

Languages of Gods and the Structures of Human Literatures: An Essay in Comparative Poetics

Teddy Fassberg
Tel Aviv University

ABSTRACT: Literature is conventionally thought to consist of two complementary, comprehensive categories: poetry and prose. The first part of this essay argues this to be a contingent Western construct which goes back to the ancient Greeks and Romans and seeks to demonstrate that it indeed is not to be found in the neighboring ancient literary cultures of biblical Hebrew and early Islamic Arabic. The second part suggests that this difference is correlated to these cultures' conceptions of the language of their god(s), a suggestion which can be seen to complement Erich Auerbach's argument in *Mimesis* regarding the separation and mixture of styles in antiquity.

LITERATURE IS CONVENTIONALLY HELD, in the Western tradition and beyond, to consist of two complementary and comprehensive categories: poetry (or verse) and prose. The distinction between them is primarily formal, setting rhythmically segmented language apart from language the segmentation of which is at least not systematically rhythmical.¹ But this binary scheme is not simply a clinical means for classifying literary language; it comes freighted with ideology.

“By a necessity of human nature,” claimed Vico, “poetic style arose before prose style.”² The original human language was poetry, Rousseau declared, regarding it as a spontaneous expression

I thank the organizers, in particular Galili Shahar, for inviting me to join the *Comparing the Literatures* workshop, as well as its participants for the discussion. I am also grateful to Sarah Johnson and Aure Ben-Zvi Goldblum, whom I first ran some of these ideas by, and to Luuk de Boer, David Wasserstein, and the journal's anonymous reviewer for their comments. Ayelet Wenger's generous help, especially on Rabbinic literature, was invaluable; references to biblical scholarship suggested by my father, Steven Fassberg, were crucial. On no account should any of them be held responsible for my own unfortunate views. Translations are mine unless noted otherwise.

¹ Yuri Tynianov, *The Problem of Verse Language*, trans. M. Sosa and B. Harvey (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1981 [1924]); M. L. Gasparov, *A History of European Versification*, trans. G. S. Smith and M. Tarlinskaja (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1–2.

² Giambattista Vico, *The New Science* §460 (see also §409, §§461–72).

of emotion in tune with nature.³ If poetry is natural, post-lapsarian prose belongs to history: “prose was born yesterday,” Flaubert remarked, and Friedrich Schlegel characterized it as “the true nature of the moderns.”⁴ As the language of modernity, prose is a cerebral and artificial medium of disenchantment, in contrast with the perception of poetry as an outlet of emotion, the product of inspiration. The popular use of “poetic” and “prosaic” to pass judgment—in European languages and beyond—in contexts far removed from literary criticism attests to the substantive dimensions of the apparently formal opposition between the two fundamental categories of literature.⁵

This opposition has deep roots. While “poetry” and “prose” pleasantly alliterate, “verse” and “prose” are more tightly bound together: they form a *figura etymologica*.⁶ “Verse” derives from Latin *versus*, the perfect passive participle of *vertere*, “to turn,” implying the view of poetry as an indirect, “perverse” use of language.⁷ Meanwhile Latin *prosa* (or *prorsa*), the ancestor of “prose,” derives from *prorsus* (“straightforward, direct”), and ultimately from *proversus* (i.e., *pro-versus*), literally signifying verse which has been straightened out.⁸ The linguistic derivativeness of “prose” is reflected in the logical priority of “verse”: whereas “prose” presupposes “verse,” the latter can be defined independently.⁹ It is not by chance that already in Greco-Roman antiquity verse was also considered chronologically—and, later, even metaphysically—prior to prose.¹⁰

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, ch. 3. See Deborah Levine Gera, *Ancient Greek Ideas on Speech, Language, and Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 39–41, for discussion and references.

⁴ Gustave Flaubert, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert*, vol. 1, trans. Francis Steegmuller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980 [1852]), 159; Friedrich Schlegel, *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, trans. Stuart Barnett (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001 [1797]), 37; Gerald L. Bruns, introduction to *Theory of Prose*, by Viktor Shklovsky, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990 [1929]), ix: “modernity begins with the discovery that the book of the world is written in prose.” See more broadly, Karlheinz Barck, “Prosaisch-poetisch,” in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe* [Basic concepts in aesthetics], vol. 5, ed. Karlheinz Barck, Martin Fontius, Dieter Schlenstedt, Burkhard Steinwachs, and Friedrich Wolfzettel (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2005), 87–112; and Na’ama Rokem, *Prosaic Conditions: Heinrich Heine and the Spaces of Zionist Literature* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013), ch. 1, on Hegel’s “prose of the world.”

⁵ See, e.g., Barck, “Prosaisch-poetisch,” with numerous examples.

⁶ “Poetry” comes from Greek *poiēsis*, or *poiein* (“to make”), and is isolated, Greek not having bequeathed to the Western tradition a corresponding term for its prosaic counterpart. I will discuss the Greek concept of prose elsewhere.

⁷ The Roman rhetorician Quintilian presented *versus* as having been “necessarily pushed off the straight path, seeking refuge in certain byways of speech” (*The Orator’s Education* 10.1.29). Verse is thus secondary in relation to ordinary speech, but not to prose, which is not to be conflated with ordinary language (see references at note 9). Whereas Latin *versus* emphasizes the formal structure of the language to which it refers, Greek *poiēsis* foregrounds its artifice, its status as a work of art; “prose” is opposed to the first formally, to the second substantively.

⁸ *Prorsa* was an aspect of the Roman goddess of childbirth, presiding over babies emerging head-first. For the etymology of “prose” see *Thesaurus linguae latinae* (Leipzig: Teubner, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1900–), s.v., and L. L. Tels-de Jong, *Sur quelques divinités romaines de la naissance et de la prophétie* [Regarding some Roman divinities of birth and prophecy] (Amsterdam: A. M. Hakkert, 1960), 43–44, for details and further references.

⁹ E.g., *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. “prose”: “Language . . . usually characterized as having no deliberate metrical structure (in contrast with verse or poetry);” cf. “verse”: “A succession of words arranged according to natural or recognized rules of prosody. . . .” See further, Gregory Nagy, *Pindar’s Homer* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 47; Kristin Hanson and Paul Kiparsky, “The Nature of Verse,” in *Prosimetrum: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Narrative in Prose and Verse*, ed. Joseph Harris and Karl Reichl (Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 20.

¹⁰ Strabo, *Geography* 1.2.6; Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* 7.205; Isidore, *Etymologiae* 1.38. In the modern period, in addition to Vico and Rousseau, see, e.g., Voltaire, “Œdipe—préface de l’édition de 1730,” [Oedipus—preface to the edition of 1730] in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* [Complete works of Voltaire], vol. 2 (Paris: Garnier frères, 1877 [1730]), 54–55; É. B. de Condillac, *Essai sur l’origine des connoissances humaines* [Essay on the

The conventional binary classification of literary language is thus seen to be neither natural nor neutral. It is a particular, contingent construct of the Western tradition, and is not to be taken for granted. In the first part of this paper I argue that, indeed, this scheme is not universal, and that it ill suits two neighboring literary cultures in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East. In the second, I suggest that these divergent conceptions of literary language may be understood in relation to ideas these cultures held about the language of god(s).

1.

The Hebrew Bible marks some of its language as “song” (*šīrā*), as in the Song of the Sea:

Then Moses and the people of Israel sang (*yāšīr*) this song (*šīrā*) to the Lord, saying, “I will sing (*’āšīrā*) to the Lord . . . (Exodus 15:1, NRSV).

It is not clear, however, that the pragmatic distinction between song and non-song corresponds to the primarily formal distinction between verse and prose, for verse need not be sung and song does not require verse.¹¹ Some of these songs were in fact classified by medieval critics as “prose;”¹² and the modern Hebrew word for “poet,” *māšōrēr*, is used in the Hebrew Bible to refer not to figures responsible for the composition of marked language, but to those engaged in its performance.¹³ It is significant that the earliest reference to biblical language as verse belongs to Josephus, writing in Greek, who is clearly thinking of Greek epic when he refers to biblical hexameters.¹⁴ Like the Hebrew Bible, early Greek epic referred to its own language, as well as other kinds of language, by means of pragmatic terms such as “song” (*oidē*); it was only later that the

origin of human knowledge], vol. 2 (Amsterdam: Pierre Mortier, 1746), §§66–67; Johann Gottfried, “Treatise on the Origin of Language,” in *Herder: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002 [1772]), 103; Thomas De Quincey, “Style,” in *De Quincey as Critic*, ed. John E. Jordan (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975 [1840]), 88–90; G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975 [1842]), 973; Arthur Quiller-Couch, “On the Difference between Verse and Prose,” in *On the Art of Writing* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1916), 50; Wlad Godzich and Jeffrey Kittay, *The Emergence of Prose* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), xi (“historical evidence shows that it is verse that precedes prose,” and 197: “we know it [verse] to be developmentally first”). References can be multiplied.

- ¹¹ James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 75 n. 24: “any text—the U.S. Constitution, the Manhattan telephone book, the warranty of a clock-radio—can be sung or set to music” (italics original; cf. *ibid.*, 190). It can be argued that under the definition of verse as language which is systematically rhythmically segmented, any text set to music or sung would have to be considered verse, because of the rhythmic segmentation the music would impose upon it. But the fact that every text set to music would thus become verse demonstrates that song is irrelevant to the distinction between verse and prose; by the same token, verse can be “prosified” by disregarding its rhythmic segmentation. To call a sung text “verse” is therefore a tautology.
- ¹² See M. ibn Ezra, *Kitāb al-Muḥāḍara wa-l-Mudhākara* [The book of conversation and recollection], ed. A. S. Halkin (Jerusalem: Hotsa’at Mekitse Nirdamim, 1975), 20–21, 46–47 (English translation of the latter in Kugel, *Idea*, 132–34), referring to them as *nathr* (for the Arabic terminology see below). For Sa’adya Ga’on’s view that there was no poetry in the Hebrew Bible, Kugel, *Idea*, 131–32, and ch. 6 more broadly.
- ¹³ Explicitly in 1 Chronicles 9:33, 15:16–21; 2 Chronicles 5:12–13, 20:21, 23:13, 29:28, etc.
- ¹⁴ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 2.346, 4.303, and see also 7.305 on David’s “trimeters” and “pentameters.” Philo, *Contemplative Life* 29, 80, refers to earlier Hebrew writings—not explicitly to biblical writings—as metrical. For discussion of Josephus and Philo, as well as the later Christian writers who shaped the view that biblical poetry was metrical, see Kugel, *Idea*, 127–70. It is also telling that the earliest form of Hebrew verse in which an “established formal system of any kind can be discerned” was called *piyyut*, from Greek *poiētēs*; see Benjamin Harshav, “Prosody, Hebrew,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, vol. 16 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 597, 600.

Greek, as it happened, developed formally oriented literary criticism.¹⁵ But whereas meter allows for a dichotomous distinction between Greco-Roman verse and prose, no such criterion divides biblical language into two discrete categories.

Biblical scholars now agree that Josephus's notion of biblical meter was unfounded and maintain—against the backdrop of free verse—that meter is not a necessary condition for verse.¹⁶ Disavowing meter, Benjamin Harshav mentions “some principles of biblical verse” such as parallelism, rhythm, assonance; none of these, however, is exclusive of what is considered “biblical prose.”¹⁷ The apparent imperviousness of biblical language to a dichotomous division suggests that it constitutes a phenomenon of a different order from Greco-Roman literary language.¹⁸ Rather more attractive, then, than attempts to force biblical language into a Procrustean binary is James Kugel's suggestion that it should be seen as operating on a continuum, ranging from the less to the more strictly organized, but not amenable to a clear-cut distinction.¹⁹ Having given up the idea that biblical verse must have meter if it is to measure up to Western standards, there appears to be good reason to let go of the Western binary model itself.

It is similarly unclear that a dichotomy would accurately categorize the marked forms of classical Arabic in early Islam. The organization of the language of classical Arabic poetry, primarily known as *šī'r* (also “knowledge”), was exceptionally strict: it was both metrical and it rhymed. It was also known as *nazm* (“organization”). Conversely, language which was neither metrical nor rhymed was called *nathr*, literally “to scatter;”²⁰ in contrast to Roman *prosa*, *nathr*

¹⁵ See Andrew L. Ford, *The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); cf. Kugel, *Idea*, 69, and Jacqueline Vayntrub, *Beyond Orality: Biblical Poetry on its Own Terms* (London: Routledge, 2019), 23–24.

¹⁶ Harshav, “Prosody, Hebrew,” 599: “For many generations scholars have argued over the ‘secrets’ of biblical prosody . . . Such attempts seem pointless today since no exact regularity of any kind has been found and since rhythm need not be based on strict numerical regularity.” Similarly, Edward L. Greenstein, “Hebrew Poetry, Biblical,” in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Roland Greene (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 601–603; Stephen A. Geller, “Hebrew Prosody and Poetics,” in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry*, 610–12; F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁷ It is not only that parallelism can be found in what is not considered verse, but there is also language in the Bible which is considered verse but does not feature parallelism; see F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, “Robert Lowth, Parallelism, and Biblical Poetry,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 21 (2021): 34.

¹⁸ Compare Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques* (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1984), 46–47, who enumerates nineteen (!) “criteria” for distinguishing prose from poetry, including the tautological “absence/rarity of prose elements.” The best case for a dichotomous distinction is Greenstein, “Hebrew Poetry.” On the basis of Alviero Niccacci's work, Greenstein (“Hebrew Poetry,” 602), argues that prose and verse employ different verbal systems; but cf. Alviero Niccacci, “The Biblical Hebrew Verbal System in Poetry,” in *Biblical Hebrew in its Northwest Semitic Setting*, ed. Steven E. Fassberg and Avi Hurvitz (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2006), 252: “the B[iblical] H[ebrew] verbal system attested in direct speech in prose basically applies to poetry.” In other words, the verbal systems which Greenstein takes as distinguishing prose from verse actually distinguish narrative from discourse. Greenstein, “Hebrew Poetry,” 603, indeed sees the latter distinction as mapping onto the supposed distinction between verse and prose, but admits that there is also discourse in prose (see Edward L. Greenstein, “Direct Discourse and Parallelism,” in *Discourse, Dialogue, and Debate in the Bible: Essays in Honour of Frank H. Polak*, ed. Athalya Brenner-Idan [Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014], 87, discussing parallelism and discourse in detail). More importantly, what we have here is a distinction which is narratological, and only incidentally formal.

¹⁹ Kugel, *Idea*, ch. 2; also Steven Weitzman, *Song and Story in Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 1–3.

²⁰ For reflection on the terminology, see the tenth/eleventh-century critic 'Abd al-Karīm al-Nahšālī, *Al-mumtī' fī 'ilm al-šī'r wa-'amalīh* [The entertainer: On the theory and practice of poetry], ed. M. al-Ka'bi (Tunis: al-Dār al-'arabiyya li-l-kitāb, 1978), 24 (see translation in Wolfhart Heinrichs, “Prosometrical Genres in Classical Arabic

did not proceed in a straight line. The fact that *nazm* was doubly constrained, by both meter and rhyme, opened up the possibility for an intermediate form which was singly constrained. Such language can be found in the Quran, which is not in meter but mostly rhymes.²¹ This language, called *saj'*, could well be considered verse, but, crucially, the Quran itself insists that its Prophet was no poet:²²

Indeed this is the speech of a noble messenger. It is not the speech of a poet (69:40–41).

In Arabic literary criticism, which only began to come into its own as a discipline at the end of the ninth century CE, the speech of the Prophet could even be categorized as *nathr*.²³ Clearly, the Western hierarchy between verse and prose cannot neatly apply here; indeed, starting in the ninth century there was a lively debate as to which was superior.²⁴ A different, highly influential strand of literary criticism maintained that the language of the Quran was superhuman (*mu'jaz*), itself constituting the proof for its divine provenance, by implication rendering the more tightly regulated, ostensibly more artful language of *ši'r* merely human.²⁵ If under this view *nathr* was, too, the two were on equal footing; in fact, the distinction between them was relatively

Literature,” in *Prosimetrum*, 253). And cf. in Syriac the roughly contemporary Antony of Tagrit on “the Greek sophists, who did not leave their skill scattered and confused, but defined it in measure and metre...” (trans. J. W. Watt, in *The Fifth Book of the Rhetoric of Antony of Tagrit*, ed. J. W. Watt, CSCO 480–81 [Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 1986], 480:9 [text], 481:7 [translation]). Before *prosa* established itself in Latin, prose was commonly referred to as *soluta oratio* (“loosened speech”). Incidentally, Arabic *ši'r* is wholly unrelated to Hebrew *šir*.

- ²¹ This scheme is presented synchronically and should not be taken diachronically. On *saj'*, the differences between its rhyme and the rhyme of *ši'r*, and its relation to the Quran, see Devin Stewart, “Rhymed Prose,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, vol. 4 (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2001–2006), 476b–484a. As Stewart notes, it has frequently been claimed that *saj'* is related to Hebrew parallelism and to Semitic “Ur-poetry.” The discussion here is restricted to Biblical Hebrew and Classical Arabic.
- ²² For the Islamic ambivalence toward poetry, see Michael Zwettler, “A Mantic Manifesto: The Sūra of ‘The Poets’ and the Qur'ānic Foundations of Prophetic Authority,” in *Poetry and Prophecy*, ed. James L. Kugel (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 75–119; also Teddy Fassberg, “The Greek Death of Imru' al-Qays,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 140, no. 2 (2020), 430–32, with references at n. 84. Cf. James L. Kugel, “Poets and Prophets: An Overview,” in *Poetry and Prophecy*, 10–11, on the rabbis' insistence on the distinction between Hebrew scripture and song.
- ²³ For a succinct overview of the history of Arabic literary criticism, see Wolfhart Heinrichs, “Arabic Poetics,” in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry*, 62–64. In al-Mubarrad's ninth-century epistle to al-Wāthiq, perhaps the earliest discussion of the two categories, prose (*al-kalām al-manthūr*) is grouped with *saj'* against poetry (see Gustave von Grunebaum, “Al-Mubarrad's Epistle on Poetry and Prose,” *Orientalia* 10 [1941]: 372–82). On Quranic language as *nathr* see, e.g., Ziyad al-Ramadan az-Zu'bi, *Das Verhältnis von Poesie und Prosa in der arabischen Literaturtheorie des Mittelalters* [The relationship of poetry and prose in medieval Arabic literary theory] (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1987), 159–62.
- ²⁴ On hierarchy, see Wolfhart Heinrichs, *Arabische Dichtung und griechische Poetik* [Arabic poetry, Greek poetics] (Beirut: In Kommission bei F. Steiner, 1969), 99. For discussions debating the superiority of one or the other, see az-Zu'bi, *Verhältnis*, 147–96; A. Azazi, “Une épître d'Ibrāhīm b. Hilāl al-Šābī sur les genres littéraires” [An epistle by Ibrāhīm b. Hilāl al-Šābī on the literary genres], in *Studies in Islamic History and Civilization in Honour of Professor David Ayalon*, ed. M. Sharon (Jerusalem: Cana, 1986), 473–505; José Miguel Puerta Vilchez, *Aesthetics in Arabic Thought: From Pre-Islamic Arabia through al-Andalus*, trans. Consuelo López-Morillas (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2017), 212–13; also Lidia Bettini, “Nathr,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. P. J. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1960–2004). Cf. M. ibn Ezra, *Kitāb al-Muḥāḍara*, 26–27.
- ²⁵ On the doctrine of its inimitability, see R. C. Martin, “Inimitability,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. 2, 526–36, and in the context of contemporary literary criticism, Lara Harb, *Arabic Poetics: Aesthetic Experience in Classical Arabic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), ch. 5.

unimportant to Arabic literary criticism, and its discussions of “poeticity” (*šī ‘riyya*) in no way excluded “prose.”²⁶

There is, then, no evidence that either biblical Hebrew or early Islamic Arabic were originally conceived from an emic perspective as formal binaries, and little justification for describing them as such etically. From an etic perspective, the literary languages of biblical Hebrew and early Islamic Arabic appear to be best described as a spectrum and a ternary, respectively. This structural difference has substantive consequences: whereas binary oppositions are inherently hierarchical—resulting in the supposedly natural inferiority of prose in Western literary traditions—nonbinary configurations do not necessarily impose rigid hierarchies, as the early Islamic case demonstrates.²⁷

Presumably, biblical Hebrew and early Islamic Arabic are not exceptional in their lack of conformity to the model of the Greco-Roman binary; the latter’s prevalence, which today extends to modern Hebrew and Arabic literature as well, only makes it seem so.

2.

If literatures are not naturally constructed as binaries, what factors take part in determining their structures? As an avenue to the identification of one such factor, I would like to suggest that the structures of the literary systems discussed above reflect broader metalinguistic conceptions. I begin by considering the Indo-European poetic tradition from which Greco-Roman literature descends. The discussion of the Jewish and Islamic traditions will in turn be extended to include Christianity, lending it breadth as the Indo-European comparanda provide depth. The result will be a comparison of the conceptions of literary language in the Indo-European tradition and the ancient Near Eastern Abrahamic religions in the light of their conceptions of divine language.²⁸

One feature of metalinguistic thought in the Indo-European tradition is that gods speak a different language from humans. Glimpses of the divine language of the Greek gods can be found in Homeric epic, as when the narrator introduces a river which flows into the Hellespont:

anta d’ ar’ Hephaisioio megas potamos bathudinēs
hon Ksanthon kaleousi theoi, andres de Skamandron (Iliad 20.72–74)

... against Hephaestus (stood) the great deep-eddying river
which gods call Xanthus, and men Scamander.

²⁶ On the relative insignificance of the distinction between poetry and prose, see Arazi, “Une épître,” especially 474 and 475–76 n. 10, and 490; az-Zu‘bī, *Verhältnis*, 18–83; Heinrichs, “Arabic Poetics,” 63. See also Kamal Abu Deeb, “Literary Criticism,” in *Abbasid Belles-Lettres*, ed. Julia Ashtiany, T. M. Johnstone, J. D. Latham, R. B. Serjeant, and G. Rex Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 358–60, on the limited formal orientation of Arabic literary criticism. On “poeticity,” e.g., Harb, *Arabic Poetics*, 1–2 with n. 2.

²⁷ See, e.g., Elizabeth Gross, “Derrida and the Limits of Philosophy,” *Thesis Eleven* 14, no. 1 (1986), esp. 27, explicating Derrida’s work on this; also noted in David Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 266.

²⁸ The following discussion therefore does not consist of a comparison of the Indo-European tradition with the ancient Near East more broadly, nor the Semitic language family as a whole, and this exercise in comparative poetics should not be taken to imply any broader antitheses between these cultures.

Such items of the gods' lexicon are disclosed elsewhere in Greek literature and also in Vedic, Hittite, Old Norse, and Irish.²⁹ These are marked words, frequently archaic, typical of poetic discourse rather than everyday interaction. They are in fact generated by poetic means such as alliteration or kenning, a form of metaphoric periphrasis.³⁰ Both play a part in shaping the gods' name for "forest" in the Old Norse Poetic Edda, *vallar-fax*, "the field's mane," in which *vallar* and *fax*—each beginning with a fricative—essentially alliterate. Dazzlingly intricate phonetic indexing is similarly found in the case of Xanthus/Scamander:

...***ks******anthon*** *kaleousi* ***theoi*** ***andres*** de ***sk******amandron***
Xanthus call gods men Scamander

The second syllable of each of the river's names duplicates the first syllable of the names of those who use them (in bold italics), while the first syllables in each of the river's names is linked to the other through metathesis (bold underline).³¹ The language of the gods was thus conceived as a poetic language, which stood in the same relation to human language as poetry stands to ordinary language. (Incidentally, this can perhaps account for the construction of prose as a language of disenchantment and secularization.)

The significance of constructing the language of the gods as poetic lay in the construction of the language of the poets as divine. Vedic as it was spoken by mortals was thought to constitute a mere quarter of the language itself; the other three were the gods':

Speech is measured in four feet (/quarters). Brahmins of inspired thinking know these.
They do not set in motion the three that are imprinted in secret; the sons of Manu speak the fourth (foot/quarter) of speech (Rigveda 1.164.45, trans. Brereton).³²

The knowledge of the gods' language here is presented as setting poets (Brahmins) apart from the rest of humanity (the sons of Manu).³³ By presenting this knowledge as "secret," a bond

²⁹ Calvert Watkins, "Language of Gods and Language of Men: Remarks on Some Indo-European Metalinguistic Traditions," in *Myth and Law among the Indo-Europeans*, ed. Jaan Puhvel (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1970), 1–17; and Calvert Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 38–39 and 181–83, with earlier references. See M.L. West, *Hesiod: Theogony* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 387–88, for references to the language of the gods in Greek; M.L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (Oxford: University Press, 2007), 160–62, for other branches of Indo-European, with references. On Vedic see below.

³⁰ See Claire Le Feuvre, "Language of Gods, Pythian Apollo and Plato's *Cratylus*," in *When Gods Speak to Men: Divine Speech according to Textual Sources in the Ancient Mediterranean Basin*, ed. S. Anthonioz, A. Mouton, and D. Petit (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2019), 81–104, for valuable discussion, and Watkins, *Kill a Dragon*, 44–45, for a concise definition of kenning with references. Contrast the use of incomprehensible language as a means of representing unique access to the gods, attested in various ancient and modern cultures, discussed by John G. Gager, ed., *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 9–10, with references.

³¹ Vladimir N. Toporov, "Die Ursprünge der indoeuropäischen Poetik" [The origins of Indo-European poetics], *Poetica* 13 (1981), 200–209. Here the human term is also phonetically indexed.

³² Cf. also Rigveda 10.90.3 and brief remarks in Michael Witzel, "Saramā and the Pañis: Origins of Prosimetric Exchange in Archaic India," in Harris and Reichl, *Prosimetrum*, 393. The divine three quarters were to completely overwhelm the mortal quarter: in the later Indian tradition the Veda came to be "viewed as a radically different, nonhuman, form of language." See Sheldon Pollock, "Indian," in *How Literatures Begin*, ed. Joel B. Lande and Dennis C. Feeney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), 94 (italics original).

³³ Stephanie W. Jamison and Joel P. Brereton, *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 22: "the poet who formulates truth is the *brahmán*."

is established not only between the poet and the gods, but also between the poet and the audience with whom these secrets were shared. Elsewhere in the Rigveda the poet Vasiṣṭha reports a conversation with the god Varuṇa:

Varuṇa said to me who am wise: “the inviolable cow bears three times seven names.”
Knowing of its track, he will speak (its names) like secrets—he, the inspired poet who strives
on behalf of the later generations (Rigveda 7.87.4, trans. Brereton).

The “cow” here signifies speech, but the rest is more difficult to interpret;³⁴ what is clear is the self-presentation of the inspired poet as conspiring with a restricted audience. The ambiguity and the exclusivity are both typical, for the poets’ claim to knowledge of divine speech is symptomatic of an obscurantist strain running through Indo-European poetry, exemplified by the aforementioned affinity for kenning, as well as elaborate anagrams and hypograms.³⁵ In the Greek tradition, Theognis similarly concluded a lengthy nautical allegory by exclaiming:³⁶

May these secrets be put forth by me as riddles for the noble.
Anyone, if he is skilled, will recognize the disaster (Theognis 681–82).

The Muses themselves notoriously presented their poetry to Hesiod in the form of a liar’s paradox:

We know how to say many lies similar to what is real,
And we also know, when we like, to pronounce truth (*Theogony* 26–27).

The Indo-European poet was often presented as a messenger, an attendant, a prophet.³⁷ By contrast, some of the most important messengers employed by the monotheistic god of scripture composed in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East were not poets. On the contrary, they suffered from linguistic impediments: Moses stuttered and Muhammad was illiterate, as were two of the apostles, Peter and John, while Paul presented himself as “ignorant in speech.”³⁸ In Greece,

³⁴ See Jamison and Brereton, *Rigveda*, ad loc., for discussion, and cf. Rigveda 4.5.3: “A great melody (he gave)—the doubly lofty, sharp-pointed, thousand-spurting, powerful bull— / having found the word hidden like the track of the cow. Agni has proclaimed the inspired thought to me” (trans. Jamison).

³⁵ Watkins, *Kill a Dragon*, ch. 16; also Françoise Bader, *La langue des dieux, ou l’hermétisme des poètes indo-européens* [The language of the gods, or the hermetism of the Indo-European poets] (Pisa: Giardini, 1989). For Pindaric anagrams, also see Calvert Watkins, “Pindar’s Rigveda,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122, no. 2 (2002): 432–35. Le Feuvre, “Language of Gods,” 90–91: “the kenningar are aenigmatic periphrases or compounds used by poets to display their art of concealing meaning under unexpected garments.”

³⁶ See also Theognis 769–72, and Pindar *Olympian* 2.83–86. On allegory in archaic Greek poetry, see Bruno Gentili, *Poetry and its Public in Ancient Greece*, trans. A. Thomas Cole (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), ch. 11.

³⁷ In Greece (selectively), Theognis presents himself as an attendant and messenger of the Muses (*therapōn kai angelos*, 769), Pindar as their herald (*kêrux*, *Dithyramb* 2.23–25) or interpreter (*prophētēs*, fr. 150: “You be the oracle, muse, and I—your interpreter”), or simply a messenger (*angelos*, *Nemean* 6.57). The poet as messenger is implicit in invocations, or descriptions of song as a gift from the Muses which is to be shared with the audience: Hesiod, *Theogony* 93–103, also 31–32; Archilochus 1 in M. L. West, ed., *Iambi et elegi Graeci* [Greek iambic and elegiac poetry] (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989–92) with Theognis 772 on the obligation of sharing; Solon 13.51–52 in West, *Iambi et elegi*; Pindar, *Olympian* 7.7. Gregory Nagy, “Ancient Greek Poetry, Prophecy, and Concepts of Theory,” in Kugel, *Poetry and Prophecy*, 56–64, argues that the functions of poet and prophet were originally unified in Greek culture; further afield, see the classic N. Kershaw Chadwick, *Poetry and Prophecy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1942).

³⁸ Exodus 4:10, and see also Jeremiah 1:6–9; Q 29:48, with discussion in E. Geoffroy, “Ummi,” in Bearman, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*; Acts 4:13, and 2 Cor. 11:6. For the fraught relationship between prophecy and poetry

gods were typically represented as communicating with humans—both in initiating poets as well as in the pronouncement of oracles to laypeople—in riddling language.³⁹ In the Hebrew Bible, God’s speech can appear in so pedestrian a form that Samuel thrice fails to realize he is being addressed by a divinity (1 Samuel 3:1–11);⁴⁰ in the New Testament, Jesus takes care to explicate his parables (e.g., Matthew 13, 21). It is striking that while the most prestigious and at times sacred texts in the Indo-European tradition—the Indic Rigveda, the Iranian Gathas, Homeric and Hesiodic epic—are unflinching in verse, Near Eastern monotheistic scripture largely makes do with less regulated, less artful language.⁴¹

In contrast with the society of gods depicted, for instance, in Homeric epic, a monotheistic god would have little use for a divine tongue, which would in effect be a “private language.” The Jewish and Christian traditions recognize angelic tongues, which are generally inaccessible to humans, but their language is not a literary ideal, and it is not God’s.⁴² At the beginning of Genesis, when humans do not yet exist, the language that Yahweh uses to create the world is Hebrew: he calls “light” *yōm* and “darkness” *layla* (1:5).⁴³ Hebrew’s special status sets its speakers apart from other linguistic communities, but there is no discrimination within the linguistic community of Hebrew speakers. Whereas Greco-Roman poets emphasized the distance between their poetry and ordinary language, Abrahamic scripture and its exegetical traditions are given to asserting its clarity and proximity to human speech. R. Ishmael accounted for apparent redundancies in the Hebrew Bible by stating that “the Torah spoke the language of humans” (Sifre Numbers 112), formulating a principle with a long, diverse future ahead of it.⁴⁴ Similarly, for all that the language of the Quran came to be considered “superhuman,” the Quran itself twice identifies the language of its revelation as “clear Arabic language” (*lisān ‘arabī mubīn*, 16:103, 26:195).⁴⁵ The gospels highlight the antagonism between Jesus and the scribes (*grammateis*), professionals whose claim to authority is founded on linguistic expertise. The very lack of rhetorical polish—according to

in the Hebrew Bible and its exegesis, see Kugel, “Poets and Prophets,” 5–12; in the Quran, Zwettler, “Mantic Manifesto.” Cf. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), ch. 6.

³⁹ On oracles and the language of the gods, see Giovanni Manetti, *Theories of the Sign in Classical Antiquity*, trans. C. Richardson (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 14–19; Lisa Maurizio, “Narrative, Biographical and Ritual Conventions at Delphi,” in *Sibille e linguaggi oracolari: mito, storia, tradizione* [Sybils and oracular languages: myth, history, tradition], ed. Ileana Chirassi Colombo and Tullio Seppilli (Pisa, Italy: Istituti editoriali e poligrafici internazionali, 1998), 138–44; Le Feuvre, “Language of Gods,” 94–97. For riddling initiation scenes of Greek poets, e.g., Hesiod, *Theogony* 25–29, and Archilochus in *Supplementum epigraphicum Graecum* [Greek epigraphic supplement] (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1923–), 15.517; see Maarit Kivilo, *Early Greek Poets’ Lives: The Shaping of the Tradition* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2010), 208–209, for an inventory.

⁴⁰ God’s speech can also appear in more elevated form. A prominent example is the divine speech at the end of Job, analyzed in Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, ch. 4.

⁴¹ Cf. G. E. von Grunebaum, “The Aesthetic Foundation of Arabic Literature,” *Comparative Literature* 4, no. 4 (1952): 333 n. 34.

⁴² On angelic tongues, see Steve Weitzman, “Why Did the Qumran Community Write in Hebrew?” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 119, no. 1 (1999): 42, with references.

⁴³ For the identification of Hebrew as the language of creation see Gen. Rab. 18.23 (Theodor-Albeck ed., 164–65) and, in Jubilees, Weitzman, “Qumran Community,” 40–43.

⁴⁴ Menahem I. Kahana, “The Halakhic Midrashim,” in *The Literature of the Sages, Second Part*, ed. Shmuel Safrai, Zeev Safrai, Joshua Schwartz, and Peter J. Tomson (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2006), 20 n. 74, emphasizes the narrow context of R. Ishmael’s argument precisely because it was later construed more broadly.

⁴⁵ Q 12:2, 14:4 emphasize intelligibility, and see also the opposition between clarity and *shi’r* at 36:69. See discussion in Claude Gilliot and Pierre Larcher, “Language and Style of the Qur’ān,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, vol. 3, 114–15.

Greco-Roman standards—which marked the language of the New Testament as non-elite was interpreted as a testament to its divinity, to God’s independence of human strictures; in the words of Erich Auerbach: “the lowly, or humble, style is the only medium in which such sublime mysteries can be brought within the reach of men. It constitutes a parallel to the Incarnation. . . .”⁴⁶ The “Word of God” itself assumes human form (John 1:14, also Revelation 19:13).

Nearly fifty years after its initial publication, David Damrosch observed that Auerbach’s *Mimesis* is admired by many, but followed by few.⁴⁷ Now, seventy-five years on, following the publication of Damrosch’s own *Comparing the Literatures*, I would like to suggest that the fundamental difference between the ancient Indo-European and Near Eastern conceptions of literary language discussed here may be seen as germane to the contrast which Auerbach gracefully illustrated between the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian approaches toward the “representation of reality.” Auerbach argued that the Greco-Roman literary tradition was characterized by a “separation of styles,” wherein higher registers were reserved for the sublime and the lower for the everyday, whereas the Judeo-Christian tradition mixed them.⁴⁸ We have seen that a similar contrast holds for what Aristotle would call the media of their mimesis: the Greco-Roman binary has appeared as a reflection of the deeply rooted Indo-European impulse to separate poetic language from the nonpoetic, while less strictly stratified literary systems can be found where there is no such drive for dichotomy. A

⁴⁶ Erich Auerbach, *Literary Language and its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993 [1958]), 51, and see 45–52; see also Kugel, *Idea*, 159–65, 205–206, and Augustine’s approach to allegory (p. 160), which is entirely foreign to the Indo-European conception mentioned above. On Augustine, see also Robert A. Kaster, *Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 84–85.

⁴⁷ David Damrosch, “Auerbach in Exile,” *Comparative Literature* 47, no. 2 (1995): 97.

⁴⁸ See also Auerbach, *Literary Language*, ch. 1.