 6). Konrad Schaefer sees these four threats as poetically set against the four divine titles used in the psalm: “Most High,” “Almighty” (v. 1), “the Lord,” and “my God” (v. 2).⁵⁴

The psalmist-persona also employs one of the strongest images of divine refuge available in the ancient world: wings. William P. Brown suggests that the image of wings is “the most vividly iconic image associated with refuge and divine protection.”⁵⁵ The image is paralleled in Egyptian iconography and is even used in the representation of deities that are not ornithological in form; wing imagery was detachable in a sense, simply representing the idea of “protection” pictographically.⁵⁶ Brown considers Psalm 91 to offer the “most detailed elaboration of the wing metaphor.”⁵⁷

The imperative verbs of Psalm 90 (vv. 13-15) ironically highlight the psalmist’s helplessness: Yahweh’s wrath burns (cf. שׁוֹרֵבָה, v. 13), and the psalmist-persona cries for deliverance from the resulting emptiness (cf. שִׁבְעֵנוּ, v.

⁵⁴Schaefer, *Psalms*, 228.

⁵⁵William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 20.

⁵⁶Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, 20-21.

⁵⁷Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, 21.

14) and affliction (cf. שְׁמִיחָנִי, v. 15) of the community. The voice of wisdom in Psalm 90 is uncertain, questioning, and even sounds a cynical note similar to Qoheleth in Ecclesiastes.⁵⁸ By contrast, the imagery and tone in Psalm 91 convey certainty and confidence in the sanctuary of Yahweh against peril – an idea explicitly confessed in vv. 9-10:

כִּי־אַתָּה יְהוָה מִחְסֵי עֲלִיּוֹן שְׁמֹת מְעוֹנָךְ:
 לֹא־תֵאָנֶה אֵלֶיךָ רָעָה וְנִגַע לֹא־יִקְרַב בְּאַהֲלֶךָ:

Psalm 91 is a wisdom psalm “of the didactic sort, where the psalmist instructs his listeners in the trustworthy ways of YHWH and the advisability of making God their security.”⁵⁹ If Psalm 90 reflects the counter wisdom tradition of Ecclesiastes, then Psalm 91 reflects the conventional wisdom of Proverbs.⁶⁰ Both psalms reflect sage personae while representing different wisdom traditions within the canon.

Shifts in voice have fostered the longstanding view that the psalm is dramatic in nature. The Targum, for example, assigns the psalm to the voices of

⁵⁸See Howard, “Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94,” 110. Howard cites vv. 3, 5-7, and 9-10 in particular.

⁵⁹Howard, “Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94,” 111.

⁶⁰Hossfeld and Zenger observe that Eliphaz employs Psalm 91 to conclude his first speech (cf. Ps 91.10; Job 5.19, 24), and Proverbs uses Psalm 91 in its introduction to the teaching discourse found in Prov 3.21-35 (*Psalm 2*, 432). In both cases, the psalm functions in support of the mainstream or conventional wisdom tradition within the canon.

Solomon and David.⁶¹ Tate agrees that although it is not necessary, the psalm can be read antiphonally:

First Voice: vv. 1-2
Second Voice: vv. 3-4
First Voice: vv. 5-9a
Second Voice: vv. 9b-13
God's Voice: vv. 14-16

Likewise Robert Bratcher and William Reyburn advise translators to name the speakers in the left-hand margin of their translations: v. 1, a priest; v. 2, the worshiper; vv. 3-8, priest; v. 9a, worshiper; v. 9b, priest; and vv. 14-16, God.”⁶²

While these multivocal interpretations show some variety, they basically assume three speaking characters – two human, one divine.

The first shift in voice appears in v. 2. The verbals in v. 1 are “(one) sitting,” (יָשֵׁב, *Qal* part. masc. sg.) and “he will dwell” (יִתְלוֹנֵן, *Hithpoel* impf. 3rd per. masc. sg.), whereas in v. 2 the verbs shift to “I say” (אָמַר, *Qal* pf. 1st per. sg.) and “I will trust” (אֶבְטָח, *Qal* impf. 1st per. sg.). In an effort to make sense of the speaker, the translation of אָמַר in v. 2 varies widely. Some translations render an imperative (אָמַר), “Say to Yahweh . . . ,” while others render a participle

⁶¹See Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 451; Weiser, *Psalms*, 605. The use of pronouns, which bears directly on the aspect of voice, is a major interpretive issue in this psalm. See Leonard Knight, “I Will Show Him My Salvation: The Experience of Anxiety in the Meaning of Psalm 91,” *Restoration Quarterly* 43 (2001): 281; Reuben Katz, “A Suggested Translation of Psalm 91:1-2,” *The Jewish Bible Quarterly* 29 (2001): 43.

⁶²Bratcher and Reyburn, *Translator's Handbook*, 801.

(אָמַר), “(who) say to Yahweh”⁶³ The Qumran text 11QP^sAp^a apparently follows a similar route, using an articular participle (הַאֹמֵר, “the one saying”).⁶⁴ The LXX renders the verb as “he will say” (ἐρεῖ, indic. fut. act. 3rd per. sg., Ps 90.2 LXX).⁶⁵ Common to all of these interpretations is effectively collapsing two speakers into one. The psalmist-persona who speaks in v. 1 continues speaking in v. 2, and simply reports the speech of the addressee.

The second shift in voice, appearing in v. 9, is equally challenging. A literal, wooden translation of v. 9 is “for you | Yahweh | my refuge/shelter | Most High | you set (שָׁמַרְתָּ, *Qal* pf. 2nd per. masc. sg.) | your refuge/dwelling.” Although v. 9a is a verbless phrase, it is spoken from a first person point of view: “For you, Yahweh, are *my* refuge.” The BHS notes to the MT propose an emendation in v. 9a to “your refuge” (בְּיָמֶיךָ). The LXX retains the first person suffix, rendering ἐλπίς μου (Ps 90.9a LXX); the Qumran manuscript is damaged.⁶⁶

Finally, the third shift appears in v. 14-16, and clearly portrays the speech of Yahweh. Tate suggests that these verses should be understood as a direct

⁶³See, for example, NEB and NRSV. Reading the verb as a participle does parallel the verb form in v. 1a.

⁶⁴See the textual notes in Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 447.

⁶⁵The BHS notes suggest reading **יֹאמַר**, following the LXX.

⁶⁶The variety of translations exceeds v. 2. See the textual notes in Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 449.

address, even though “they are not technically an example of the descriptive vocative.”⁶⁷

Tate’s interpretation of the psalm is noteworthy since he opts out of the dramatic reading, concluding that “one speaker sets forth the claims of faith in a prayer.”⁶⁸ Read this way, the psalmist-persona speaks to the addressee (grammatically, 2 per. masc. sg.) in vv. 1, 3-8, 9b-13, but switches to the first person and directly addresses Yahweh at key junctures in the psalm (vv. 2, 9a). From a persona-critical standpoint this shift is similar to Psalm 23, another hymn of great trust in Yahweh. The psalmist-persona in Psalm 23 refers to Yahweh in the third person (vv. 1-4a), until traversing the “valley of deep shadow” (בְּיַם צִלְמוֹת). Subsequent to this image of calamity the psalmist-persona directly addresses Yahweh, in a manner grammatically similar to 91.9a: כִּי־אַתָּה עִמָּדִי (“for you are with me”). The direct, more intimate address continues through the remainder of the psalm. According to Tate, the final speech-shift in 91.14-16 would then constitute a divine oracle reported via the single speaker, an oracle that “responds to the prayer-testimony in vv. 3-13 and gives authority to its exhortation.”⁶⁹ In this way the psalmist-persona becomes prophetic in nature, functioning as a mouthpiece for Yahweh.

⁶⁷Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 450.

⁶⁸Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 450-51.

⁶⁹Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 457.

Thus the aspect of voice exhibited in Psalm 91 is complex. The psalm can be read as a dramatic dialogue between three speakers, two human and one divine. Psalm 91 can also render the prayer of a single persona, who through a complex series of shifts nonetheless creates a dramatic episode:

- V. 1: the psalmist-persona speaks to a human addressee
- V. 2: the psalmist-persona speaks to Yahweh
- Vv. 3-8: the psalmist-persona speaks to a human addressee
- V. 9a: the psalmist-persona speaks to Yahweh
- Vv. 9b-13: the psalmist-persona speaks to a human addressee
- Vv. 14-16: the psalmist-persona speaks Yahweh's words to a human addressee

In any case, one encounters a sage persona who authoritatively confesses the conventional wisdom tradition that those who seek refuge beneath Yahweh's wings will be protected from peril and satisfied with long life.

In this way the psalmist-personae of Psalms 90 and 91 introduce the theme found in Book IV and the editorial center of the Psalter – the “answer” to the vexing problems Books I-III present. The cooperation between Psalms 90-91 is theologically significant. Walter Jens describes Psalm 90 as a “desperate accusation, formulated in post-exilic darkness.”⁷⁰ Even as the persona of Psalm 90 looks back to the beginning of Israel's relationship with Yahweh, confessing that Yahweh has been Israel's refuge for generations past, the confession is

⁷⁰Walter Jens, “Psalm 90: On Transience,” trans. Wilhelm C. Linss; *Lutheran Quarterly* 9 (1995): 177.

tempered with and restrained by the anguish of the present.⁷¹ By contrast, Psalm 91 “gives a much clearer answer to the human problem than Psalm 90.”⁷² In fact, James Luther Mays warns that Psalm 91 “itself poses a danger,” since “its assurance of security is so comprehensive and confident” so as to lend itself to abuse.⁷³ Left to its own devices, Psalm 91 presents a jolting bouleversement to the reader; it is a response that almost fails to acknowledge the problem. Taken together, Psalms 90-91 offer a more mature response, introducing the sapiential message that Yahweh is refuge without glossing over the genuine sense of irreparable loss predicated by the destruction of Israel’s physical and political refuge of land and kingdom.

Brutes, Evil-doers, and the Rule of God: The Psalmist’s World in Psalm 92

Psalm 92 links to the preceding psalms in Book IV. In Psalm 90 the psalmist-persona longs for the steadfast faithfulness of Yahweh, and in Psalm 92 the speaker takes pleasure in declaring it:

שְׁבַעְנוּ בְּבִקְרַת חֶסֶדְךָ (90.14)
טוֹב . . . לְהַגִּיד בְּבִקְרַת חֶסֶדְךָ (92.2-3)⁷⁴

⁷¹See Werner H. Schmidt, “Der Du die Menschen lässt sterben’: Exegetische Anmerkungen zu Ps 90,” in *Was ist der Mensch . . . ? Beiträge zur Anthropologie des Alten Testaments* (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1992), 115-30.

⁷²Howard, “Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94,” 111.

⁷³Mays, *Psalms*, 297.

⁷⁴See McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1050.

In Ps 90.15-16 the speaker entreats Yahweh to bring gladness (שְׂמֵחָנוּ) to the community and make manifest divine deeds (יִרְאֶה . . . פִּעֲלָךְ); in Ps 92.4 the psalmist-persona is brought to sing with gladness (שְׂמֵחַתִּנִּי) by the work of Yahweh (בְּפִעֲלֶךָ).⁷⁵ McCann observes that “אֲמוּנָה” in v. 2 recalls Ps 91.4 and that “all three psalms are concerned with day and night.”⁷⁶ Other concatenations include the divine title עֲלִיוֹן (cf. Pss 91.1, 9; 92.2), the reference to Yahweh’s “name” (שְׁמִי, 91.14; לְשִׁמְךָ, 92.2), the striking image of the brief flourish of grass (צִיץ/צוּץ, cf. Pss 90.6; 92.8), and the “gesture of looking down upon one’s defeated enemies” (cf. Pss. 91.8; 92.12).⁷⁷ Most importantly, Psalm 92 continues the wisdom/didactic tone present in the preceding two psalms and responds to the assurances of Psalm 91 and the petitions of Psalm 90.⁷⁸ The three psalms function together to recognize and give thanks for the refuge of Yahweh from the calamity recognized and lamented in Books I-III.⁷⁹

⁷⁵Cf. McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1050-51; Howard, “Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-4,” 112.

⁷⁶McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1050-51. Cf. Ps. 90.4-6; 91.5-6; 92.3.

⁷⁷See Clifford, *Psalms 73-50*, 105; Howard, “Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94,” 112.

⁷⁸Howard, “Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94,” 112.

⁷⁹See Howard, “Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94,” 112; McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1046; Kirkpatrick, *Book of Psalms*, 553-54; Joseph Reindi, “Weisheitliche Bearbeitung von Psalmen: ein Beitrag zum Verstaendnis der

Psalm 92 also anticipates the following psalm, which begins the full emphasis on the reign of God (cf. Pss 92.8; 93.4). In Wilson's view Psalm 92 functions as a transition from the introductory "Mosaic" theme of Yahweh as refuge to the core theme of the so-called enthronement psalms and Book IV as a whole (i.e., the reign of Yahweh).⁸⁰ Psalm 92 is unique within this group (Psalms 90-92) and Book IV in that it is the first psalm to contain "the classic vocabulary of musical and joyful praise."⁸¹ The psalm is unique within the Psalter in that it is the only psalm that specifically indicates a time for use: לַיּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת.

The reference to the Sabbath has contributed to the historical identification of the speaker as a priest in a liturgical setting, emphasizing the few corporate references found within the primarily first-person perspective to suggest corporate participation.⁸² Indeed, rabbinic sources cite Psalm 92 (along with Psalms 24; 48; 81; 82; 93-4) as part of the temple liturgy on the Sabbath; the psalm

Sammlung des Psalters," in *Congress Volume: Vienna, 1980* (ed. John A. Emerton; Leiden: Brill, 1981), 350-55.

⁸⁰Wilson, *Editing*, 216. See also McCann, "Book of Psalms," 1050; Clifford, *Psalms 73-50*, 105; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 442-43.

⁸¹Howard, "Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94," 112.

⁸²McCann suggests that vv. 1-4 implicitly invite others to share in thanksgiving. Broyles notes the 1st per. pl. reference in v. 14 and observes that the psalm "contains several features typical of corporate worship . . . and several parallels with Psalms 52 and 75," which also reflect corporate, liturgical worship. See McCann, "Book of Psalms," 1050; Broyles, *Psalms*, 364. See also Clifford, *Psalms 73-150*, 106.

has no doubt been used as its superscription suggests.⁸³ Scholars have noted, however, that beyond the superscription the psalm itself bears no explicit connection to the Sabbath and was likely not composed specifically for that purpose.⁸⁴

Another common historical identification is that the speaker is the king.⁸⁵ Richard J. Clifford notes that “if the speaker was the king,” then the experience of salvation celebrated in the psalm would have been beneficial to the entire community.⁸⁶ Tate recognizes the royal indications, but ultimately rejects the identification:

The appropriateness of the language of [Psalm] 92 for a king should not be doubted. It may very well have been composed with a king in mind; indeed even for the victory celebration of some king. On the other hand, the shift of royal language to common worshippers in later usage of the psalms is beyond dispute. Any attempt to confine a psalm like this to royal situations should be rejected. Perhaps the speaker is a king, but any reader may fuse his or her identity with that of the speaker.⁸⁷

⁸³McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1050; Nahum M. Sarna, “Psalm for the Sabbath Day (Ps 92),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962): 155-68; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 2, 444.

⁸⁴See McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1050; Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 229; Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 465, 468-69.

⁸⁵See Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 465; Clifford, *Psalms 73-50*, 108.

⁸⁶Clifford, *Psalms 73-50*, 108. Here Clifford does recognize that this identification is a supposition, and that the poem “does not tell what the particular act of justice was.”

⁸⁷Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 465.

Other suggestions are more generalized, but nonetheless consider the identity of the speaker in historical terms. Clifford contends that the psalm could only have been uttered by “someone who, in danger, trusted God and was rescued.”⁸⁸

Weiser offers a general identification of the speaker in a fairly specific circumstance:

When v. 2 speaks of the confession which is uttered in the morning and by night, the thought which most easily comes to our mind in this connection is that the poet must have stayed at the sanctuary for several days during the festival season (cf. Pss 55.17; 134.1), possibly during the New Year Festival, at which according to tradition a cultic ceremony took place during the festival night.⁸⁹

Other scholars are hesitant to follow identifications such as Weiser makes, noting that the “speaker in the psalm is not identified beyond the generalized descriptions of one who has been delivered from the peril of evil foes by the gracious intervention of Yahweh.”⁹⁰

There are a few important observations to make regarding this attempt to identify the speaker. First and foremost, the “speaker in the psalm” *was* not any historical figure, but *is* a literary persona. To recall Maio’s expression of the underlying theoretical basis for the literary persona, the “poet does not address anyone by a poem.”⁹¹ It is in this sense that the historical author of the psalm,

⁸⁸Clifford, *Psalms 73-50*, 108.

⁸⁹Weiser, *Psalms*, 614.

⁹⁰Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 465. See also Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 227.

⁹¹See ch. 2 above, and Maio, *Creating Another Self*, 5.

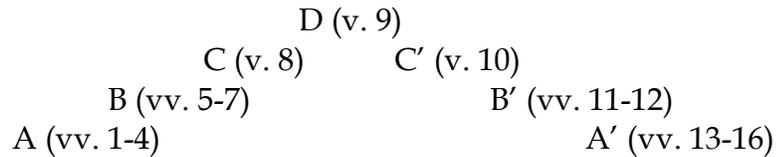
whether priest, king, or supplicant keeping late hours in the temple, does not address anyone by a psalm. Second, the historical poet does not necessarily need to have firsthand experience of the impression the psalm offers.⁹² Following Mowinckel and Croft, it is unlikely that any of the aforementioned historical figures actually composed the psalm anyway – it would have more likely been composed by official cultic poets for use by such figures. It is possible, and perhaps likely, that the historical poet did have a comparable experience to draw from, but it is not necessary to the composition of the psalm.

Third, the elements in the psalm that act as catalysts for these historical identifications should not be ignored or denied. The superscription does identify liturgical use, and the speaker in the psalm certainly does generalize beyond individual experience; one can indeed detect kingly language. Whether or not the psalm was employed in a cultic or royal setting is a critical aspect of the study of the Psalter, but it is not the most germane question to the present hermeneutical approach. In its present shape and setting Psalm 92 has been recast,⁹³ its speaker is a literary figure and the elements of the text constitute a literary world. It is in the psalmist-persona's reaction to this world that we reach the heart of the psalm and discover its canonical impetus.

⁹²See chs. 2 and 3 above.

⁹³See Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 465. See also ch. 3 above, pp. 48-49, and Howard, "Editorial Activity in the Psalter," 61.

The structure of the poem itself illuminates the character of the poem's literary world. Tate and others⁹⁴ observe a chiasmic structure centering on the key v. 9:



Although none of the cited commentators present the chiasm in this form, it emphasizes the hermeneutical implications of the chiasmic structure. At the center of the psalm (v. 9) one finds Yahweh "on high forever." On either side of Yahweh's exaltation one finds evildoers (פְּעֵלֵי אָוֶן, vv. 8, 10): the wicked on the left (רְשָׁעִים, v. 8), and enemies (אֹיְבֵיךָ, v. 10) on the right. The psalmist-persona scathingly submits that this ordering of the world is lost on the brutish and dim-witted, whose flourish is temporary (v. 8). Conversely, the speaker extols the enduring growth of the righteous and personally benefits from Yahweh's reign (cf. v. 8).

From the psalmist-persona's individual perspective, the reader is invited to consider a colorful cast of characters on the basis of the poem's imagery. The success of the wicked spreads like grass, but from Ps 90.5-6 the reader knows that such achievement is temporary and will finally meet permanent annihilation.

⁹⁴See Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 464; Schaefer, *Psalms*, 230; McCann, "Book of Psalms," 1050. McCann considers the full chiasmic structure of the psalm (as presented by Tate) to be too ambitious (1050).

The noun rendered “on high” by the NRSV (גָּרוֹם) is specifically a poetic term, exalting Yahweh in a figurative sense.⁹⁵ The same term is used to describe the exaltation of the psalmist-persona’s “horn” (קַרְנֵי), a figurative expression of strength. This exultation is like being anointed (בִּלְחֵי, *Qal* 1st per. sg., lit. “I mingled, mixed”) with a fine ointment, an act that “represents the refreshment offered a guest or the consecration of a royal figure.”⁹⁶ The psalmist-persona will rest in the lap of luxury, the refuge that Yahweh’s sovereignty affords, while the evil-doers fade on all sides. This world is not too different from the protective spread of Yahweh’s wings in Ps 91.4.

Yet the speaker also expands this individual experience to the righteous in general, who are likened to the palm tree and the “cedar in Lebanon” (v. 13). One can hardly underestimate the strength of this image. The tree is a significant metaphor in the Psalter, the Old Testament, and the ancient Near East.⁹⁷ The image of the tree is the “central metaphor” of Psalm 1, which “stands at the

⁹⁵Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 1928 (hereafter “BDB”).

⁹⁶Schaefer, *Psalms*, 230. On the difficulty of the verb and possible solutions, see Thijs Booij, “Short Notes: The Hebrew Text of Psalm XCII 11,” *Vetus Testamentum* 38 (1988): 210-14.

⁹⁷See Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, 55-79. See also Clifford, *Psalms 73-150*, 107.

Psalter's threshold" and "serves to orient the reader of the Psalms."⁹⁸ In both Psalm 1 and 92, the tree is used as a metaphor for the righteous, in contrast to the wicked. The image of the tree has strong wisdom and תורה associations, but also has definite royal connections and even associations with the community; it is employed broadly as a metaphor for life and righteousness.⁹⁹ Brown notes that in Psalm 92 the date palm "symbolizes the vitality that defies even old age, much in contrast to the image of the withering grass" in v. 8 and Psalm 90.¹⁰⁰

The contrast between the righteous and the wicked in particular betrays the psalmist-persona's sage manner of speaking. McCann notes that the verb forms in vv. 11-12 do not change from v. 10, and thus the psalmist-persona savors the salvation that is to come.¹⁰¹ The speaker sees the temporary triumph of the workers of evil but does not anguish over the rise of dullards. The wise bet is finally on those who take refuge in Yahweh, whose rule was established by the work of creation, and whose rule will once again be asserted when the

⁹⁸Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, 55. Brown suggests that the tree metaphor in particular plays a role in the final shape of the Psalter and its role as *tôrâ*, which functions as a replacement for the cultic institution of the temple (75).

⁹⁹Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, 57-61, 67-70.

¹⁰⁰Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, 76.

¹⁰¹McCann, "Book of Psalms," 1051. Cf. Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 230, and the NRSV, for example.

wicked wither and the righteous enjoy permanent rescue.¹⁰² McCann sums up the poem of Psalm 92 aptly: “in terms of the structure of the psalm and the reality of the psalmist’s world, the affirmation of God’s rule is made in the midst of evil.”¹⁰³ Taken together with Psalms 90-91, these three poems sound a sapiential voice, multivalent but delimited in its canonical context to address the calamity of the post-exilic community. Stepping into the world of these psalms, seeing this world from the psalmist’s point of view, the reader knows that the tragedies of exile and life after exile are real, but that God’s rule will ultimately prove a sure refuge. As Kraus concludes with Rudolf Kittel, it is a “justification of God’s righteous rule in hymnic style.”¹⁰⁴

With reference to this psalm, two additional observations are necessary. First, in the analysis of this psalm we begin to see that as a consequence of paying particular attention to literary persona and the world of the psalmist, an emphasis on the formative capacity of reading the Psalter becomes clear. To use Tate’s language, the identities of persona and reader fuse.¹⁰⁵ Clifford suggests

¹⁰²God’s “work” in the Psalter is often associated with creation. On this connection see Clifford, *Psalms 73-150*, 106; Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 466; Mays, *Psalms*, 299.

¹⁰³McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1051.

¹⁰⁴See Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 229.

¹⁰⁵See Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 465, and above.

that this psalm “enables” and “invites” the reader to adopt the perspective of the persona and receive the same assurances.¹⁰⁶

Second, vv. 2-4 are noteworthy from a persona-critical standpoint. The speaker celebrates the pleasure of psalm-singing. Kraus writes that the speaker is “at the place of *todah*” and finds “aesthetic fulfillment” in the act of psalm-singing – it has become “the essential content of life.”¹⁰⁷ In other words, the psalmist-persona lauds the life of the psalmist-poet. It is here, rather than any of the historical reconstructions noted above (or below), that the poet and persona draw near.

Cosmic Battle and the Present Crisis, I: The World of Psalm 93

In its canonical setting, Psalm 93 appears in a somewhat anomalous location. The psalm brings the first emphatic expression of the kingship of Yahweh, which is the core theme of Book IV. This theme, though central to the whole of Book IV, is primarily expressed in Psalms 96-99, leaving Psalm 93 at least two steps removed from the main group of psalms with which it has the most similarities in content. In his contextual reading of Psalms 90-94, Howard admits that at first glance there is little to tie Psalm 93 to the preceding psalms of Book IV. He nonetheless makes the case for several important connections.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶Clifford, *Psalms 73-150*, 105.

¹⁰⁷Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 228, 230.

¹⁰⁸Howard, “Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94,” 113.

As we have observed, the key motif in Psalm 92 appears in v. 9: “But you are on high forever, O Yahweh.” This exaltation of Yahweh as ruler is affirmed in Ps 93.2:

נִכּוֹן כְּסֹאֲךָ מֵאֵז מִעוֹלָם אֲתָה

Thus the two psalms share the theme of Yahweh’s kingship, even if Psalm 92 is not usually considered a Kingship of Yahweh psalm (as is Psalm 93). Howard also perceives concatenation in the use of מֵאֵז in Pss 92.6 and 93.2, which he takes as a divine epithet.¹⁰⁹ Psalm 93 also responds to a primary theme in Psalm 90, insofar as it “affirms YHWH’s eternality in a confident way, not despairingly contrasting it with human ephemerality, as we find in Psalm 90.”¹¹⁰

Looking forward, one also finds points of disjuncture between Psalm 93 and 94. Psalm 94 is neither a Kingship of Yahweh psalm nor a praise song, whereas Psalm 93 is both.¹¹¹ Howard, however, concludes that the two psalms have much stronger connections “than is generally assumed.”¹¹² Two keyword pairs, גֵּאוּת / גֵּאִים (Pss 93.1; 94.2) and יִרְכָּאֵי / יִרְכָּיִם (Pss 93.3; 94.5), link the

¹⁰⁹Howard, “Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94,” 113.

¹¹⁰Howard, “Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94,” 114. Tate supports Howard’s conclusion regarding the connections between Pss 90-94. See Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 488-89.

¹¹¹David M. Howard, *The Structure of Psalms 93-100* (ed. William Henry Propp; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 105.

¹¹²Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 118. See also Howard, “Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94,” 114; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 449.

psalms.¹¹³ Yahweh's sovereignty and secure, high position connect the psalms thematically.¹¹⁴ Howard, however, points out that *Torah* is also an important thematic connection between the two psalms:

On the level of 'motifs' (that is, not strictly lexical repetitions), we may note the reference to YHWH's decrees in Psalm 93 (v. 5a) and YHWH's Torah in Psalm 94 (v. 12b). The word 'ēdōt/'ēdūt ('testimonies, decrees, warnings') occurs 32 times in the Hebrew Bible (23 of these are in the Psalter) referring to the Torah. The echoes of the Sinai experience implicit in these terms are common throughout this section of the Psalter. In later periods, these terms came to be associated especially with the wisdom movement. Thus both psalms refer to YHWH's words as communicated at Sinai.¹¹⁵

In terms of the broad movement of the Psalter, Psalm 93 (together with the subsequent collection of Kingship psalms) appears at a crucial point, and its opening words – יהוה מלך – provide the most concise articulation of the response to the theological crisis in Books I-III.¹¹⁶ The Davidic kingship is lost, as is the refuge of the land (Books I-III). Yahweh is refuge, however, just as in the days of Moses (Psalms 90-91). Yahweh is forever on high, as asserted through the ordering of creation and the ultimate ordering of the wicked and righteous (Psalm 92). Yahweh is king.

¹¹³Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 105-107. See also Howard, "Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94," 114-16.

¹¹⁴Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 105, 107-8.

¹¹⁵Howard, "Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94," 116.

¹¹⁶See McCann, "Book of Psalms," 1053.

This inaugural assertion of Psalm 93 has drawn a great deal of attention from interpreters. Mowinckel employed the phrase “יְהוָה מֶלֶךְ” in support of his theory of an enthronement festival for Yahweh, arguing for the rendering “Yahweh *has become* King.”¹¹⁷ Subsequent to exhaustive deliberation, however, most interpreters overturn Mowinckel and translate the phrase as “Yahweh reigns,” or “Yahweh is king.” Tate also renders the phrase as “Yahweh reigns,” but appears somewhat annoyed at the debate when he concludes that “cultic terminology should not be pushed into such rationalistic modes of thinking. The dramatic nature of worship does not require an exact metaphysical delineation of words in liturgies.”¹¹⁸ What Tate pleads on cultic/liturgical grounds, I would also submit on poetic grounds. In the *literary world of the psalm*, either is possible; the speaker could legitimately celebrate the durative kingship of Yahweh that has been present all along (but perhaps overlooked), or reassert Yahweh’s rule after the intermittent calamities that play out in Books I-III and the biblical narrative at large.

This world in which Yahweh is king, however, is not accomplished on the assertion of v. 1 alone, but through the character of the speaker and the texture of

¹¹⁷See Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 36. Howard notes a decisive study by Michel Diethelm (“Studien zu den sogenannten Thronbesteigungspsalmen,” *Vetus Testamentum* 6 [1956]: 40-68), who concludes that Mowinckel errs, and that the correct translation is “Yahweh reigns” or similar. See also Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 233-34, who reaches a similar conclusion. Cf. Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 472.

¹¹⁸Cf. Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 472.

the psalm's imagery. Although the psalm's affinity with a liturgical setting has prompted several interpreters to hear portions of the psalm spoken by a chorus or community of speakers, we nonetheless encounter a single persona.¹¹⁹ The change of address (cf. vv. 1, 4; vv. 2-3, 5) may indeed "provide hints regarding the psalm's liturgical use," but within the psalm no change in speaker is necessary.¹²⁰ Rather than shaping our view of the psalm's pre-canonical use, the change to a direct address of Yahweh in v. 2 can shape our view of the persona. Weiser suggests that this shift "reveals that a stronger personal bond based on faith exists between the psalmist and God."¹²¹

The shifts to a more personal address make sense as the world of the psalm unfolds. After the inaugural statement that יהוה מלך, the reader encounters a vivid image that conveys the statement: Yahweh is "robed in majesty," "robed, girded with strength," a presence that commands the unshakable establishment of the תִּבֵּל (v. 1). These images, not the naked assertion, establish the presence of Yahweh in the world of the psalm. With the presence of Yahweh fixed in the reader's mind, the psalmist-persona addresses Yahweh directly, responding appropriately: "Your throne is established from old, you are from all eternity" (v. 2).

¹¹⁹See, for example, Broyles, *Psalms*, 367; Schaefer, *Psalms*, 232; Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 118.

¹²⁰Broyles, *Psalms*, 367.

¹²¹Weiser, *Psalms*, 619.

The next image conveys a classic ancient Near Eastern nemesis of the divine king. It is noteworthy that the speaker says that the waters (נְהַרִּים, lit. “rivers”)¹²² lift “their voice” (קוֹלָם). Of course, קוֹל does simply mean “sound” and is often used to refer to the roar of waters, but the chaotic waters “were actually personified as gods in Canaanite literature.”¹²³ In any case, the speaker tells Yahweh that the Sea threatens. Broyles notes the significance of the conflict:

Yahweh’s kingship is here exhibited dramatically by his superiority to the sea Contrary to the static views of divine kingship that many of us imagine (God merely sitting on his throne), this psalm presents King Yahweh exerting his warrior strength and waging battle against chaos and evil.¹²⁴

What is most interesting is that the psalm never actually presents King Yahweh waging battle. The psalmist introduces the image of the Sea and moves immediately to an assertion of King Yahweh’s victory (v. 4). Yet Broyles’ comment is nonetheless accurate. The psalm’s imagery conjures so powerfully that the reader quite naturally imagines what lies in between vv. 4-5. In fact, the battle is most powerfully portrayed by its very omission.

By means of this conflict, Psalm 93 emphatically links creation and the kingship of Yahweh.¹²⁵ Mays aptly observes that the “two are coordinate

¹²²See Broyles, *Psalms*, 368, for an explanation of this usage.

¹²³McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1054.

¹²⁴Broyles, *Psalms*, 368.

¹²⁵Weiser, *Psalms*, 618; Clifford, *Psalms 73-150*, 108-10.

because in the way the psalm thinks about reality, the establishment of the world was the deed by which [Yahweh] gained kingship,” and that Yahweh’s kingship “is guarantee of the stability of the ordered, inhabitable world.”¹²⁶ Thus Yahweh’s kingship matters a great deal with regard to the essential questions of the post-exilic community: “Who are we?” and “How do we continue?” Both are answered, it would seem, by seeking refuge in King Yahweh.

The psalm concludes with a final image of King Yahweh, spoken in direct address (v. 5). Broyles suggests that with regard to the “statutes” (עֲדָתָי) of Yahweh, we should “not think of codified legislation but of the dynamic encounter between Yahweh and his people at the temple.”¹²⁷ The image is of Yahweh delivering royal decrees from a palace befit for sacredness. With striking economy, the psalmist-persona imagines and interacts with majestic and powerful characters engaged in the cosmic struggle of creation.

Cosmic Battle and the Present Crisis, II: The World of Psalm 94

Like Psalm 93, Psalm 94 is something of a canonical anomaly. The psalm intrudes into a series of classic enthronement psalms (Psalms 93; 95-99), and is longer, more complex, and “sounds a more discordant note” than the

¹²⁶Mays, *Psalms*, 301.

¹²⁷Broyles, *Psalms*, 369.

surrounding psalms.¹²⁸ Psalm 94 exhibits a more apparent affinity to Psalms 90-92, primarily in terms of common wisdom vocabulary and motifs. In particular Psalms 92 and 94 exhibit numerous lexicographical links and are both concerned with comparing the wicked/foolish, who temporarily flourish, and the righteous/wise, who are ultimately rescued and sustained by Yahweh.¹²⁹

Howard also identifies echoes of Psalm 90 in Psalm 94: 1) the two psalms contain the only lament portions in Psalms 90-101; 2) in Ps 90.2 Yahweh is the sovereign creator of the earth (אֱלֹהֵי אֶרֶץ), and in Ps 94.2 Yahweh is the sovereign judge over the earth (אֱלֹהֵי אֶרֶץ); 3) in Ps 90.11 no human can know (יִדְעוּ) the scope of Yahweh's wrath, while conversely in Ps 94.11 Yahweh knows (יָדַעַת) human thoughts; and finally 4) the heart (לֵב) is the seat of right living and desires in Ps 90.12, and in Ps 94.15 the upright of heart (לֵב) follow Yahweh's restored justice.¹³⁰ McCann believes the similarities between Psalm 94 and 90-92 may suggest that Psalm 94

¹²⁸Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93*, 119; Howard, "Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94," 114; Howard, "Psalm 94 among the Kingship-of-Yhwh Psalms," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61 (1999): 667-68. See also McCann, "Book of Psalms," 1057.

¹²⁹See Howard, "Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94," 114; McCann, "Book of Psalms," 1057.

¹³⁰Howard, "Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94," 121-22.

functions to bind the collection of enthronement psalms (Pss 93; 95-99) to the opening psalms of Book IV.¹³¹

Thus Psalms 93 and 94 form a kind of interlocking¹³² arrangement between the sage and enthroning psalms of Book IV:

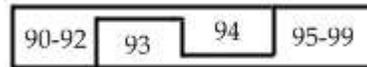


Figure 2: Interlocking Arrangement of Psalms 93-94

Yet at the same time Psalm 94 bears numerous connections to the psalms immediately adjacent (93 and 95), even though it is clearly different in character and type. We have already noted the links between Psalm 93 and 94.¹³³ As we will find, there are also significant links between Psalm 94 and 95.¹³⁴ Howard argues that the placement of Psalm 94 “should no longer be seriously questioned,” as it is aptly suited to function “as an appropriate hinge” between the early part of Book IV, which raises questions about life and the relationship between God and God’s people, and the middle part of Book IV, which breaks

¹³¹McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1057.

¹³²Wilson (“Shaping the Psalter,” 75) uses this term to describe the interchange of Psalms 93 and 94.

¹³³See above, Psalm 93.

¹³⁴See below, Psalm 95.

into unfettered praise of King Yahweh.¹³⁵ Thus Psalm 94 has an “editorial cohesiveness” within the context of Book IV.¹³⁶

From a persona-critical standpoint, Psalm 94 follows Psalm 93 quite naturally. In Psalm 93 the psalmist-persona presents the reader/hearer with a powerful image of King Yahweh. Then the speaker directly addresses Yahweh, the creator whose throne is unshakable. Next enter the roaring waters, and the cosmic battle ensues in the imagination of the reader/hearer. Finally the psalmist-persona addresses the victorious Yahweh, who speaks from a holy temple. A comparable quality of voice, cast of characters, and conflict appears in Psalm 94.

The variety of form-critical categories represented in Psalm 94 has led to the suggestion that the psalm lacks unity, although many interpreters argue otherwise.¹³⁷ Following Gunkel, most commentators classify Psalm 94.1-7 as a communal lament.¹³⁸ Although, as McCann concludes, such identification does not fit very well with the psalm as a whole, it is nonetheless frequently cast over

¹³⁵Howard, “Psalm 94,” 668; Howard, “Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94,” 122. See also Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 488-89. Indeed, Hossfeld and Zenger characterize the positioning of Psalm 94 between Psalms 93 and 95 as “theological brilliance” (*Psalms 2*, 456).

¹³⁶Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 489.

¹³⁷See Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 486; Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 238-39; McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1057; Schaefer, *Psalms*, 234.

¹³⁸See McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1057; Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 485-86; Gunkel, *Psalms*, 82.

the entire poem.¹³⁹ Schaefer considers vv. 16-19 “a startling leap expressed in a rhetorical question,” in which “the poet represents the people’s complaint.”¹⁴⁰ Likewise Weiser suggests that “the worshiper sets the testimony to his personal saving experience.”¹⁴¹ Broyles does observe that “the speaking ‘I’ who confesses the Lord as ‘my God’ (v. 22) refers to ‘the Lord our God’ in the very next verse.”¹⁴² While the last word of the psalm does indeed include a first-person, plural suffix (אֱלֹהֵינוּ), it does not necessarily cast a “communal” shadow over the entire voice aspect of the poem. One may read Psalm 93 as a coherent whole presented by the voice of an individual.

In vv. 1-7, the aspect of voice and world of the psalm are similar to Psalm 93. The speaker directly addresses Yahweh, who is now emphatically characterized as the “God of vengeance” (אֱלֹהֵי נִקְמוֹת, 94.1). Howard notes that vengeance is a royal prerogative and an exercise of “legitimate executive power,” which corresponds to the royal imagery in Ps 93.1.¹⁴³ The one who established the earth (Ps 93.1) is now the one judging (שֹׁפֵט, Ps 94.2). Next the psalmist-

¹³⁹McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1057.

¹⁴⁰Schaefer, *Psalms*, 234.

¹⁴¹Weiser, *Psalms*, 624.

¹⁴²Broyles, *Psalms*, 371. See also Schaefer, *Psalms*, 234.

¹⁴³See Howard, “Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94,” 122. Regarding this identification Howard refers to George E. Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1973), 70-104.

persona decries the wicked as a third-person reference while still maintaining a direct address to Yahweh:

עֲדֹמְתֵי רְשָׁעִים | יְהוָה עֲדֹמְתֵי רְשָׁעִים יַעֲלִזוּ: (Ps 94.3)

This kind of voice aspect is identical to the situation in Psalm 93:

נִשְׂאוּ נְהַרֹת | יְהוָה נִשְׂאוּ נְהַרֹת קוֹלָם יִשְׂאוּ נְהַרֹת דְּכִיָּם: (Ps 93.3)

Just as the floods lift their roaring voice in Ps 93.3, so the wicked “pour out” their arrogant speech (יִבְיֵעוּ) (יִבְיֵעוּ) their arrogant speech (יִדְבְּרוּ עֲתָק), lit. “they speak arrogant [speech]”).¹⁴⁴

Furthermore, the speaker identifies the wicked as a threat to Yahweh. The psalmist actually reports the challenge of the wicked (וַיֹּאמְרוּ, “and they say,” v. 7), presumably still in direct address to Yahweh. The wicked contend that Yahweh is essentially blind to their activity (וְלֹא־יִבִּין and לֹא יִרְאֶה, v. 7).

Thus the speakers and worlds of Psalm 93 and 94 are connected. If King Yahweh established the world and defeated the waters of chaos, then Yahweh can also judge the earth and take vengeance against the wicked. The reader/hearer is invited to correlate the cosmic battle in Psalm 93 to the present crisis within Psalm 94.

Whereas Psalm 93 moves immediately to a denouement with Yahweh issuing decrees, Psalm 94 continues for some sixteen verses. The remainder of the psalm continues to expand the world of vv. 1-7, and though the same

¹⁴⁴The expression “pour out” is also used figuratively of speech. See BDB, 615.

persona continues to speak, the psalm exhibits several shifts with regard to the aspect of voice. Verse 8 begins a direct address to the foolish. Far from blind, Yahweh is the very inventor of the tools of perception (v. 9), and, being fully aware of the activities of the wicked, will respond appropriately (vv. 10, 13-15). In v. 12 the speaker again returns to a direct address to Yahweh, but now in third-person reference to the righteous, who are Yahweh's own.¹⁴⁵ Although the entire psalm has a general wisdom-like character, in these verses (vv. 8-15) the sage character of the speaker is most prominent.

Verse 16 represents another shift in the aspect of voice. Up to this point, the speaker has addressed the world of the psalm "in terms of traditional wisdom theology."¹⁴⁶ Now the psalmist persona speaks explicitly in the first person, relating a personal experience consonant with the general experience of the righteous.¹⁴⁷ This confessional, "I-You" speech suddenly intensifies the presence of the speaker in the poem as well as the speaker's relationship to Yahweh. The remaining verses alternately address Yahweh directly (v. 20) and speak about Yahweh in the third person (vv.22-23), which Schaefer suggests conveys a sense of drama to the reader.¹⁴⁸ Schaefer also notes that the psalm as a

¹⁴⁵Schaefer describes vv. 12-13, 18b not as a direct address to Yahweh, but as an "introspective monologue with God very close by" (*Psalms*, 234).

¹⁴⁶See Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 494.

¹⁴⁷See Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 494-95.

¹⁴⁸Schaefer, *Psalms*, 234.

whole has an “impatient tone,” a sense of urgency that is created in part by the frequent rhetorical questions of the speaker.¹⁴⁹

Despite a myriad of nuanced shifts in voice, the persona of Psalm 94 as a whole exhibits a sage character. Tate suggests that the speaker “fits the mold of a well-informed, theologically versed leader,” who deals with the evildoers “as a teacher.”¹⁵⁰ Mays simply refers to the speaker as “teacher.”¹⁵¹ As in Psalms 90-92, the speaker in Psalm 94 has a didactic focus. Taken together, the multivalent but canonically constrained voices of Psalms 90-92, and 94 press a point: the present crisis is real but temporary, and Yahweh will ultimately restore justice. Such is the confession of Moses. The great mythical battles of the past tell a similar story. Traditional wisdom theology supports it. The personal confession of the psalmist-persona offers the same assurance.

Already in the first quarter of Book IV the reader is invited to begin constructing (or implying) an editorial/authorial voice operative in this penultimate division of the Psalter. The Psalter-persona presents the basic conflict between faith tradition and life experience. The Psalter-persona has inherited a theological perspective in which Yahweh is sovereign, just, and faithful to those who trust in Yahweh. At the same time, the Psalter-persona recognizes the element of recalcitrant protest within the canonical story, in which

¹⁴⁹Schaefer, *Psalms*, 234.

¹⁵⁰Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 487, 492.

¹⁵¹Mays, *Psalms*, 304.

the crisis of exile fundamentally challenges the inherited theological tradition. Yahweh is sovereign and faithful to the people, but in the world of the psalmist-persona, the people wait in longsuffering for Yahweh's power and fidelity – asking, עַד-גְּמֹלִי. These psalms assert in the midst of crisis the certainty of Yahweh's refuge and kingship. Ironically, the boldness of the Psalter-persona's claim is a function of the uncertainty that the poems betray; a bright vision of the future imagined in the present darkness.

One may also note how well the psalmist-personae of these psalms render the proper effect in relation to Book IV as a whole. A sapiential voice is wholly suited to pursue this vexing theological problem. Furthermore, the sage personae in these psalms seem to correspond to the two basic wisdom traditions within the Hebrew canon. The psalmist-persona of Psalm 91, for example, seems to speak from within the conventional wisdom tradition, whereas the psalmist-persona of Psalm 90 seems to speak according to the counter wisdom tradition.

Is Yahweh among Us or Not? Psalm 95

As we have observed, the intrusion of Psalm 94 into the enthronement series occasions the juxtaposition of psalms that are quite different in overall character. Despite the apparent disjunction, however, there are numerous lexicographical concatenations and thematic links that tie the psalms together. This relationship applies to Psalms 95 and 94 as well. In his analysis of Psalms 93-100,

Howard concludes that “Psalm 94 is most closely connected to Psalm 95.”¹⁵² The basis for this conclusion is lexicographical, structural, and thematic. Psalms 94 and 95 share a considerable common vocabulary, of which the keyword “rock” (צַיִר) is the most significant (cf. Pss 94.22; 95.1).¹⁵³ The word appears elsewhere in Book IV only in Ps 92.16, and its occurrence at the end of Psalm 94 and the beginning of Psalm 95 represents what Howard calls “a prime example of concatenation.”¹⁵⁴ Structurally, the two psalms “contain the only sustained nonhymnic material among Psalms 93-100.”¹⁵⁵ Yahweh’s relationship with Yahweh’s own people, Yahweh’s sovereignty over the earth, and Yahweh’s role as creator are key themes in both psalms.¹⁵⁶

Although Psalm 95 does have several links to Psalm 96 – which not surprisingly include references to Yahweh as king and Yahweh’s sovereignty and role as creator – Psalm 95 bears a much stronger connection to Psalm 100.¹⁵⁷ Howard concludes that their very closely related structure and thematic

¹⁵²Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 119.

¹⁵³Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 119-21.

¹⁵⁴Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 121, 174.

¹⁵⁵Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 121.

¹⁵⁶See Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 120-21.

¹⁵⁷Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 131, 138.

emphases form “an inclusion or frame around Psalms 96-99,” the core of the kingship of Yahweh psalms.¹⁵⁸

Thus Psalm 95 has two canonical roles. First, it functions as a transition, or “pivot” psalm, to the celebration of Yahweh’s kingship.¹⁵⁹ Second, it functions “in tandem with Psalm 100 to demarcate the second section of Book IV,” bracketing the four kingship of Yahweh psalms in between.¹⁶⁰

The undeniable inclusion of the community and the repeated calls to worship in this psalm have stirred commentators toward “rather colorful” reconstructions of a liturgical festival.¹⁶¹ Without denying the psalm’s clear affinity to a liturgical setting, we will instead focus on the present literary context, the voice(s) within, and the literary world of the individual psalm.

In terms of literary voice, Psalm 95 is striking. As we have already seen, the presence of the community is stronger in this psalm than any to this point in Book IV. Within the span of vv. 1-7a, seven of the nine verbs (excluding participles) are in the first-person, plural form, with ten first-person, plural references in all. There are three very slight shifts in the aspect of voice within the span of these verses, and they shape the overall structure of the section. The

¹⁵⁸Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 138; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 462.

¹⁵⁹Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 175; Wilson, *Editing*, 217.

¹⁶⁰Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 138, 175.

¹⁶¹Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 498-500.

psalm begins with an imperative address to the community (לְכוּ, 2nd per. masc. pl.); the “I” persona addresses the “you” community. This command is immediately followed by a first person, plural verb that is formally cohortative (נִרְנְנֶה). The “I-you” mode collapses into “we,” and in an essentially reflexive manner the persona exhorts the community to worship. The speaker(s) in vv. 1-2 does/do not describe a scene so much as call the audience to create one. The exhortations to sing, celebrate, and worship are situated around the presence (פָּנִיּוֹ, v. 2) of a central image, Yahweh the “rock” (צוּר, v.1).

This manner of speaking appears to change in v. 3. First person, plural references are absent in vv. 3-5, and these verses are concerned primarily with descriptions and images of Yahweh in the third person – that is, the verses are spoken *about* Yahweh, rather than *to* Yahweh. First, Yahweh is a “great God” (אֵל גָּדוֹל, v. 3), and a “great king above all gods” (עַל-כָּל-אֱלֹהִים וּמֶלֶךְ גָּדוֹל, v.3), enthroning Yahweh above the pantheon of deities. The basis for this description comes in the form of images of Yahweh as creator (vv. 4-5). In v. 4 Yahweh holds the “depths of the earth” (מְהַקְרֵי-אָרֶץ) in hand (יָדָיו), and therefore the heights (הַרְיִם) belong to Yahweh as well. In v. 5 Yahweh actively forms (עֲשָׂהוּ, יִצְרֶה) the sea and land, which are also counted among Yahweh’s possessions. Once again mythical images connect Yahweh’s kingship and

creative capacity, correlating to previous imagery found particularly in Psalms 93 and 94.¹⁶²

Then in v. 6a the “I-you” speech mode returns with the appearance of a second imperative verb (בִּאֵר). The speaker addresses the community, and then the mode of speech again collapses into “we.” The “we” voice in v. 6 gives exhortations similar to vv. 1-2, and according to McCann “invites actions that were appropriate for greeting a king.”¹⁶³

Verse 7a again shifts to a third-person description of Yahweh, but now highlights the relationship between the community and Yahweh. This relationship forms the basis for the actions the community is called to take. The image of the shepherd is an ancient Near Eastern staple and was often associated with the role of king.¹⁶⁴ The entire scope of the earth, which in v. 4 lies in Yahweh’s hand, is now replaced with an image of the community itself, Yahweh’s “flock” (צֹאן).

In terms of literary voice, therefore, vv. 1-5 and vv. 6-7a parallel each other. In v. 7b, the mode of speaking briefly returns to a direct address of the

¹⁶²Clifford suggests that the “poem presupposes a narrative, the combat myth,” in which “a warrior god is commissioned by the divine assembly to combat a threat to the universe posed by a chaos monster. . . . The warrior kills the monster, and returns victorious to the divine assembly,” who then proclaim the warrior god “the Great King.” See Clifford, *Psalms 73-150*, 117.

¹⁶³McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1061.

¹⁶⁴McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1062.

community, although rather than an imperative the psalmist-persona speaks in a subjunctive sense:

... הַיּוֹם אִם-בְּקִלּוֹ תִשְׁמָעוּ: (Ps 95.7b)

Weiser comments that the divine “utterance” was “probably spoken by a priest or by a prophet officiating at the cult.”¹⁶⁵ Such an assumption certainly makes sense, but it is at least noteworthy that the speaker specifically encourages the community to hear (שָׁמַעַתְּ) the “voice” (קוֹל) of Yahweh. The most basic understanding of the poem’s world is that Yahweh speaks. If the reader/hearer perceives a psalmist-persona prophetically delivering a divine oracle, then we have an interesting voice aspect that is not entirely different from the Greco-Roman rhetorical situation of *prosopopoeia* (similar to Ps 91.14-16).¹⁶⁶ The clause is a very abbreviated transition, giving the introduction of the divine speech a sudden impression.¹⁶⁷ Schafer best captures the effect:

Psalm 95 opens in a festive mood, with procession and joyful praise. The scene is set and suddenly, God, the one who is being celebrated, speaks and chills the festive air. Thus ends the psalm.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵Weiser, *Psalms*, 626, n 1. Kraus claims that the speaker “is obviously one of the Levites who addresses the community with the authority of prophetic charisma.” See Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 247.

¹⁶⁶See above, “Psalm 91,” and ch. 2, “Persona: History and Theory.”

¹⁶⁷Broyles, *Psalms*, 373; Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 247; Schaefer, *Psalms*, 236.

¹⁶⁸Schaefer, *Psalms*, 236.

Tate points out that the key passage related to the divine cautionary speech is Exod 17.7: "He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'"¹⁶⁹ As Wilson observes, the community's failure to accept Yahweh's kingship "is compared to the rebelliousness of Israel before Moses in the Exodus. The result then (as now) was the loss of the rest promised by God. The contingent nature of God's promises is clearly emphasized."¹⁷⁰ The key question for the post-exilic community was, "If our Davidic/Solomonic kingdom is lost, then who are we?" The multivalent but canonically constrained voice thus far in Book IV has attempted to offer the sapiential reply, "We are the community that takes refuge in Yahweh, who was our refuge in the days of Moses and who is our refuge and king in the present." Psalms 90-94 have imagined a world where Yahweh is indeed refuge and king. Psalm 95 presents the appropriate response of the community. In the Exodus event, the identity of the people of Israel was formed ("I will take you as my people, and I will be your God," Exod 6.7), and a pitfall to the formation of that identity was the failure to recognize the reality of the presence of Yahweh (Exod 17.7). In the world of the present psalm and the literary context of the Psalter, the identity of the community is being reformed. The divine utterance in Ps 95.7b-11 warns the community that a similar pitfall "is

¹⁶⁹Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 502.

¹⁷⁰Wilson, *Editing*, 217.

a real possibility for the people of the Lord."¹⁷¹ McCann detects the sense of urgency that the cautionary conclusion of the psalm creates, reflecting a quality of voice that Schaefer observes in the previous psalm.¹⁷²

The Voice of Hope: Yahweh's Rule in Psalms 96-99

Psalms 96-99 represent the core series of kingship of Yahweh psalms, which together creatively convey a point of view – a view that responds to the theological problems raised in Books I-III and forms the theological heart of Book IV and the Psalter: Yahweh is king.¹⁷³ These psalms are similar in terms of their canonical relationships, voice, and literary world. They are treated here together due to their relative uniformity. At the same time, however, each psalm also constitutes a discrete poetic unit with unique features and qualities of significance for the present analysis.¹⁷⁴

Manifold connections between these psalms come as no surprise since they are each classic examples of the so-called enthronement psalms. The nature of these connections is nonetheless striking. While there are concatenating links between each of the psalms, Psalms 96-99 appear to exhibit an alternating pattern

¹⁷¹Mays, *Psalms*, 306.

¹⁷²See McCann, "Book of Psalms," 1062 (cf. Schaefer, *Psalms*, 234).

¹⁷³Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 177; McCann, "Book of Psalms," 662, 1066; Wilson, "Use of the Royal Psalms," 92.

¹⁷⁴Tate argues that Psalms 96-99 form a "coherent unit" and treats them together, though he also recognizes each as a discrete, unique poem. See *Psalms 51-100*, 504, 531.

of close relationships.¹⁷⁵ Psalms 96 and 98 have a larger lexical commonality and exhibit more significant keyword links than any two psalms within Psalms 93-100.¹⁷⁶ Besides the obvious echo of references to Yahweh's kingship (Pss 96.10; 98.6), the opening call of both psalms is שִׁירוּ לַיהוָה שִׁיר חָדָד (Pss 96.1; 98.1), and the psalms close with almost identical language:

לְפָנֵי יְהוָה | כִּי בָא כִּי בָא לְשֹׁפֵט הָאָרֶץ יִשְׁפֹּט-תִּבְלַבְל בְּצַדִּיק וְעַמִּים בְּאִמּוֹנָתוֹ:
(Ps 96.13)

לְפָנֵי-יְהוָה כִּי בָא לְשֹׁפֵט הָאָרֶץ יִשְׁפֹּט-תִּבְלַבְל בְּצַדִּיק וְעַמִּים בְּמִישָׁרִים: (Ps 98.9)

Several manuscripts and a similar expression in 1 Chr 16.33 omit the repeated “for he comes” appearing in Ps 96.13.¹⁷⁷ The only other difference is the means of Yahweh's judgment: “truth” (אִמּוֹנָה) in Ps 96.3 and “equity” (מִישָׁר) in Ps 98.9. In Ps 96.10, however, Yahweh also judges the people with equity. Thematically, both psalms characterize Yahweh as one bringing salvation, judgment, and wonders, and both portray Yahweh's sovereignty over the natural world and all its inhabitants.¹⁷⁸ In fact, the only thematic difference between Psalms 96 and 98

¹⁷⁵Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 177. See also Wilson, *Editing*, 217.

¹⁷⁶Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 44. Howard describes these keyword links as “an embarrassment of riches.” See also Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 524.

¹⁷⁷See note to Ps 96.13 in *BHS*.

¹⁷⁸Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 145-47.

is that the latter “does not specifically mention other gods or idols.”¹⁷⁹ Howard also points out a structural similarity between these two psalms:

Call to Praise 1:	96.1-3	98.1a
Reasons for Praise:	96.4-6	98.1b-3
Call to Praise 2:	96.7-9	98.4-6
Bridge:	96.10	-
Call to Praise 3:	96.11-12	98.7-8
Reasons for Praise	96.13	98.9

Although Psalm 98 lacks a bridge, Howard points out that the notion of Yahweh’s kingship, which forms the bridge in Ps 96.10, has already been introduced in Ps 98.6.¹⁸⁰

The connections between Psalms 97 and 99 are not as strong in comparison to the connections between Psalms 96 and 98, though still noteworthy. Of greatest significance is that the psalms both begin with the key phrase of Book IV: **יְהוָה מֶלֶךְ** (Pss 97.1; 99.1). Other links include references to a theophanic “cloud” (**עָנָן**, Pss 97.2; 99.7) and the mention of Zion (Ps 97.8; 99.2).¹⁸¹

The sovereignty, judgment, and holiness of Yahweh are themes in both psalms.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 45. Howard notes, however, that if the waters of Psalm 98 are understood in a mythopoeic sense as gods, then the psalms would have this theme in common as well.

¹⁸⁰Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 147.

¹⁸¹Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 159.

¹⁸²See Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 159.

In terms of literary voice, Psalms 96-99 are fairly uniform. The poems exhibit a patent lack of emphasis on the presence of the literary voice: there are virtually no explicit self references – no “I” or “we” surfaces in the psalms. The only grammatical first-person elements in these psalms appear in the divine descriptor “our God” (אֱלֹהֵינוּ), which appears once in Psalm 98 (v. 3) and four times in Psalm 99 (vv. 5, 8, 9 [2x]). While God is the constant subject of description and object of action in these psalms, Yahweh is actually seldom addressed directly. In most cases, the speaker intermittently slips into a direct address of the divine, as if by momentary lapse. In Ps 97.8-9 the speaker suddenly addresses Yahweh directly with regard to Zion and Judah’s joyful response to Yahweh’s judgments. Likewise the speaker in Ps 99.4 directly addresses the “Mighty King” (וְעֵז מְלֶכֶךְ, lit. “and strength of a king”) to extol acts of justice. The phrase appears again in v. 8 regarding Yahweh’s response to Moses and Aaron. Otherwise Yahweh is typically spoken *about*, rather than spoken *to* in these psalms.

The personae in Psalms 96-99, however, do specify addressees on several occasions. The addressees may be summed up by the first verse in the group (Ps 96.1): “כָּל-הָאָרֶץ.” In addition to “all the earth” (Pss 96.1; 98.4), the “families of the peoples” (מִשְׁפְּחוֹת עַמִּים, Ps 96.7) are directly addressed, as are the “righteous” (צַדִּיקִים, 97.12). In many instances, the personae of Psalms 96-99 exhort various members or elements of the earth to raise their own voices. “All

the earth" is called to "rejoice," "sing," "make a joyful noise," "declare," and perhaps even "roar" (Pss 96.1, 6, 11; 97.1; 98.4, 7). Reminiscent of Ps 93.3, the sea is called to "roar" (יִרְעַם), and the floods to "clap their hands" (יִגְחֹאֲרוּ כַּף) for Yahweh's coming judgment (Pss 96.11; 98.7). Likewise the fields are called to "exult" (יִעֲלֹז), the trees to "sing" (יִרְנְנוּ), and the hills to "sing together" (יִרְנְנוּ יַחַד) for the same reason (Pss 96.12, 98.8).

In Ps 96.10 the speaker gives the order to say "Yahweh is king." In 97.6 the speaker confesses that the heavens proclaim Yahweh's righteousness, and that the towns (בְּנוֹת, lit. "daughters") of Judah rejoice (Ps 97.8). In Ps 99.6-8 the psalmist-persona recalls that Moses, Aaron, and Samuel cried out to Yahweh, who answered by speaking from the pillar of cloud. Yet despite the multiple exhortations for nature and humans to "speak up," there is no explicitly reported speech in these psalms.

In short, the personae in Psalms 96-99 address everyone and everything, while hearing from none. The speakers address people only in a collective or universal manner. The speakers also summon and personify aspects of the natural world, as well as the creatures of the earth (Pss 96.11-12; 98.7). The scope and nature of the addressees lend an apostrophic quality to the aspect of voice in Psalms 96-99. Perhaps the simplest way to perceive the primary manner of speaking in these psalms is a single literary voice within each psalm that addresses the reader/hearer in an extended apostrophe to "all the earth."

Although in each psalm the presence of the speaker is not emphasized through self-reference or self-description, each speaks in an authoritative manner. The poems are saturated with imperative summons and assertions. In addition to the frequently-occurring imperative form, many of the imperfect verbs may be translated in a jussive sense (Pss 96.11-12; 97.1; 98.7-8; 99.1, 3). The sense of urgency felt in previous psalms comes to full bloom in this section. The speakers put this commanding and urgent force behind a message – they are concerned with poetically conveying a point of view. Mays characterizes Psalm 96 in particular as having “a definite evangelical cast.”¹⁸³ The psalmist-persona in 96.2 instructs the audience to “proclaim” (בְּשִׁירָה), which the LXX translates “preach good news” (εὐαγγελίζεσθε, impv. aor. mid. 2nd per. pl.).

The emphatically-preached gospel of these psalms is threefold. First, Yahweh is king (96.10; 97.1; 98.6; 99.1). While the speakers in these psalms do have a tendency to “tell” rather than “show,” the worlds of these poems are cast with striking images, consistently shaping a world fit for a king. Tate creatively understands Ps 96.6 as “a tetrad of personified divine powers” attending Yahweh in the temple, “agents” of Yahweh’s saving work that make for an abstract but majestic image.¹⁸⁴ Psalm 97 in particular contains powerful theophanic imagery, in which Yahweh’s presence constitutes the fiercest forces

¹⁸³Mays, *Psalms*, 308. See also McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1065.

¹⁸⁴Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 410, 414.

on earth (Ps 97.2-5). This imagery connects to the past theophany of Moses and Aaron that the speaker recalls in Ps 99.7. Psalm 99 opens with Yahweh “enthroned” (יָשֵׁב) on the cherubim (Ps. 99.1).¹⁸⁵ By comparison, the deities worshipped by other peoples are “worthless things” (אֱלֹהֵי אֲלֻמִּים, Ps 96.5), a noun used in the MT as a derogatory term for gods.¹⁸⁶

The second aspect of this gospel is that the earth should respond appropriately to King Yahweh. The appropriate response is both joy and fear. In Psalms 96 and 98 the speakers summon unbridled joy from the audience, while in Psalms 97 and 99 the speakers are by comparison more restrained in their praise and articulate a sense of awe such that the audience will “tremble” (יִרְגְּזוּ, 99.1).¹⁸⁷ Taken together the speakers in these psalms seem to work extremely hard to convince their audience to heed the cautionary oracle in Ps 95.8-11 and recognize the presence and sovereignty of King Yahweh. Clifford says that the poem of Psalm 99 “is intent on preparing the nations for accepting their new Lord.”¹⁸⁸ The speakers animate the heavens and earth and all civilization in a royal reception for the divine king; the imagery of the waters, fields, hills, and

¹⁸⁵Cf. Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 526.

¹⁸⁶See Tate, *Psalms 51-100*. On this comparison between Yahweh and other gods, see Ps 97.7, 9.

¹⁸⁷See Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 178.

¹⁸⁸Clifford, *Psalms*, 129.

trees in celebration particularly portray the literary word imagined in these psalms (Pss 96.1-3, 11-12; 97.1, 6, 8; 98.4-8; 99.1-2).

Finally, the essential consequence of Yahweh's kingship is the restoration of justice. The psalmist-persona tells of Yahweh's acts of justice with regard to the great figures of the past, when Yahweh was "forgiving" (נָשָׂא) but nonetheless an "avenger" (נִקְוֶה) of their wrongdoings (Ps 99.6-8). The recollection of Moses is particularly noteworthy, considering that as a "Moses Book," Book IV has already looked back to the time of Moses as evidence of Yahweh's refuge and reign.¹⁸⁹ The justice of Yahweh in the past, however, is also a present reality in the world of these psalms:

The Lord loves those who hate evil;
he guards the lives of his faithful;
he rescues them from the hand of the wicked.
Light dawns for the righteous,
and joy for the upright in heart. (NRSV, Ps 97.10)

The Lord has made known his victory;
he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.
He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness
to the house of Israel.
All the ends of the earth have seen
the victory of our God. (NRSV, Ps 98.2-3)

Most importantly, on the basis of this assertion about the past and present justice of Yahweh, the speakers anticipate with certainty a coming restoration of justice:

. . . for he is coming,

¹⁸⁹See above, "A Persona Mosaic: The Multivalent Voice of Psalm 90." See also Wilson, *Editing*, 217.

for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth. (NRSV, Ps 96.12b-13).

. . . for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity. (NRSV, Ps 98.9)

For this reason many interpreters conceive of these psalms as having an eschatological thrust.¹⁹⁰ The speakers imagine and participate in a world where God's reign restores justice. As McCann concludes, the shape of the Psalter "makes it clear that the sovereignty of God is asserted in the face of opposition."¹⁹¹ It is against this canonical background that the quality of voice in Psalms 96-99 makes sense. Their voice is set against calamity, against the victory of the wicked, the sovereignty of idols, and a community forgotten by Yahweh. They assert a world under the rule of King Yahweh, even as they admit circumstances that suggest otherwise.¹⁹² When heard in isolation, one could almost characterize the cosmic scope, naked assertion, and imperative tone of these speakers as having an insincere quality. When heard within their canonical context, however, these personae speak with a rather unparalleled voice of faith

¹⁹⁰See McCann, "Book of Psalms," 1064, 1066-67, 1070, 1073; Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 531; Weiser, *Psalms*, 638-39; Broyles, *Psalms*, 377; Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 255.

¹⁹¹McCann, "Book of Psalms," 1067.

¹⁹²See McCann, "Book of Psalms," 1070.

and hope.¹⁹³ In short, attention to the aspect of voice in these psalms is important because it enables the leap of faith required for the survival of the community to which the poems belong.

Survival and the Search for Identity: Psalm 100

Despite a disparity in length, Psalm 100 is most closely related to Psalm 95 within Book IV. Both psalms open with a call to “give a shout” (רוע) and both psalms give the summons to “enter” (באו, Pss 95.2; 100.6).¹⁹⁴ In Book IV the noun תודה appears only in Psalms 95 and 100. Both psalms “emphasize the close relationship of Yahweh” with Yahweh’s own people.¹⁹⁵ At the point of this emphasis in each psalm, Howard notes a striking similarity:

(Ps 95.7a) כִּי הוּא אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאַנְחָנוּ עִם מְרֵעֵיתוֹ וְצֹאן יָדוֹ

(Ps 100.3b) הוּא־עֲשָׂנוּ וְלֹא אֲנַחְנוּ עִמּוֹ וְצֹאן מְרֵעֵיתוֹ

The *BHS* variant notes for 100.3 specify that instead of “וְלֹא אֲנַחְנוּ” (“and not we ourselves”), several manuscripts (including Heironymus and the Targum) follow the *Qere* reading, וְלֹא אֲנַחְנוּ (“and we are his”), a reading that the *NRSV* follows

¹⁹³See McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1067; Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 145.

¹⁹⁴See Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 535.

¹⁹⁵See Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 535.

as well.¹⁹⁶ Howard also opts for the *Qere* reading, although Tate appears to follow Joe Lewis who reads the traditional *Ketiv* כִּי in an asseverative sense: “surely” or “indeed.”¹⁹⁷ Whether following the *Qere*, or the *Ketiv* in the sense of a positive assertion, the idea that the people are in the care of Yahweh is clear. The close literary connections between Psalms 95 and 100 essentially form a bracket, “frame,” or *inclusio* around the core kingship-of-Yahweh psalms (Psalms 96-99).¹⁹⁸

At first glance, it would not seem that Psalm 100 is of much interest from a persona-critical standpoint. There is little in the way of self-reference or description, and the quality or manner of the voice does not depart in any remarkable way from Psalms 96-99. Upon closer examination, however, v. 3 presents a significant point of interest for the present study:

Know that the Lord is God.
It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. (NRSV)

In the span of a few words, the psalmist-persona captures the heart of Book IV and the essential thesis of our project. First, the call to “know” (יָדַע) that

¹⁹⁶See *BHS*, 1180.

¹⁹⁷The debate over this interpretive question is somewhat legendary. See Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 533-34; Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 92-94; Joe O. Lewis, “An Asseverative כִּי in Psalm 100 3?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 (1967): 216.

¹⁹⁸See Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 530; Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 141, 165, 175, 181; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 495.

Yahweh is God is analogous to proclaiming Yahweh's reign – it essentially recognizes the sovereignty of Yahweh.¹⁹⁹ The basis for this recognition is that **הוּא-עֲשָׂנוּ** and that the community in question is **עַמּוֹ**, which together refer “to God's roles as creator of humankind and as creator of a covenant people.”²⁰⁰ The assertion of God's sovereignty, coupled with the supporting notions of God as creator and caretaker of the covenant people, profoundly resonate with the collective poetic universe of Psalms 90-99. In those psalms the personae proclaim God's reign, and allusions to God's role as creator and God's formation of the people of Israel in the time of Moses support that proclamation. McCann, however, best articulates the significance of the verse:

The clustering of personal pronouns and pronominal suffixes in v. 3 is striking as is their sequence: “he . . . he . . . us . . . we . . . his . . . his.” This arrangement dramatically suggests that the question of human identity must begin and end with God. This is what the psalm intends for us to “know.”²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹Walther Zimmerli identified the phrase as a variation of the so-called “recognition formula.” See Walther Zimmerli, *I Am Yahweh* (trans. Douglas W. Stott; ed. Walter Brueggemann; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 53-63. See also Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 532; James Mays, “Worship, World, and Power: An Interpretation of Psalm 100,” *Interpretation* 23 (1969): 323-24. Hossfeld and Zenger (*Psalms* 2) identify Psalm 100 as the completion of the “hymnic universal history” beginning in Psalm 93, in which “peace will cover the whole world of the nations in the cosmic reign of the sovereign of the world, YHWH” (2).

²⁰⁰Broyles, *Psalms*, 387. Cf. Mays, “Interpretation of Psalm 100,” 324.

²⁰¹McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1078.

As we noted in chapter three, the “hermeneutical underpinnings”²⁰² of the Psalter are related to a redefining of the post-exilic community’s conception of itself. The Psalter and Book IV in particular represent a performative evolution in the identity of a community. The post-exilic community asks, “Who are we?” Psalm 100, Book IV, and the Psalter respond, “Yahweh is king.” We have heard from different voices thus far in Book IV. Within the constraints of their present canonical context, however, these literary voices function together to re-orient the identity of its readers/hearers under the kingship of Yahweh. For the post-exilic community, to know that “Yahweh is king” was to have a theological basis not simply for a re-oriented identity, but for survival:

Why did Israel survive and the nations around it did not? Israel survived because it found in its authoritative texts, including the Psalter, a hermeneutical rationale for survival.²⁰³

As Kraus concludes, the purpose and thrust of Psalm 100 is particularly related to the “self-understanding” of the worshipping community.²⁰⁴

The King in a Manner of Speaking: Psalm 101

Although less striking, Howard does observe that the “principle of concatenation of terms continues to be evident in the relationship between

²⁰²See DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 29. See also above, ch. 3, “Rousing the Slumbering Book: The Canonical World of the Psalmist-Persona.”

²⁰³DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 29.

²⁰⁴Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 275.

Psalms 100 and 101.”²⁰⁵ Besides the superscriptions, which each contain the identification **בְּזִמְרוֹר**, the psalms are linked by Yahweh’s **הַסֵּד** (Pss 100.5; 101.1). The strongest connections of Psalm 101, however, are not to immediately adjacent psalms, nor are they based on any particular keyword. Helen A. Kenik has demonstrated the sapiential quality of Psalm 101 by correlating the “basic role of the king” presented in the psalm to the wisdom teachings, in particular the Book of Proverbs.²⁰⁶ The wisdom character of Psalm 101 looks back in Book IV, across the kinship-of-Yahweh psalms, to Psalms 92 and 94.²⁰⁷ In this relationship we begin to see the concentric, tripartite shape of Book IV.

The content of Psalm 101 has, ironically, shifted the focus of scholarship primarily toward the psalm’s form and original setting.²⁰⁸ Kraus concludes that “no matter how we may rule in individual questions of form, Psalms 101 is to be classified as a song that is characterized by its theme. It belongs among the royal psalms.”²⁰⁹ Indeed, the psalm is regularly classified under this general

²⁰⁵Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 181.

²⁰⁶Helen Ann Kenik, “Code of Conduct for a King: Psalm 101,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (1976): 399-403.

²⁰⁷See Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 182.

²⁰⁸See Kenik, “Code of Conduct,” 394-95.

²⁰⁹Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 277.

category.²¹⁰ More specifically, however, scholars typically understand the setting of this psalm as an occasion in which the king speaks – whether as a “vow of loyalty” at a coronation/enthronement ceremony, as a vow of renewal at the entrance to the temple, or as a complaint at a moment when the king stands “in dire need.”²¹¹

Clifford suggests that Psalm 101 is unique because the

poem contains clues to its purpose and the identity of its speaker. The speaker (“I”) is in charge of a great “house” (v. 7), has the authority to destroy the wicked in his territory (v. 8), and lives in the “city of the Lord” (v. 8). The speaker is therefore the Davidic king, and the psalm is most likely his public proclamation at this enthronement or its annual commemoration.²¹²

Like Clifford, most interpreters operate from the view that the king “was the original speaker,” or the one “who speaks in this psalm.”²¹³ This language in effect collapses the “speaker” of the psalm with the historical monarch. Of

²¹⁰In addition to Kraus, see for example, Michael L. Barré, “The Shifting Focus of Psalm 101,” in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception* (ed. Peter W. Flint and Patrick D. Miller; Boston: Brill, 2005), 206; McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1081; Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150* (ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker; Waco: Word, 1983), 3; Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 181.

²¹¹The coronation or enthronement ceremony is the most common identification of setting. See Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 277; Weiser, *Psalms*, 648; Clifford, *Psalms*, 135-36; Barré, “Psalm 101,” 206; Mays, *Psalms*, 321; Kenik, “Code of Conduct,” 394; Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms* (trans. J. R. Porter; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), 57. On the view of the psalm as a temple entrance liturgy, see Schaefer, *Psalms*, 248; Broyles, *Psalms*, 389. Allen concludes that the psalm is best viewed as a complaint – “more precisely a psalm of innocence, containing a hymnic passage and wisdom motifs” (*Psalms 101-150*, 4).

²¹²Clifford, *Psalms*, 135-36.

²¹³See McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1081; Weiser, *Psalms*, 648.

course, such a view in one sense is entirely appropriate: with Kenik one can affirm that there “is every reason to suspect that this personal expression of uprightness properly fits the occasion of the royal inauguration into office.”²¹⁴ The historical Judahite king may have recited the very words of Psalm 101 at some point in the past. There is, however, a subtle but important distinction to make. This distinction is betrayed in the precise language of a few interpreters. Michael L. Barré, for example, argues in favor of the view “that the poem was *composed for the occasion of the enthronement* of a Judahite king.”²¹⁵ Likewise Broyles refers to the common view that the psalm was written *for the Davidic king*.²¹⁶ From this language one may infer an understanding similar to Mowinckel, in which a cult professional created a psalm to be spoken by a different person and in a different setting. In short, a poet created a royal persona – a voice fit for a king.

Furthermore, the content of the speaker’s words are obligatory and performative. The royal persona’s vow of loyalty “does not look back to the past,” but obliges the king to appropriate behavior in the future.²¹⁷ Kenik points out that the series of “solemn ‘I’ statements” that function this way in Psalm 101

²¹⁴See Kenik, “Code of Conduct,” 398.

²¹⁵Barré, “Psalm 101,” 206 (emphasis added).

²¹⁶Broyles, *Psalms*, 308 (emphasis added).

²¹⁷Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 277.

have a precedence within ancient Israelite tradition and bear directly on the role of the king:

The king of Judah was not just a political sovereign, nor did he stand for the nation as a god like the king of the ancient orient. He was rather one from among the people of Yahweh who, because of the singular privilege of being anointed to kingship, bore a special responsibility of guardianship for the faith of the nation. His special task was obedience to the voice of Yahweh that demanded of him the practice of justice. The charge given to the king was that he be a loyal and obedient follower of Yahweh by acting toward his associates with honesty and equity. The king was commissioned to preserve the life of the nation by the practice of justice, for only by justice is order in the land and harmony among peoples maintained. The very life of the nation either flourishes or is extinguished in accord with the support of its life-lines – the integrity of its leader and the people before God and among themselves.²¹⁸

The verb “walk” (אָתֵּרֶלֶךְ, Impf., *Hith.* 1st per. sg.) in v. 2 is a figurative expression for “conducting oneself.”²¹⁹ The speaker in Psalm 101 is essentially taking on the responsibilities of the role of king – saying “I do” to Yahweh and the loyal subjects of the throne. The language is therefore performative: it ceremoniously binds the king to the duties inherent to the throne, and thereby sanctions the authority of the king. In this manner the psalm “enthrones” the king.

Thus a very striking relationship develops between the historical speaker and the literary persona of the psalm. In the enthronement *Sitz im Leben*, the king does not shape the speaker in Psalm 101; rather, it is the created persona of Psalm

²¹⁸Kenik, “Code of Conduct,” 395-96.

²¹⁹See Clifford, *Psalms*, 137.

101 that shapes the “real,” historical speaker. The king adopts the created persona in Psalm 101 in the performative act of becoming king. A literary identity in effect predicates the identity of a historical figure.

Although the content of Psalm 101 has indeed shifted focus to matters of form and setting, Barré maintains that Psalm 101 has a shifting focus of its own. As noted, Barré concludes that the psalm was composed for the occasion of the enthronement of a Judahite king. More specifically, Barré sees the psalm in terms of the “instruction of the king’s courtiers (especially his advisors) in conduct becoming to such personnel.”²²⁰ In the editorial history of the psalm, however, this focus shifted to the “glorification of the Davidic king as the royal paragon of righteousness and virtue.”²²¹ McCann proposes a similar view, though based on literary context rather than text-critical evidence. Like many scholars, McCann observes the affinity between Psalms 101 and 18.²²² McCann cites Leslie C. Allen, who observes a temporal relationship between the two psalms:

Psalm 18 looks back to God’s intervention in response to the king’s appeal and testimonial, and gives thanks that he was delivered from a situation of distress. Psalm 101 is set at an earlier stage in royal experience.²²³

²²⁰Barré, “Psalm 101,” 206.

²²¹Barré, “Psalm 101,” 206, 220-222. Barré’s argument is based on an excavation of the MT itself, in which he posits a revision process.

²²²McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1081.

²²³Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 6. See McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1081.

McCann appropriately wonders, “If Psalm 101 reflects an earlier stage of royal experience, why is it placed after Psalm 18?”²²⁴ Furthermore, he questions what a psalm “לִּי יְיָ” is doing in Book IV in the first place, if Books I-III and Psalm 89 in particular lament the loss and failure of the Davidic covenant and monarchy.²²⁵ McCann’s response is particularly insightful:

Assuming the placement is not simply haphazard, one can respond that in its current literary setting, the royal complaint in Psalm 101 is a response to the destruction of the monarchy, as are Psalms 90-100 The voice of an imagined future king says, in effect, “I shall do everything right,” implying that the monarchy should be restored; the question in v. 2 thus asks when the restoration will occur. The cogency of this approach is strengthened by the juxtaposition of Psalm 101 with 102, which, while it starts out as an individual prayer (perhaps still to be heard as the voice of a king?), suddenly in v. 12 becomes an expression of hope for the restoration of Zion, the seat of the monarchy (cf. 101.2 with 102.13), as well as an expression of hope for the return of the exiles (vv. 18-22). Thus Psalms 101-102 together address the three key elements of the crisis of exile – loss of monarchy, Zion/Temple, and land.²²⁶

Therefore in its final canonical context, the literary persona of Psalm 101 becomes a truly fictionalized character, an “imagined king” who is one of the canonically constrained personae speaking from the imaginary world(s) of Book IV. In Psalm 101, the reader encounters the king, but only in a manner of speaking.

²²⁴McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1081.

²²⁵McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1081.

²²⁶McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1081. See also Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 277. The question of v. 2 is often identified as the most problematic aspect of the psalm. Most overall interpretations of the psalm try to make sense of the question in one way or another. For an overview, see Thijs Booij, “Short Notes: Psalm CI 2 – ‘When Wilt Thou Come to Me?’” *Vetus Testamentum* 38 (1988): 458-62. Booij concludes that the question refers to a revelatory dream or vision (460).

In Psalm 101, however, the king may not be alone. Kraus notes the surprising manner in which the ruler in v. 5 “functions as the judge of thoughts and inclinations” and thus “transcends his own possibilities and capabilities.”²²⁷ He also points out that “in v. 6 the king speaks in a manner suitable only for Yahweh.”²²⁸ While the consistent first person, singular point of view in the psalm (“I”) has prompted most interpreters to hear a single speaker throughout, John S. Kselman proposes divine-royal dialogue:

Psalm 101 is not a monologue, the utterance of a single voice (the king’s), as commonly assumed, but a dialogue involving both king and deity. In the introduction (vv. 1-2) and the negative confession (vv. 3-5) we hear the ‘I’ of the king. But the . . . ‘I’ of vv. 6-7 (and perhaps v. 8) is no longer the voice of the king, but of Yahweh, in the form of a divine oracle to the king²²⁹

Although there is no textual indication that a shift in speaker has occurred, divine speech has (according to one view) already appeared in Book IV without warning (cf. Pss 91.14-16). Kselman cites Psalm 32 as a similar example.²³⁰ According to this dialogic understanding of the psalm, the divine oracle that concludes the psalm functions as the “answer” to the hermeneutically

²²⁷Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 279. Cf. Pss 90.8; 101.5.

²²⁸Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 279.

²²⁹John S. Kselman, “Psalm 101: Royal Confession and Divine Oracle,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 33 (1985): 45.

²³⁰Kselman, “Psalm 101,” 53. The unannounced shift occurs in Ps 32.8.

troublesome question in v. 2: Yahweh comes to the king in the divine word.²³¹

While this view does seem to make sense of the divine-like qualities and capacities of the speaker in vv. 6-7, it is still possible to understand a single, royal persona who speaks. With a single speaker, the psalm emphasizes the idea that the “chosen king represents and executes God’s office of judgment. In bold formulations the anointed one takes up the function transferred to him in goodness.”²³²

The interpretation of Psalm 101 turns on the aspect of voice. In terms of the original historical setting and function of the psalm, as well as the editorial recasting of the psalm within Book IV of the Psalter, the idea of persona – the idea of a literary voice that is in some sense distinct from historical persons – is a necessary part of making sense of the psalm. In terms of its original setting, the persona forms the identity and attitude of the king at his enthronement ceremony; the focus is on the prevention of calamity. Recast in its literary setting, the persona is a wholly invented king of the lost Davidic monarchy who reasserts adherence to the “way of completeness” (יְרֵךְ תְּמִים, v. 2); the focus is on restoration from calamity.²³³

²³¹Kselman, “Psalm 101,” 57. McCann admits the possibility of such a view, but concludes that it is “highly speculative” (“Book of Psalms,” 1083).

²³²Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 280.

²³³See Wilson, *Editing*, 217. Wilson suggests that the psalm reflects the attitude that Israel must adopt.

A Prayer of One Afflicted: Psalm 102

As we noted above, Psalm 102 is connected to Psalm 101 insofar as they deal with the three crucial aspects of the exilic crisis – loss of monarchy, Temple/Zion, and land.²³⁴ Like Psalm 101, however, Psalm 102 also looks back to an earlier part of Book IV. Whereas Psalm 101 echoes Psalms 92 and 94, Psalm 102 recalls Psalms 90 and 91; the connections to Psalm 90 in particular are noteworthy.²³⁵ Wilson detects four thematic connections between Psalms 102 and 90.²³⁶ First, the theme of human transience is central to both psalms (cf. Pss 102.4, 12; 90.5-6, 9-10). In each poem the brevity of human life is compared to withering grass (פְּעֵשֶׁבַּ אֵיבֶשׁ, Ps 102.12; פְּחֻצִּיר . . . וַיֵּבֶשׁ, Ps 90.5-6). Second, human transience is contrasted with the eternity of Yahweh (cf. Pss 102.13, 25-28; 90.7-8). Third, the psalmist-persona anguishes over Yahweh’s wrath in both psalms (cf. Pss 102.11; 90.7-8, 11). Finally, Yahweh’s wrath is contrasted with the psalmist-persona’s confession that Yahweh will deliver (cf. Pss 102.29; 90.15-17). The recurrence of so many themes and the similarity of terms suggest to Wilson

²³⁴See McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1081, 1086.

²³⁵See Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 182.

²³⁶See Wilson, *Editing*, 218. See also McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1086. McCann points out that like Psalm 90, Psalm 102 “grounds hope for the future in God’s eternity” (1086).

that Psalms 102 and 90 form an *inclusio*, although Psalms 90-102 and 103-106 do not otherwise seem to form coherent units.²³⁷

McCann also points out a few broader but important connections to Book IV. He recognizes that Psalm 102 proclaims the reign of Yahweh:

(Ps 102.13a) וַאֲתָהּ יְהוָה לְעוֹלָם תֵּשֵׁב

Psalm 102.16-17 also emphasizes the kingship of Yahweh.²³⁸ In this way Psalm 102 ties into Psalms 95-100 and the core of Book IV. Despite its recognition of Yahweh's sovereignty, however, the overall somber tone of Psalm 102 sets it apart from the unrestrained praise in the kingship-of-Yahweh psalms.

Psalm 102 has perplexed interpreters. The source of the difficulty stems from the apparent shifts in vv. 13-23 and vv. 26-29. The material in these verses has a more corporate focus in contrast to the individualistic quality of vv. 2-12 and 24-25, thus prompting a form critical debate on whether the psalm should be deemed an individual- or communal-type psalm.²³⁹ The communal element is often identified as the intruder; Allen comments that "all would be clear" if the psalm simply consisted of the verses bearing the stamp of individual complaint.²⁴⁰ At the same time, the presence of the communal concern in the

²³⁷See Wilson, *Editing*, 218.

²³⁸See McCann, "Book of Psalms," 1086.

²³⁹See Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 84; McCann, "Book of Psalms," 1086; Allen, *Psalms 100-150*, 11.

²⁴⁰Allen, *Psalms 100-150*, 11. See also Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 87, n. 94.

psalm has prompted some interpreters to render a corporate focus for the entire psalm, understanding the “I” who speaks not as an individual speaker but as the community itself.²⁴¹ While support for the “corporate I” interpretation has faded in recent years,²⁴² the verses remain juxtaposed, spurring alternative interpretations. Three are most frequent: 1) the psalm contains a single speaker who speaks on behalf of the community; this view leads scholars to posit historical individuals in which such discourse makes sense – typically the king; 2) the psalm is composite, formed from an earlier individual lament and later editorially shaped into a post-exilic community lament; and 3) the psalm is simply the prayer of a individual who included supplication for the community in addition to personal concerns.²⁴³ In any case, the question of “who speaks” constitutes one of the key interpretive issues in this poem. Not surprisingly, scholars have primarily addressed the question in terms of historical individuals who may have voiced the lyrics and the settings in which they may have spoken them.

²⁴¹See for example Mowinckel, *Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 1:219.

²⁴²Kraus rejects the classic “corporate I” interpretation, and quotes as far back as F. Delitzsch: “We have to interpret it as personal as it sounds, and we must not make the individual into a people.” See Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 283 (Delitzsch source not cited).

²⁴³Allen, *Psalms 100-150*, 11; McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1086; Clifford, *Psalms 73-150*, 139; Schaefer, *Psalms*, 250. Broyles, *Psalms*, 390; Weiser, *Psalms*, 652-53; Bratcher and Reyburn, *Translator's Handbook*, 860; Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 283-84.

Although approaching the text from a form-critical standpoint or attempting to retrace the text's composite fracture lines is by no means inappropriate, there are other hermeneutical points of entry to the psalm. Fortunately, Psalm 102 receives a full analysis of its potential dialogic qualities from Mandolfo. She treats the psalm as multi-voiced, with the following structure:²⁴⁴

Table 1: Mandolfo's Dialogic Structure of Psalm 102

Verse	Content	Speaker	Addressee
2-3	invocation	petitioner (1cs)	deity (2ms and imv)
4-13	complaint	petitioner (1cs)	deity (2ms)
14-16	affirmation of confidence	petitioner	deity (2ms)
17-23	description of YHWH's saving action	didactic voice	human (3ms reference to deity)
24	complaint	petitioner (1cs)	deity (2ms)
25-29	petition (vv. 25, 29), motivation/praise (vv. 26-28)	petitioner (1cs)	deity (2ms)

According to this view the psalm begins in typical lament form with a call to Yahweh (vv. 2-3), followed by vv. 4-13, which present "in passionate, first person language the supplicant's plight."²⁴⁵ Although v. 13 is regularly interpreted as belonging with the subsequent verses, Mandolfo contends that the verse belongs with the preceding vv. 4-12; this structure intensifies the contrast between

²⁴⁴See Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 84.

²⁴⁵Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 85.

human transience and Yahweh's eternity.²⁴⁶ The speaker withers like grass, but Yahweh dwells (יָשָׁב) forever (cf. vv. 12, 13). While the subject matter shifts in vv. 14-16, Mandolfo does not detect a shift in voice. Rather the dialogue shifts to a new voice in v. 17, which continues the concern for Zion that began in v. 14.²⁴⁷ Based on both the form and content of vv. 17-23, Mandolfo identifies a new, didactic speaker:

In vv. 17-23 YHWH is spoken of in the third person, in hymn-like language, and there is no longer any direct evidence for assigning the supplicant to the role of speaker; there are no 1cs pronominal suffixes, either possessive or subjective. The personalized tone of the psalm has been abandoned temporarily for the purpose of interjecting a more dispassionate, although no less forceful, discourse on the nature and saving activities of YHWH. The supplicant's specific case is not addressed, though we are told that YHWH listens to the prayers of the destitute (v. 18), an assertion that could offer encouragement to the supplicant. Still, it seems that YHWH's rebuilding of Zion, not his redemption of the supplicant, is the motivation for the praise that permeates this section.²⁴⁸

In vv. 24 the original voice returns and carries to the conclusion of the psalm, "as if the previous hymn never occurred."²⁴⁹ Based on the dialogical structure of the Book of Lamentations, Mandolfo suggests that vv. 4-13 could be attributed to

²⁴⁶Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 85.

²⁴⁷Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 85-86. Seen in this way, vv. 14-16 function as a transition to vv. 17-23.

²⁴⁸Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 85-86.

²⁴⁹Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 86.

Zion personified.²⁵⁰ Seen in this way, the didactic interjection “functions as a response to the concern about Zion’s fate.”²⁵¹

At the same time, Mandolfo recognizes that didactic interjection is otherwise “out of step” with the rest of the psalm and does little to mitigate the force of the complaint at the end.²⁵² In the final analysis, Mandolfo reads a supplicant’s voice that offers no vow of praise, and a psalm that is void of penitential language (ironic, considering the psalm’s role in the history of the Christian Church).²⁵³ The didactic voice offers the only words of praise (perhaps with the exception of vv. 26-28), which Mandolfo demonstrates to be in rhetorical service of the complaint, compelling Yahweh to action. In short, Mandolfo reads Psalm 102 as a horizontal dialogue “that is fairly unremitting in its description of Yahweh as a deity who uses his power to oppress.”²⁵⁴ This reading makes, so to speak, for an unusual conversation within the Psalter:

²⁵⁰Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 86.

²⁵¹Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 87.

²⁵²Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 86-87. She notes that the vision of YHWH in the didactic interjection stands in stark contrast to the psalm’s basic complaint. In the former, YHWH rescues from suffering (vv. 18, 20), while in the latter, Yahweh is “described as responsible for the dire straits in which the supplicant (Zion?) finds herself” (87).

²⁵³Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 87-88. She notes that the language of vv. 26-28 does contain hymnic elements, but since those verses “speak mostly of the deity’s creative power and endurance” rather than mercy or justice as in the case of many laments, they could be understood simply “as having a mitigating effect on the intensity of the complaint” (88).

²⁵⁴Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 88.

The supplicant does not call on YHWH's sense of justice (though she certainly appeals to YHWH's sense of mercy) to right her despicable situation. She does not ask YHWH to requite the wicked and reward her innocence. She simply appeals to the most base notion of fairness – YHWH has so much and she has so little, thus it is unfair that the deity use all his limitless power to limit the supplicant's meager life. In the end, the petition is left open, unanswered. Although the didactic interjection attempts to deflect the harshness of the complaint, it cannot be silenced and gets the last word.²⁵⁵

Mandolfo reads the "last word" (v. 29) as petition, translating יִשְׁכֹּנּוּ and יִכּוֹן in a jussive sense: "May the children of your servant dwell securely, / and may their seed be established in your presence."²⁵⁶

Mandolfo's reading has the advantage of interpreting the psalm according to its aspect of voice; her dialogic interpretation of the psalm makes sense of the contrasting elements even as it emphasizes the dissonance between them. By dividing the psalm along the lines of voice, she is able to uncover new structural relationships in the psalm, particularly with regard to vv. 13 and 14-16. While affirming the ingenuity of this approach, and without denying the composite nature of the psalm or its contrasting elements, another reading is also possible. The reader can interpret the psalm as a coherent whole according to a single persona.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁵Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 88.

²⁵⁶Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 84 (cf. NRSV).

²⁵⁷Recognizing the composite nature of this (or any) psalm does not prevent one from reading the psalm as a whole. The editorial activity of conflating or interpolating texts itself suggests as much to the reader. See for example Robert C. Culley, "Psalm 102: A Complaint with a Difference," *Semeia*

The unique superscription, which “is one of the very few that accurately describes the actual content of the following psalm,” suggests as much.²⁵⁸ In some sense the superscription functions as “the earliest extant commentary on the psalm.”²⁵⁹ Seen this way, the superscription invites the reader to hear the voice of לְעֵנִי in a very specific circumstance:

כִּי־יַעֲטֹף וְלִפְנֵי יְהוָה יִשְׁפֹךְ שִׁיחוֹ (Ps 102.1b)

Notice that the superscription invites the reader into a dramatic scene – the afflicted one “pours out his complaint” (יִשְׁפֹךְ שִׁיחוֹ) in the presence of Yahweh. The superscription not only indicates “who speaks,” but to whom the persona speaks. Like Psalm 90, the superscription is concerned with identifying the psalm’s persona.

Mandolfo is apt to point out that vv. 17-23 exhibit no explicit first-person language and suddenly refer to Yahweh in the third person rather than direct address. At the same time, however, there are also no syntactical or grammatical elements that explicitly require a new speaker. Neither does the shift necessarily

62 (1993): 21-23, 25-26; Allen, *Psalms 100-150*, 13. Kraus notes that identifying the composite nature of the psalm “does not lead to progress,” insofar as it does not resolve (but merely identifies) the contrasting elements in the text (*Psalms 60-150*, 283).

²⁵⁸McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1086.

²⁵⁹Culley, “Psalm 102,” 31.

require a different speaker in order to make sense of the text.²⁶⁰ With regard to the aspect of voice the only required change is the addressee. Whereas in vv. 2-16 the psalmist persona addresses Yahweh directly, presenting in intimate but anguished terms an “I-you” relationship, in vv. 17-24 the speaker addresses the reader/hearer and references Yahweh in the third person. Perhaps because the psalmist-persona addresses an unidentified reader/hearer, the more intimate “I-you” language is absent from these verses. The psalmist-persona returns to directly addressing Yahweh in v. 25, and continues to the conclusion of the psalm.²⁶¹ Structured in terms of the addressee, v. 24 fits with the preceding verses, and serves as a striking contrast between Yahweh’s saving acts and the psalmist-persona’s plight. In this way v. 24 functions in a very similar manner as v. 13. Both verses serve as transitions between what precedes and what follows them.²⁶²

²⁶⁰Cf. Ps 90.14-16, in which the shift seems to require a new speaker. On the other hand one can still understand Ps 90.14-16 as the continued voice of the same persona, but who nonetheless reports an oracle of Yahweh. In both cases the reader must infer a different quality of speech – either reported or directly expressed.

²⁶¹Cf. Culley, “Psalm 102,” 27. Culley sees both vv. 24 and 25 as “addressed to someone other than the deity.”

²⁶²See Culley, “Psalm 102,” 31, who also considers v. 13 transitional, but cf. Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 85.

Table 2: Psalm 102 According to a Single Persona

Verse	Content	Speaker	Addressee
2-3	invocation	psalmist-persona: "one afflicted"	deity (2ms/imv)
4-13	complaint emphasizing human transience, contrasted with divine eternity	psalmist-persona: "one afflicted"	deity (2ms)
14-16	affirmation of confidence description of YHWH's saving	psalmist-persona: "one afflicted"	deity (2ms)
17-24	action, contrasted with psalmist- persona's plight petition (vv. 25, 29),	psalmist-persona: "one afflicted"	reader/hearer
25-29	motivation/praise (vv. 26-28)	psalmist-persona: "one afflicted"	deity (2ms)

The dissonance between the psalm's individual and communal concerns and its shifts in address are held together by the theme of time – a motif that “runs through the whole” according to Mays.²⁶³ As noted, the individual complaint language contrasts the eternal time of the divine with the ephemeral existence of human beings.²⁶⁴ The communal emphasis in the psalm is also concerned with time, in particular the future restoration of Zion and its people.²⁶⁵ According to

²⁶³Mays, *Psalms*, 322.

²⁶⁴For a fuller development of this time contrast, see Culley, “Psalm 102,” 28.

²⁶⁵See Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 284-86; Mays, *Psalms*, 323; Culley, “Psalm 102,” 30; McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1087.

the psalmist-persona, the appointed time has come (פִּי-בָא מוֹעֵד) for Yahweh to save the destitute and restore Zion—in short, to act as sovereign king. McCann even detects keyword links between this description of “God’s anticipated action toward Zion” and “the essence of God’s character revealed to Moses after the episode of the golden calf” in Exod 34.6.²⁶⁶ He believes this allusion implies that the psalmist-persona’s “hope is grounded in the earlier exodus event, which is also aimed at manifesting God’s universal sovereignty.”²⁶⁷ In short, the psalmist looks to Yahweh’s saving events of the past, and the poetically imagined hope of Yahweh’s restoration in the future, as a basis to petition for help in the present calamity. Seen in this way, the rumination of the psalmist-persona makes a great deal of sense within its present literary context. The collective poetic world of Book IV imagines Yahweh enthroned anew, extending sanctuary to the afflicted. This vision is supported by past events in the canonical narrative, in which Yahweh is sovereign and provides refuge to the people. At the same time, Psalm 102 also correlates to the collective voice in Book IV in that it does not deny the reality of the crisis at hand. In Psalm 102, the psalmist-persona literally wraps the vision of salvation with the personal crisis of the present. The psalmist-persona sees personal plight as a corollary of community crisis.²⁶⁸ Thus “the

²⁶⁶McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1087.

²⁶⁷McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1087.

²⁶⁸See Mays, *Psalms*, 323-24; Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 286; Allen, *Psalms 100-150*, 16; McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1087.

central theological question of the psalm is the salvific significance of the Lord's everlasting time for the incomplete time of the lowly."²⁶⁹ In this way the persona in Psalm 102 explores the individual consequences of a reoriented identity under the kingship of Yahweh.

The present analysis of Psalm 102 has observed at least two readings, each with different emphases: one that looks to the vision of Yahweh's salvation, while the other sees the psalm "as part of the Psalter's complaint tradition, prayers that accuse Yahweh of causing the crisis at hand," and call for divine resolution.²⁷⁰ Although Bellinger observes that the poem is "plausibly susceptible to more than one reading," he suggests that "the need to decide between the readings is unnecessary."²⁷¹ Instead Bellinger argues that Psalm 102 is an example of "poetic ambiguity," a literary feature in which multiple meanings or plurisignation "may not be a fault in style but rather may be inherent in the complexity and richness of poetic language."²⁷² In short,

²⁶⁹Mays, *Psalms*, 324.

²⁷⁰W. H. Bellinger, Jr., "Psalm 102: Lament and Theology in an Exilic Setting" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the national SBL; Philadelphia, Pa., November 21, 2005), 11.

²⁷¹Bellinger, "Psalm 102," 11.

²⁷²Bellinger, "Psalm 102," 11-12. On the notion of poetic ambiguity, see William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957); M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Dallas: Holdt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 8-9; Babette Deutsch, *Poetry Handbook: A Dictionary of Terms* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1974), 11-12; Julian Wolfreys, Ruth Robbins, and Kenneth Womack, *Key Concepts in Literary Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 5-6.

Bellinger suggests “that we relish the poetic ambiguity and allow both readings to stand.”²⁷³ This suggestion is particularly instructive, insofar as it allows the psalmist-persona of Psalm 102 to echo the canonical voice of Book IV. Just as the psalmist-persona here wraps the vision of salvation with the personal crisis of the present, so the Psalter-persona wraps the proclamation of the kingship of Yahweh with somber notes of exilic crisis on either side. As Bellinger observes,

The sequence of the psalms in Book IV provides a hermeneutical clue for readers and a fruitful context for reading Ps 102. Questions of exile and the future press upon readers. Content and context near the conclusion of Book IV suggest that the psalmists seek a rhetorical effect upon readers/hearers who still deal with the aftermath of defeat.²⁷⁴

Although there are a variety of plausible ways to read Psalm 102, the persona aspect is crucial. Within its present literary context, Psalm 102 plays a significant role in formulating the collective “answer” of the multivalent but canonically-restrained personae of Book IV, an answer that responds to the crisis voiced particularly at the conclusion of Book III.

Says the Persona to Persona: Psalm 103

Wilson sees in Psalm 103 an even stronger connection to the opening poem of Book IV than was found in Psalm 102:²⁷⁵

1. YHWH forgives the iniquity of humankind (cf. Pss 103.3, 10, 12; 90.7-8)

²⁷³Bellinger, “Psalm 102,” 12.

²⁷⁴Bellinger, “Psalm 102,” 15.

²⁷⁵Wilson, *Editing*, 218. See also Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 182.

2. YHWH responds to humans with steadfast love and mercy (cf. Pss 103.4, 8, 11, 17-18; 90.14)
3. Yahweh satisfies human beings with good as long as they live (cf. Pss 103.5; 90.14)
4. Moses is mentioned as the mediator of the divine will (cf. Pss 103.7; 90.1)
5. YHWH pities those who fear him (cf. Pss 103.13; 90.13)
6. YHWH knows humans are dust and therefore frail (cf. Pss 103.14; 90.3)
7. The transient nature of humankind is emphasized using comparison with “grass” that perishes (cf. Pss 103.15; 90.5-6).

These keyword and thematic links lead Wilson to make the following conclusion:

[Psalm] 103 stands almost as an answer to the questions and problems raised in [Psalm] 90, problems [that] received their impetus from the situation described in [Psalm] 89. [Psalm] 103’s final answer has no correspondence in 90, but encapsulates the central themes of the fourth book.²⁷⁶

Psalm 103 also connects to Psalm 102, though the points of contact have a much more positive tone in Psalm 103. The groaning persona in Psalm 102 is like a little owl among ruins, perched in solitude on a rooftop (Ps 102.7-8). In Psalm 103, Yahweh renews the speaker’s youth “like the eagle” (פִּנְשֵׁר). Both psalms liken human transience to the withering grass (cf. Pss 103.15-16; 10.12), and both contrast the ephemeral existence of mortals to the eternity of Yahweh (cf. Pss 103.15-17; 102.12-13). In Psalm 103, however, the comparison is situated in a more positive light.

Finally, Psalm 103 looks forward to Psalm 104, not only in terms of its universal outlook but in the recurring key phrase found in the beginning and concluding verses of each psalm (cf. Pss 103.1, 22; 104.1, 35):

²⁷⁶Wilson, *Editing*, 218.

McCann concludes that if “Book IV is a response to the crisis of exile elaborated in Book III . . . , then Psalm 103 is extremely well-placed.”²⁷⁷ His basis for the contention is that 1) Psalm 103, in its present literary context, offers the praise anticipated in Ps 102.16, 19, 22-23; 2) the psalm invites its audience to return to the perspective of the Mosaic era, a strategy consistent with Book IV as a whole; and 3) the psalm proclaims God’s universal sovereignty, a theme which continues in the following psalm.²⁷⁸ In short, Psalm 103 resonates with its literary environment.

The mixture of individual and communal concerns has again spurred a debate as to the form-critical identification of the psalm.²⁷⁹ We will not revisit the lines of argument, except to note Kraus, who maintains that “with the words בְּרַכִּי נַפְשִׁי אֶת־יְהוָה in vv. 1 and 22, Psalm 103 is clearly identified as a song of thanksgiving and a hymn of an individual.”²⁸⁰ Indeed, the reader in Psalm 103 may hear a single persona, although first-person, plural references in vv. 10, 12, and 14 dramatically invite the community into the psalm. As with many psalms in Book IV, Psalm 103 exhibits multiple shifts in address, but with an interesting

²⁷⁷McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1091.

²⁷⁸McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1091.

²⁷⁹See Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 290; Allen, *Psalms 100-150*, 19-20; Clifford, *Psalms 73-150*, 139; McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1090.

²⁸⁰Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 290.

twist: as the psalm opens and concludes, we hear the persona in conversation with itself.²⁸¹

Table 3: Speaker and Addressee in Psalm 103

Verse	Speaker	Addressee
1-5	psalmist-persona: "לְדוֹד"	psalmist-persona: "לְדוֹד"
6-14	psalmist-persona: "לְדוֹד"	reader/hearer/community
15-19	psalmist-persona: "לְדוֹד"	reader/hearer
20	psalmist-persona: "לְדוֹד"	"messengers/mighty ones"
21	psalmist-persona: "לְדוֹד"	"hosts/ones ministering"
22a	psalmist-persona: "לְדוֹד"	"works/dominion"
22b	psalmist-persona: "לְדוֹד"	psalmist-persona: "לְדוֹד"

In vv. 1-5 the reader encounters one of the most striking depictions of the psalmist-persona. The self-depiction in vv. 1-5 elicits a fairly passionate response from Weiser, who considers the psalm "one of the finest blossoms on the tree of biblical faith," and contends that the "man who speaks in this psalm is able to talk from personal experience."²⁸² Weiser considers it a disservice to the poet (whom he equates with the speaker) to "regard the psalm as a compilation of

²⁸¹See Broyles, *Psalms*, 395, who suggests that "here we learn that the self can be commanded to exercise itself to confess God's mercy." Self-address appears elsewhere; cf. Pss 42.6, 12; 43.5; 104.1, 35; 146.1. In some sense this manner of self-reference recalls Sadoski's notion of the "generalized other" that is a separate but integral aspect of human personality – at once "other" and "coterminous" with the self. Sadoski connects this psychological notion of the "generalized other" to the literary notion of persona, and concludes that the literary persona is a phenomenon of imaginative writing. See Sadoski, "Imagination," 273-76. See also ch. 2 above, "The Psychology of Composition."

²⁸²Weiser, *Psalms*, 657.

quotations taken from other sources."²⁸³ On the contrary, says Weiser, the "special distinctiveness of the psalm lies precisely in the inner connection between the poet's personal experience of God and the understanding of the faith worked out in the biblical testimonies of the Fathers, which are woven into an organic whole."²⁸⁴ Weiser aptly intuits that the poem's unique strength lies in the presentation of its speaker. Of course, we have no idea who that speaker was, nor do we know the nature or content of her experience. We do not even know how many historical individuals contributed to the poem, despite Weiser's objections. The historical author(s) is/are unknown, distinct from the literary world of Psalm 103 and the literary context of Book IV and the Psalter.

The psalm's superscription suggests that the psalm may be heard according to the voice of the Davidic king. Psalm 103 is the second of two psalms ascribed לַדָּוִד in Book IV, although Wilson attributes Psalm 104 to the "Davidic collection" in Book IV as well.²⁸⁵ The presence of Davidic psalms may initially seem at odds with the general canonical role of Book IV within the Psalter. If we hear Psalm 103 as the poetically imagined voice of King David, however, the psalm becomes a hymn well suited to its literary context. Through self-exhortation, the imagined Davidic-persona opens with a revealing testimony

²⁸³Weiser, *Psalms*, 657.

²⁸⁴Weiser, *Psalms*, 657.

²⁸⁵See Wilson, "Shaping the Psalter," 75-76; Wilson, *Editing*, 180-81.

of Yahweh's faithfulness (חֶסֶד, v. 4). The Davidic-persona then extends to those who are oppressed (עֲשׂוּקִים) the vindication and justice (צְדָקוֹת וּמִשְׁפָּטִים) of Yahweh (v. 6). Next the Davidic-persona validates the authority of Moses as one who knows the דָרֶךְ of Yahweh (v. 7). The Davidic-persona subsequently ruminates on Yahweh's faithfulness with regard to "those who fear [Yahweh]" (יִרְאִי, vv. 11, 13), a community of which the Davidic-persona is also a member (vv. 10, 12, 14). In v. 19 the Davidic-persona confesses the thematic heart of Book IV:

יְהוָה בְּשֵׁמִים הַכִּין כְּסֵאוֹ וּמִלְכוּתוֹ בְּכֹל מְשָׁלָה:

The Davidic-persona then crescendos into an all-encompassing exhortation to bless Yahweh, an exhortation that is directed vertically (v. 20), horizontally (v. 21), and inwardly (v. 22).

While few would suggest that the superscription לְדָוִד denotes authorship, it nonetheless suggests an interpretive strategy to the reader. As a literary persona speaking within Psalm 103 – which itself functions within the literary context of Book IV and the Psalter as a whole – the voice of David in some sense validates and endorses the world imagined in Book IV.

The Persona who would be Poet: Psalm 104

As a creation hymn, Psalm 104 “echoes many of the motifs in Psalms 93-100.”²⁸⁶ The psalm is clearly linked to the preceding psalm by its corresponding *inclusio*, בְּרַכֵּי נַפְשִׁי אֶת־יְהוָה (cf. Pss 103.1, 22; 104.1, 35). Psalms 104 and 103 are also linked by the key lexeme עֲשֵׂה, which appears six times in each psalm as either a verbal or noun (cf. Pss 103.6, 10, 18, 20, 21, 22; 104.4, 13, 19, 24a, 24b, 31).²⁸⁷ Wilson notes that a number of manuscripts combine Psalms 103-104, although he acknowledges that the overall lack of superscriptions in Book IV makes it difficult to conclusively discern if the two psalms form a single poem.²⁸⁸ McCann sees a link between the two psalms in terms of their canonical role:

Together . . . Psalms 103-104 affirm God’s cosmic sovereignty in response to the theological crisis articulated in Psalms 101-102 And in concert with Psalms 93; 95-99, Psalms 103-104 contribute to the response of Book IV to the theological issues raised in Book III²⁸⁹

Psalm 104.35 adds a final expression to the *inclusio* found in Psalms 103-104:

הַלְלוּ־יָהּ. The addition looks forward to the conclusion of Psalm 105 and the

²⁸⁶Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 182.

²⁸⁷McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1096.

²⁸⁸See Wilson, *Editing*, 180-81. Targum, Syriac, and LXX do not combine the two psalms.

²⁸⁹McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1096. See also Virgil Howard, “Psalm 104,” *Interpretation* 46 (1992): 178.

inclusio that frames 106 (cf. Pss 105.45; 106.1, 48).²⁹⁰ Howard suggests that Psalms 104-106 function together as a conclusion to Book IV.²⁹¹ Once again, the psalm is bound to its literary context.

From a persona-critical perspective, Psalm 104 is more or less straightforward, though some aspects are noteworthy. The psalm opens with a self-reference, an aspect of voice introduced in Book IV by Psalm 103. The self-referential opening here, however, does not receive the same expanded exposition as in Ps 103.1-5. Instead, the psalmist-persona moves into a lengthy address to Yahweh, extolling the magnificence of the various realms of creation (Ps 104.1b-30). In these verses the presence of the psalmist-persona is not particularly emphasized, as in the case of the kingship-of-Yahweh psalms. The psalm is fairly remarkable in that it sustains for many lines a consistent manner of direct address to Yahweh in the second-person and third-person reference to the various aspects of creation.

²⁹⁰Of course, the locations of the הללו־יה expression in Psalms 104-106 have led scholars to suggest that the concluding הללו־יה in Ps 104.35 is actually the superscription for Psalm 105, which not only creates corresponding *inclusios* for Psalms 105-106, but makes for a more uniform correspondence between the *inclusios* for Psalms 103-104. The LXX places the הללו־יה in Ps 104.35 at the beginning of Psalm 106. See Bruce K. Waltke, "Superscripts, Postscripts, or Both," *Journal of Biblical Literature* (110): 1991: 583-96, esp. 595-96; Wilson, *Editing*, 145-55; DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 89.

²⁹¹See Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 182. See also Wilson, *Editing*, 219.

In v. 31, however, something unique happens. The psalmist persona ceases the direct address to Yahweh and turns to the reader/hearer. Yet in this address to the audience the psalmist-persona exhorts Yahweh in apostrophe:

יְהִי כְבוֹד יְהוָה לְעוֹלָם יִשְׂמַח יְהוָה בְּמַעֲשָׂיו: (Ps 104.31)

Brown makes the striking observation that the psalmist-persona apparently exhorts Yahweh to rejoice (יִשְׂמַח), language normally applied to creation rather than creator.²⁹² Brown suggests that the phrase is the “key rationale” for the psalm – that the psalmist-persona “dedicates her work to God to help sustain God’s delight in creation, to provide sufficient support for God’s engagement in the world.”²⁹³ The magnificence of the psalm’s literary world escapes no interpreter. It is also noteworthy that the birds that metaphorically describe the afflicted one in Ps 102.7-8, as well as the grass that repeatedly symbolizes the transience of humankind in Book IV, now falls within the creative work of Yahweh (cf. Ps 104.14, 17).

While v. 32 continues the apostrophe to Yahweh, in vv. 33-34 the psalmist-persona offers the first first-person reference since the opening verse. The ephemeral span of the psalmist-persona’s life will be spent singing to Yahweh. Verse 34 in particular is interesting from a persona-critical standpoint. One can

²⁹²William P. Brown, “The Lion, The Wicked, and the Wonder of it All: Psalm 104 and the Playful God,” *Journal for Preachers* 29 (2006): 15.

²⁹³Brown, “Psalm 104,” 16.

interpret the verse as an explicit reference to the poem itself (שִׁירִי, “my musing”), which in some sense breaks the dramatic illusion and moves the psalmist-persona above the world of the poem.²⁹⁴ This explicit shift in the relationship between the speaker and the literary world of the poem characterizes the psalmist-persona as a singer or poet, resulting in perhaps the shortest distance in Book IV between persona and historical author.

The psalmist-persona’s breach of the world of the poem is short lived, however. Before the concluding half of the psalm’s *inclusio*, the psalmist-persona offers a call for the wicked to “be consumed from the earth” (יִתְנוּ חַטָּאִים) (בְּיַד־הָאֲרֶץ) – as if to keep unspoiled the earthly sanctuary imagined in the preceding verses.

Two Sides to Every Storyteller: Psalms 105-106

Once again the psalms in the final part of Book IV recall the beginning. Both psalms devote much attention to Moses and the Exodus narrative, and so connect in particular to Psalm 90. Wilson considers Psalms 90-92, 94, 102, and 105-106 to form a “Mosaic frame” that “provides an interpretive *entrée* to the book and in the process binds together the [Kingship-of-Yahweh] psalms and the Davidic collection [Psalms 102, 103-104] into a unified whole.”²⁹⁵ With McCann

²⁹⁴On reading “my meditation” as a reference to the psalm itself, see for example Clifford, *Psalms 73-150*, 150.

²⁹⁵Wilson, “Shaping the Psalter,” 76.

we may conclude that Book IV is indeed a “Moses-book” that responds “to the crisis of exile and its aftermath.”²⁹⁶ With Psalms 105-106 the basic tripartite, concentric shape of Book IV is complete.²⁹⁷

At the same time Psalms 105-106 are connected to their immediate canonical neighbor, Psalm 104. Howard, as we have noted, considers the three psalms a concluding group; Wilson also treats the three psalms together.²⁹⁸

Schaefer writes that

Psalm 104 is to Psalms 105-106 as Genesis 1-11 is to the rest of the Torah, creation and the history of God’s people. Psalm 104 contemplates the creative acts of God up to the present day. Psalm 105 gazes at the history of God’s people and is open-ended. Together these two psalms envision God who has a hand in creation, history, and an interest in the present.²⁹⁹

Psalms 105-106 are bound together in part by the הַלְלֵי־יְהוָה (or הַלְלֵי־יְהוָה) expression found at the end of Psalm 105 and both the opening and closing of Psalm 106. As noted, some scholars suggest that the הַלְלֵי־יְהוָה found in Psalm 104.35 is better placed as a superscription to Psalm 105, in which case the

²⁹⁶McCann, “Book of Psalms,” 1040.

²⁹⁷See Howard, “Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94,” 109.

²⁹⁸Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 182; Wilson, *Editing*, 219.

²⁹⁹Schaefer, *Psalms*, 259. See also Archie C. C. Lee, “Genesis 1 and the Plagues Tradition in Psalm CV,” *Vetus Testamentum* 10 (1990): 263.

expression forms a dual *inclusio* for Psalms 105-106—just as the expression

בְּרַכֵּי נַפְשֵׁי אֶת־יְהוָה does for Psalms 103-104.³⁰⁰

McCann maintains that Psalms 105-106 should read together.³⁰¹ This grouping, however, is based not only on their obvious thematic similarity, but also on the striking contrast they create by means of their juxtaposition. Both psalms recount the works of Yahweh on behalf of ancient Israel, but the latter emphasizes the failure of Israel to respond appropriately.³⁰² The historical praise hymn of Psalm 105 shines a bright light on Psalm 106, sharpening the picture of both ancient Israel's failure and Yahweh's benevolence.³⁰³ DeClaissé-Walford highlights the effect of Psalm 106, both in contrast to the previous psalm and as the conclusion of Book IV:

The message to the postexilic community is clear. "Go back to the time when Israel relied solely on YHWH. But remember that even in the days of your ancestors, in the time of your escape from Egypt, during the wilderness wanderings, and when you settled in the land of Israel, all was not well." . . . The community which shaped the Psalter placed Psalm 106 at the end of Book Four, which celebrates the kingship of YWHH, to remind the people that YHWH had done marvelous things for Israel in the past. But they had been disobedient and unfaithful in the past, despite

³⁰⁰See Waltke, "Superscripts, Postscripts, or Both," 595-96; Wilson, *Editing*, 145-55; DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 89.

³⁰¹See McCann, "Book of Psalms," 1104; Anthony R. Cresko, "Endings and Beginnings: Alphabetic Thinking and the Shaping of Psalms 106 and 150," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 68 (2006): 37.

³⁰²See DeClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 90; Cresko, "Endings and Beginnings," 37.

³⁰³See McCann, "Book of Psalms," 1104;

YHWH's goodness. In the present situation, YHWH is good to Israel once again, guaranteeing the *identity* and survival of the postexilic community.³⁰⁴

Mays also notes that the identity of the people is rooted in the story that unfolds in these psalms, in Yahweh's faithfulness to Israel in the past.³⁰⁵ Book IV of the Psalter concludes, therefore, in a manner that has permeated throughout. In Book IV the reader encounters many voices that, in their present literary context, collectively imagine a reoriented identity under the kingship of Yahweh.

If Psalms 105-106 should indeed be read in close relation, then their literary voices may be heard in relation to one another as well. The manner in which Psalms 105-106 relate as a whole is reflected in their voice aspects.

Howard writes that the two psalms

tell the story of YHWH's acts in history from two different perspectives: Psalm 105 reviews Israel's history from the perspective of YHWH, who is faithful to his people at all times, whereas Psalm 106 surveys the history of Israel's rebellious unfaithfulness.³⁰⁶

Psalms 105 and 106 no doubt emphasize Yahweh's deeds and Israel's failure, respectively. The tales in both poems, however, are presented from the perspective of the storyteller. Psalm 105 opens with a series of imperatives, in a manner reminiscent of the kingship-of-Yahweh psalms. The calls to praise articulate the speaker's conception of the appropriate response. At first the

³⁰⁴See DeClaisse-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 90-91 (emphasis added).

³⁰⁵See Mays, *Psalms*, 338.

³⁰⁶Howard, *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 182.

storyteller-persona speaks to an anonymous addressee (i.e., the “reader/hearer”), as is often the case in Book IV. In v. 6, however, the speaker specifically identifies the addressee:

זָרַע אֲבֹרָתָם עֲבָדוּ בְּנֵי יַעֲקֹב בְּחִירָיו:

Immediately following the identification of the addressee, the storyteller-persona identifies the main subject of the story: אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה (v. 7). In the poetic account that follows, the speaker refers to Yahweh, the heroes and past generations of Israel, and supporting cast in the third person (vv. 8-45).

In two instances, however, the storyteller-persona reports the speech of Yahweh. In vv. 8-11 the speaker cites multiple instances demonstrating that Yahweh has not forgotten the covenant with Israel. The speaker concludes by quoting Yahweh on the matter:

לֵאמֹר לְךָ אֶתֵּן אֶת־אֶרֶץ־כְּנָעַן חֶבְלֵנִי נִחַלְתֶּכֶם: (v. 11)

The לֵאמֹר construction clearly introduces the expression as reported speech; we continue to hear the voice of the storyteller. The quote addresses the heroes and past generations of Israel. The manner in which the speaker quotes Yahweh highlights the promise of land as a central theme in the story and the psalm as a whole.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁷See W. Dennis Tucker, Jr., “Revisiting the Plagues in Psalm CV,” *Vetus Testamentum* 55 (2005): 401-2. See also Anthony R. Cresko, “A Poetic Analysis of Ps 105, with Attention to Its Irony,” *Biblica* 64 (1983): 20-46; Richard J. Clifford, “Style and Purpose in Psalm 105,” *Biblica* 60 (1979): 420-27.

The second quote appears a short span later, after the storyteller poetically describes Israel's perilous beginnings. Again the speaker quotes Yahweh:

אַל־תִּגְעוּ בְּמִשְׁיַחַי וְלִנְבִיאֵי אֱלֹהֵי־תִרְעוּ: (v. 15)

Although in this second instance there is no infinitive construct of אָמַר to introduce the quote, Yahweh's words are introduced by וַיִּזְכַּח in v. 14. The second quote addresses not Israel, but the kings (מְלָכִים) who would oppress Israel. The word choice here is interesting, considering the collective voice of Book IV that enthrones Yahweh as king.

Although the storyteller speaks throughout this psalm, it nonetheless has a dramatic quality. The storyteller *tells a story*, which by its very nature imagines a scene with characters who act. The storyteller invites the audience into the poetically-imagined drama of the Torah.³⁰⁸

In Psalm 106 the presence of the storyteller-persona becomes somewhat more explicit, although in a peculiar manner. After a brief imperative summons (v. 1), the storyteller asks:

מִי יִמְלֵל גְּבוּרוֹת יְהוָה יִשְׁמִיעַ כָּל־תְּהִלָּתוֹ: (v. 2)

Weiser sees the rhetorical question as the "guilty conscience" of the community that casts a shadow on the whole psalm, in the sense that no person is worthy of

³⁰⁸See Marty E. Stevens, "Psalm 105," *Interpretation* 57 (2003): 187-89.

the task.³⁰⁹ This interpretation makes the question all the more ironic, since it is the *storyteller* who has thus far “uttered the great things of Yahweh” and made the readers/hearers to hear “all his praise.” Joining the storyteller in uttering the great things of Yahweh, of course, are the other personae of Book IV, in particular the voices of the kingship-of-Yahweh psalms. In any case the question remains unanswered, and paradoxically functions to highlight both the presence and anonymity of the storyteller.

After a brief sage exhortation,³¹⁰ the storyteller again returns to self-revealing discourse. The storyteller here becomes supplicant:

(v. 4a) זָכַרְנִי יְהוָה בְּרִצּוֹן עֲמִיד

The persona here understands his or her own fate as tied to the fate of the community, a situation that may illuminate the mixture of individual and community concerns in Psalm 102.³¹¹ Regardless, the speaker reveals the intertwining of fates and thus a personal investment in the story at hand; more than an account of the failures of past generations or the present community, it is the persona’s story as well. This revelation is explicitly confirmed in v. 6:

חָטְאנוּ עִם־אֲבוֹתֵינוּ הָעוֹיְנוּ הָרָשָׁעִנוּ:

³⁰⁹Weiser, *Psalms*, 680.

³¹⁰The אֲשֶׁר־saying in Ps 106.3, the reference to the “statutes” (חֻק) and “laws” (תּוֹרָה) in Ps 105.45, and other allusions have led some interpreters to identify them as wisdom psalms. See Allen, *Psalms 100-150*, 51.

³¹¹See above, “A Prayer of One Afflicted: Psalm 102.”

The preposition **עִם** (lit. “with”) and the use of first-person, plural verbs put the storyteller, the present community, and past generations together.

Broyles calls Psalm 106 “a lesson in memory.”³¹² Indeed, “זִכָּרוֹן” is key to both Psalms 105 and 106. The storyteller calls the audience to remember the wonderful works of Yahweh (Ps 105.5). The storyteller pleads to be remembered along with the people (Ps 106.4). The generations past fail to remember Yahweh’s faithfulness (Ps 106.7) and quickly forget Yahweh’s works (**שָׁכַחוּ**, Ps 106.13). They forget God altogether (Ps 106.21). Yahweh, on the other hand, remembers the covenant with the people (Pss 105.7; 106.45), and on that basis, delivers. The act of storytelling itself is a remembering. In some sense, then, these two concluding psalms recall the end of Book III, in which the speaker pleads for deliverance and calls Yahweh to remember the brevity of mortal life (Ps 89.47-48). The storyteller turns the tables, suggesting that Yahweh does indeed remember the covenant for the sake of the people (Ps 106.45), but that the people must not again fail to remember their narrative of deliverance and the source of their identity. In this way the storyteller speaks in concert with the rest of Book IV. Yahweh is refuge and king, and the “answer” to the calamity of exile is a reorientation of the community’s identity under the sovereignty of Yahweh. Psalm 106 ends on a haunting note, however:

הוֹשִׁיעֵנו יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְקַבְּלֵנוּ מִן־הַגּוֹיִם (v. 47a)

³¹²Broyles, *Psalms*, 407.

While Book IV resounds with the proclamation of Yahweh's sovereignty, the last words plead for the poetically-imagined world(s) of Book IV to bear on the calamity at hand.

It is interesting that Book IV concludes with a "storyteller-persona." In some sense we have read the psalms of Book IV together, as a poetic arrangement that tells a story. Perhaps the concluding psalms of Book IV invite the audience to read in this manner. The speakers in these psalms do seem to sing in concert. Together they imagine a path to survival: speaking anew the identity of the community, once again oriented – as in the time of Moses – to Yahweh enthroned.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

This project has offered a literary and theological reading of Book IV of the Psalter that focuses on the literary personae in each of Psalms 90-106, and on the Psalter-persona expressed in Book IV as a whole. The notion of the literary persona offers a useful hermeneutical tool for reading the poetry of the Psalter. While readers encounter a diversity of speakers and may legitimately hear the personae of Book IV in a variety of ways, these personae are ultimately shaped by their canonical context. Collectively and in their present literary context, the personae of Book IV imagine and bespeak a reoriented identity under the kingship of Yahweh. In this way the aspect of voice in Book IV is an important feature of the poetry that rests at the theological heart of the Psalter.

The Poet in the Poem and the Psalmist in the Psalm

Chapter two surveys the history and theory of the literary persona. While the etymology of the word *persona* is complex and somewhat ambiguous, the word derives from the ancient stage and the Latin term for “mask,” and functions metaphorically to denote the literary voice within a poem. As a critical term, *persona* is restricted primarily to poetry, and can describe both a tool for the reader in the management of the complex and sometimes paradoxical expressions of literary voice, as well as a creative mechanism utilized by the poet.

In either case, at the heart of the concept lies a distinction between the author of a poem and the characters she creates. This distinction is inherent to poetry, occurring whether an “I” or “you” ever appears in the poem. Although this distinction is an inherent aspect of poetry, the degree of distinction between poet and persona is highly variable. The degree to which the poet and persona are distinct is influenced by the intentions of the poet and by the literary sentiments and conventions contemporary to both poet and reader. In the classic and modern eras, the separation between poet and persona was conventionally emphasized; by contrast, Romantic and postmodern poetry attempted to minimize the separation between poet and persona. This theory of a literary persona may be applied to poetry as a means of coping with the difficulties arising from the relationship between poet and persona. Insofar as this relationship is particularly difficult with respect to the Psalter, a persona-critical reading of the Psalter is a useful hermeneutical approach.

Chapter three explored the possibility of identifying literary personae in the poetry of the ancient Near East, in biblical literature, and particularly in the Psalter. Not surprisingly, the reader encounters in these literary contexts an artistically constructed literary voice, properly identified as a persona and not to be equated with the historical author. In this way the poetry that occupies the focus of this project is consistent with the notion of the literary persona as an inherent (but highly variable) aspect of poetry.

For much of the history of scholarship on the Psalter, the “psalmist” has been conceived as a pre-canonical historical figure, the real poets who composed their psalms. This approach has presented much difficulty, due in part to the ambiguity and universalizing of the psalms during the shaping of the Psalter. As a result, scholars like Tanner have suggested that the notion of the psalmist is no longer feasible. On the other hand, rather than discarding the psalmist it is possible to apply the notion of a literary persona as a means of coping with these difficulties, and as a method of analyzing the speaker or speakers within a psalm on literary terms. While the most recent scholarship has shown great promise with regard to employing the theory of literary persona in the interpretation of biblical texts, little has been done with regard to engaging and making use of the wider discussion among literary scholars. Most surprisingly, the largest corpus of biblical poetry has received the least amount of persona-critical attention.

As poetry, a psalm presents a created literary world from which the psalmist-persona speaks. The psalmist-persona’s relationship to this world is hermeneutically significant. Furthermore, the canonical relationships among Psalms 90-106 have a significant impact on the analysis and interpretation of the literary personae within these psalms. Scholars have come to recognize that the Psalter as a whole is hermeneutically greater than the sum of its parts. In its final form, the Psalter tells a story of survival: Books I-III celebrate but ultimately lament the reigns of David and Solomon, while Books IV-V celebrate and look forward to restoration through Yahweh who is proclaimed king. In this way the

community reorients its identity in theological terms, and in that identity finds a means of continued existence.

Chapter four examines the literary personae of Psalms 90-106 within the context of each psalm and within the canonical context of Book IV as a whole. The literary personae within Book IV exhibit a variety of interesting features. In many cases, the aspect of voice may be interpreted in more than one way. Psalm 90, for example, may be interpreted as exhibiting a multivalent persona. Psalm 102, on the other hand, may be interpreted as dialogic (following Mandolfo), or as a single persona that shifts address. Interpreters have also attributed speech in Psalms 91 and 95 to different speakers.

Several psalms exhibit a sage-persona, particularly with regard to the first and last sections of Book IV that enclose the central kinship-of-Yahweh psalms. The literary personae in Psalms 90-92, 94, 105-106 all exhibit to some extent a sage-like quality in terms of their diction, subject matter, and manner of reflection. This observation is not to suggest that these psalms are “wisdom psalms” *per se*, but simply that one may hear a “sage-persona” in these psalms.

The literary personae of Psalms 94 and 95 betray a sense of urgency, a quality that comes to full bloom in the kingship-of-Yahweh Psalms (Psalms 96-99). This urgency contributes to the overall theological thrust of Book IV, insofar as it communicates to the reader that the theological statement “Yahweh reigns” is not a benign thesis but a hopeful statement bearing on the decidedly exigent matter of survival. The literary personae do not merely suggest that Yahweh is

king; they *proclaim* that *Yahweh reigns*. They do not simply note the difficulty of the community's situation; they ask, "*How long will the wicked exult?*" They do not submit a request for reprieve; they call Yahweh to שׁוּב (Pss 90.13; 94.3).

The literary personae of Book IV are frequently exposed through self-reference and self revelation. In the core kinship-of-Yahweh psalms, however, the literary personae is less emphasized. Interestingly, as the emphasis on the essential theme of Yahweh's reign climaxes, the presence of the literary persona recedes.

While the occurrence of superscriptions is not as frequent in Book IV (compared to Books I-III), when they do occur they often present an interesting aspect with regard to the literary persona of the psalm. The superscriptions of Psalms 90 and 101-103, for example, in one way or another shape how the reader hears the speakers in those psalms. In a limited sense, these superscriptions function as a kind of ancient persona-critical interpretation!

In two instances, Ps 92.2-4 and 103.33-34, the distinction between poet and persona becomes very slight. Although the speaker of the poem nonetheless remains a stylized, created, literary persona, the speaker betrays the voice of the poet. These instances illustrate the variability of the distance between poet and persona.

Although Book IV is not "explicitly dramatic" in the same way as, for example, ancient Near Eastern epic poetry or the Song of Solomon, it does exhibit a decidedly dramatic quality in its own fashion. In some situations Yahweh

speaks (Psalms 91 and 95, for example), and in some instances it is possible to hear more than one human speaker (Psalms 91; 102). More than any other feature, however, the literary persona is constantly shifting address – to Yahweh, to the community, to the wicked, to the righteous, and, of course, to the reader. What Schaefer says of Palms 94 is true of Book IV as a whole: “Drama is felt as the poet dramatically addresses and speaks about God.”¹ Of course, it is not the poet who speaks, but the psalmist persona who is entangled in this poetic drama. As the psalmist-persona frequently switches between addressing Yahweh and addressing the community and/or the reader/hearer, it is almost as if the psalmist-persona is brokering the dialogue between those entities. Sometimes the psalmist-persona tells Yahweh of the community’s plight; sometimes the psalmist-persona proclaims to the community Yahweh’s refuge, ultimate justice, and sovereign reign. In the process of reorienting the community’s identity according to the kinship of Yahweh, the psalmist-persona functions as a kind of liaison between people and king. In this way the Psalter is dramatic and dialogic – not only in the sense that Mandolfo demonstrates, but oddly even when only a single literary persona is heard.

The overarching goal of this project has been to interpret Psalms 90-106 from a persona-critical vantage point. In doing so, however, we have advanced not one, but two fundamental arguments. The primary argument is that the

¹Schaefer, *Psalms*, 234.

theory of the literary persona, which distinguishes between the historical poet and the poetic voices he or she creates, is a useful hermeneutical tool for interpreting the poetry of the Psalter. At the same time, however, we have argued that the literary personae in Psalms 90-106 may be interpreted in relation to one another and to the Psalter and Old Testament/Hebrew Bible as a whole—that is, canonically. While this argument functions as a sub-thesis in service of the main theoretical and methodological focus of this project, it is nonetheless an argument in itself.

The underlying assumption of this canonical-critical method is that there is an *overall* rhetorical movement within the Psalter. To a significant extent, this hermeneutical dimension of the Psalter complicates the aspect of voice, and, as a result, our exegesis of the selected psalms. In an effort to cope with this additional complexity, we have used the nomenclature of “psalmist-persona” and “Psalter-persona” to distinguish between the various aspects or layers of identity and voice operative in Book IV. The “psalmist-persona” is comparable to the *narrator* of fictional prose and denotes the literary persona who speaks within a given psalm. The “Psalter-persona” corresponds more closely with the notion of the *implied author*, a persona who does not speak in any psalm, but whom a reader may nonetheless construct in the act of reading the poetry of the Psalter. Indeed, the assumption of a single controlling point of view in the final shape of the Psalter seems to be an idea that canonical critics assume—or at least work toward in the identification of manifold links—but seldom explicitly argue.

On the basis of the extensive evidence provided by canonical critics, we have heard the literary personae of Psalms 90-106 together, and that persona-critical analysis does seem to allow for an overall controlling point of view – a “Psalter-persona.” In the most striking of ironies, the identity of the “Psalter-persona” seems to be that of one *in search of an identity*, forced to reckon with a crisis that has erased the traditional sources of identity. At the same time, this crisis has shaken the foundations of the Psalter-persona’s inherited theological tradition. The bold response, and thus the driving thesis of the various literary personae in Book IV, is that the Psalter-persona’s identity – and the identity of the Psalter-persona’s community – must be reoriented according to the kingship of Yahweh. This reoriented identity is a matter of survival, and in Psalms 96-99 in particular, is sung unrestrained, as if to drown out the somber note that reverberates through the psalms on either side of the core kinship-of-Yahweh collection. Thus in a most basic sense, the Psalter-persona is a deeply conflicted character, torn between the faithful proclamation that Yahweh is king, and the vexing and contradictory reality of the crisis at hand. This conflict is apparent not only in the concentric arrangement of Book IV, but also in smaller connections such as Psalms 90-91, and even within individual psalms such as Psalms 92 and 102.

In sum, Book IV of the biblical Psalter presents a Psalter-persona in search of a reoriented identity under the kingship of Yahweh.

Last Words: Singing One's Own Songs and the Theological Imagination

In a few instances, we observed how sensitivity to the aspect of voice within a psalm illustrates the formative capacity of the Psalter's poetry.² That is, encountering the literary personae of the Psalter can shape the identity of the reader: in the act of reading, the reader becomes the "I" of the psalm.³ Here, as Bellinger illustrates, the "universalizing" of the Psalter in its final form is critical:

No wonder the Psalms have remained so popular and influential through the centuries. They touch the basic human experience and relate it to God's involvement in life. When readers see the Psalms as poetic prayers and so faith poems, new vistas of understanding can arise.⁴

A similar understanding of the Psalter is reflected by Athanasius in a letter to Marcellinus:

Furthermore there is a command to give thanks in all circumstances, but the Psalms also teach what one must say when giving thanks. Then hearing from others that as many as wish to live a godly life will be persecuted, from these we are taught how one must call out while fleeing, and what words must be offered to God while being persecuted and after being delivered subsequent to persecution. We are asked to bless the Lord, and to acknowledge him. But in the Psalms we are instructed how one must praise the Lord and by speaking what words we properly confess our faith in him. And in the case of each person one would find the divine hymns appointed for us and our emotions and equanimity.

There is also this astonishing thing in the Psalms. In the other books, those who read what the holy ones say, and what they might say concerning certain people, are reading the things that were written about those earlier people. And likewise, those who listen consider themselves to be other than those about whom the passage speaks, so that they only

²See especially the exegesis of Psalm 92.

³See for example Howard, "Editorial Activity in the Psalter," 58.

⁴Bellinger, *Psalms*, 7.

come to the imitation of the deeds that are told to the extent that they marvel at them and desire to emulate them. By contrast, however, he who takes up this book – the Psalter – goes through the prophecies about the Savior, as is customary in the other Scriptures, with admiration and adoration, but the other psalms he recognizes as being his own words. And the one who hears is deeply moved, as though he himself were speaking, and is affected by the words of the songs, as if they were his own songs.⁵

Thus the Psalter's significance and influence are connected to the way in which generations of readers have identified with and adopted its expressive lyrics.

Recent research, pedagogical practices, and literary conventions suggest that there is indeed a formative capacity with regard to the notion of "persona." Empirical data from cognitive scientists indicates that readers tend to adopt the perspective of fictional characters within a narrative (typically the protagonist), and that such adoption plays a significant role in our engagement with narratives: we experience narratives from the spatiotemporal perspective of the characters we adopt.⁶ In classrooms, teachers are using the "*persona* method," in which students are asked to assume the personae of different literary characters in order to experience and understand, for example, Shakespeare or multi-ethnic literature.⁷ Ed Block observes that modern poetry's use of persona tends to lead

⁵Athanasius, "Letter to Marcellinus," in *Athanasius: The Life of Antony* (ed. Emilie Griffin; trans. Robert C. Gregg; San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1980): 93-94.

⁶See Amy Coplan, "Empathic Engagement with Narrative Fictions," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62 (2004): 142-52.

⁷See for example Cortland Auser, "'The Mask Is the Face': Personae in Teaching Multi-Ethnic American Literature," *MELUS* 16 (1990): 69-76; Rebecca E.

to an increased participation of the reader “as imaginative co-creator with the writer of the lyric poem,” who searches his or her “own experience, both human and literary, to find the frame of reference and significance to which the poem applies.”⁸ In this way “it becomes the reader’s role to confront, reconcile, or organize the meaning of the poems and their possible significances.”⁹

A comparison between such modern uses and conceptions of the literary persona may be useful in analyzing the formative capacity of the Psalter more fully. In any case, the extent to which the poetry of the Psalter can shape the perspective of readers and the processes involved in and related to that act of reading would be an interesting study, and would further illuminate importance of the Psalter in normative settings.

Finally, this project has attempted to engage the poetry of the Psalter according to its created “literary personae” and “imaginary world.” The poetry of the Psalter, I believe, provides fertile ground for the exploration into the link between theology and the imagination. It is in the community’s ability to imagine a world, replete with created voices singing the nature and circumstances of that world imagined, and in the editorial process of shaping that world, that Book IV becomes so theologically potent. Perhaps the Psalter is

Burnett, “The ROLE’S the Thing: The Power of Persona in Shakespeare,” *The English Journal* 82 (1993): 69-73.

⁸Block, “Lyric Voice and Reader Response,” 154, 163.

⁹Block, “Lyric Voice and Reader Response,” 155.

the most “religious” book in the Hebrew Bible precisely because it is the most imaginative.

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