

## An Exercise in “Double-Wording”

### The Surprising Work of Scripture

#### A reading of Jane Hirschfield’s “Poetry & the Constellation of Surprise”

[in *The Writer’s Chronicle*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 28ff.]

NOTE: I have suggested a “replacement” at each of Hirschfield’s references to poetry (and related concepts) with “Scripture” (and related concepts). If that is confusing, see an alternate copy of the article at the end of this document (beginning on page 8), where I have *actually* replaced the reference to poetry with Scripture. Then come back and read this version and see if you can “double-word” the text as you read it through.

Each instant of a good poem [biblical text] provides the enactment of an unfathomable transformation. From the silence preceding the title’s first word to the first word, from the first word to the second, everything is changed. The illimitable possibility of the empty page becomes some constellation of feeling, thought, interior shift, and musical gesture: the many-levelled experience we feel as “meaning.” A good poem [Scripture] makes self and world knowable in new ways, brings us into an existence opened, augmented, and altered. Part of its work, then, must also be to surprise—to awaken into a new circumference is to be startled.

Poems [biblical texts] transport us into unanticipatable comprehensions. In this, lyric epiphany [scriptural revelation] is like any learning sharply won: its surprise is the signal of strongly shifted knowledge. But one of the distinguishing powers of art [scripture] is that it unseals its experience freshly not only once, but many times. Good poems [biblical texts] provide an informing so simultaneously necessary and elusive that they are never, it seems, taken in fully, and can never be fully used up. New each time they are read, good poems [biblical texts] offer a kind of mirror-reflection of Tantalus’s Hell—each time we enter poetry’s [scripture’s] realm, we find hunger both wholly present and wholly answered.

Other conceptual realms are not like this. Even discoveries [e.g., source criticism, textual criticism, ideological criticism, literary criticism, historical Jesus research] so revolutionary as those made by Copernicus, Keppler, and Newton [biblical scholars] eventually become taken for granted: impersonal, emotionally neutral, as calm and fixed in the mental landscape as a long-familiar chair or backyard boulder. These things may—and do—still astonish, if contemplated closely. Still, their usefulness does not depend on the strength and depth of our reaction to their existence. In art [scripture], the response is the actual discovery—whether conceptual, aesthetic, or emotional, whether consciously parsed or felt as uncomprehendingly as an ox feels the stick. A long memorized poem [biblical text] can still evoke a stunned revelation during recitation. Pound put it simply, “Poetry is news that stays news.” How this happens is what I would like to look at here.

It is, of course, we who house poems [biblical texts] as much as their words, and we ourselves must be the locus of poetry's [scripture's] depth of newness. Still, the permeability seems to travel both ways: a changed self will find new meanings in a good poem [biblical text], but a good poem [biblical text] also changes the shape of the self. Having read it, we are not who we were the moment before. Awareness matters if this reciprocity is to happen, and art's [scripture's] first seduction is the summoning and instigation of presence. If a poem, piano concerto, or painting [biblical text] does not feel alive and pressing, demanding from us the attention of current discovery, it is not, at that moment, fully art [scripture]—only something travelling under art's [a canonical] name with which we happen to share a room. A work of art is not color knifed or brushed onto a canvas, not shaped rock or fired clay, a vibrating cello string, black ink on a page—it is our active, agile, and participatory collaboration with those forms, colors, symbols, and sounds. Art [Scripture] lives in what it awakens in us.

Transformation in itself carries meaning. The feeling of passage undertaken and alteration undergone is foundation rock for an inhabited first-hand experience. If art [scripture] is constructed experience aspiring to the weight of the real, one touchstone of what we feel real, rather than imagined, is this sense of the transitive physicality of the experience: of our own embodied, altering, and participatory presence. Outward dimensionality is seen by physically shifting the eye; the parallel holds for the psyche. A life felt as full is full of change. Describing the experience of emotion, we call ourselves “moved.” In biological life, transformation is an unnegotiable given. In art [scripture], it is the hallmark struck into a work [text] that works.

Poems [biblical texts] preserve their inaugural newness in part because they are like the emotions—not object, but experience, event. The emotions must always be primal, because they are local and unextractable, occurring only in present-time: emotion informs us of current circumstance, current needs. Poems that last [biblical texts] are those that do not lose the power to astonish and move their readers in equally immediate ways. The same poem [biblical text] that resists time's erasure also lives in and by it. An embeddedness in the fleeting, it is the score to a music in which the reader is instrument and audience both, not conclusion or summation but an orchestration of self, whose meaning cannot be named except by its own enactment played fully through.

Poetic realization [biblical revelation] is also strangely evaporative and volatile: while the poem [biblical text] can hold it stably, the mind cannot. Like certain chemical, or perhaps alchemical reactions, a poem [biblical text] is held in the vessel and procedures of its own making. Even the mind of the writer cannot keep what has been found: great poems [biblical texts] exceed their creators [historical authors/contexts]. They are more capacious, compassionate, original, witty, strange, avaricious for range and beauty; their surprises are, as the etymology of the word “surprise” literally states, beyond grasp. For this reason, the biographies of poets [historical criticism] puzzle[s]. The life [historical context] neither

fully accounts for nor reflects the poems' [biblical texts'] achievement. There is no explanation for a Larkin or Dickinson, but also not for Celan, Blake, Hopkins, Whitman, or Shakespeare [a Paul, a John, ...]. The outer life story, the historical times, do not make the art [scripture]. The creative leap is inconceivable until it is done—not least because, as will be explored further below, a certain inconceivability is part of its nature. Lyric epiphany [biblical revelation], it seems, gives off a kind of protective mist or exudate, an amnesia to any generalizable recall. And what can't be remembered will (re)appear to us as new.

Creative discoveries are made by generative recombination: disparate elements brought together in a way not previously seen, then recognized as making a useful whole. Cognition begins with the construction and distinction of patterns. From the infants "buzzingandbloomingconfusion," in William James's phrase, we assemble a comprehensible world by perceiving first what stays or recurs. Only then can we see the alterations, and which combinations are new and can newly inform. The greater the distance and leap of effective connection, the more surprise it will hold; the most profound discoveries—those described as revolutionary or "earth-shaking"—are ones, like the Copernican rearrangement of sun and planets, that revise our most daily, unquestioned assumptions. The Latin verb *cogitare*, "to think," has its linguistic roots in the act of shaking things together—agitation of the existing order is needed to make something new, a principle contained in trickster myths worldwide. Intelligence is a little different. The Latin *intelligo* refers to sorting and intentional selection. This reminds of Chekhov's definition of talent: the ability to tell the essential and inessential apart.

If the mind recognizes discovery by its perception of change and the unexpected, all real creativity [revelation], then must surprise. Surprise erases the known for the new. Counterfactual thought's "what if" resides on a spectrum; play also shakes things together—often quite literally—in new ways. But while the results of play both instruct of the world and bring pleasure, they rarely jolt. Make believe can play its indispensable role in a life precisely because it doesn't matter or count; without the commitment of outer-world repercussion, it is experience courted but not married. The distinction clarifies why some poems [texts] seem essential, while others, as accomplished and interesting of surface, do not. Deep surprise is the way the mind signals itself that a thing perceived or thought is consequential, or that a discovery may be of some real use. (The experience itself, though, especially in responding to a work of art [biblical text], may well be felt as some different emotion, the one that follows—scientists say that surprise itself lasts half a second at most.) We can think of the role of surprise in survival's own sorting—what most surprises will be most strongly acted on, and most strongly learned. The poems [biblical texts] we carry forward, as individuals and as cultures, are those that not only strike us powerfully but also hold some reason to call up their own recall. They are the poems [texts] we think to turn to, to read or say when poetry [revelation] is wanted.

Surprise magnetizes attention: an infant hearing an unexpected sound will stop and stare hard. The experience of surprise is itself surprising. It is also, literally, arresting: in a person strongly startled, the heart rate momentarily plummets. It's as if the whole being pauses, to better grasp what's there. Surprise does not weigh its object as "good" or "bad"; though that may follow, its question is simply "What is it?," asked equally of any sudden change. Its facial expression, according to one researcher, is close to rapture, the openness of a baby's first waking, empty of self. Darwin, in his book investigating the emotions, grouped surprise with astonishment, amazement, and wonder.

In poetry [scripture], surprise deepens, gathers, and purifies attention in the same way: the mind of preconception is stopped, to allow a more acute taking-in. A taxonomy of poetic [exegetical] surprise covers many levels—unexpectedness can occur in word, syntax, concept, image, or rhetoric. Disruption of pattern (overt or subtle) can take place in structure, rhythm, approach, meter, or rhyme. The unlikely thing may be the choice of what is looked at. Surprise can rest entirely in a poem's [passage's] textural surface or in subtext alone. One subtle path to surprise is through the movement and refocussing of attention. Some haiku, for instance, simply bring the unnoticed to notice, as if the walls of the room you are in were suddenly to drop away and the house next door—which, after all, you did know was there—was suddenly sitting companionably within view.

By means large or small, thought's startlements displace the self. Even the fine-grained surprise of a line's enjambment can be felt as perceptible pause and question, then an ensuing revision of mind; as with a pun, or Japanese poetry's pivot-words, both phases of mind are intended. Keats pointed to these almost intangible forms of surprise when he wrote that poetry "surprises by fine excess." In the density of poetry's [scripture's] rendering attention, the world—and so the experiencing self—takes on a reliable abundance. It gives the same pleasure we feel before a discovered spring; we know thirst will be answered unmeagerly, with a generosity far beyond its own measure.

Surprise carries an inverse relationship to the harness of ego and will: it is the emotion of a transition not self-created. Though infants can visibly surprise themselves by sneezing, there is not self-tickling. We tend not to laugh at our own jokes, at least when alone. Yet one of the reasons creative effort is undertaken is precisely to surprise oneself by what might be found. The already-known may bring comfort, but the as-yet-undiscovered brings an enlargement of life. We are beings often skeptical of, made worried by, surprise. We are also beings who seek it out—Polynesian trans-oceanic explorers in hollowed-out logs, Atlantic City gamblers, and the mountain climber sleeping cliff-suspended on half dozen pitons share the willingness to submit themselves to the unknown. Risk of failure—not unfamiliar to even the desk-bound—amplifies the exhilaration of success.

Surprise is the gate through which the new must pass. If something in a poem [sermon] startles others, it will have startled its maker first. Robert Lowell wrote, speaking in one poem about his others,

“My Dolphin, you only guide me by surprise.” “No surprise for the writer [preacher], no surprise for the reader [hearer],” stated Robert Frost. Poems [sermons] only appear to come from the self if you do not write them. The writer [preacher] knows they are gift, won from collaboration of individual with language, self with unconscious, personal association and concept with the world’s own uncontrollable materials and events. Picasso said, “I do not seek, I find.” Insight’s arrival as if from outside the self has been described not only by artists but by biologists, economists, mathematicians. The early-20<sup>th</sup>-century mathematical prodigy Ramanujan reported that his theorems came to him from a whispering goddess. If you leave out the goddess, the description turns out to be not uncommon among mathematicians—many radically new propositions, it seems, are proved after rather than en route to their first appearance, whole, in the mind.

At the start of considering these questions, I raised the question of abiding surprise with a friend, while walking. We reached a ridge, and I said, “We’ve been here many times before, why is it always so new?” I myself was thinking of E. O. Wilson’s theory of sight-lines and the African savannah; of the complex textures of sky, leaves, and grasses; of the role of cloud and mist in Chinese paintings. She answered, “Because it isn’t me.”

The world’s beauty continually surprises, in no small part because it is not controlled by self or what self knows. Even a grain of sand or pebble, considered closely, can liberate us from conscious mind’s constriction, from our close-held embrace of ego’s dominance over things—the proof is in poems by Zbigniew Herbert, Wislawa Szymborska, Charles Simic, Carlos Drummond de Andrade. A city would serve as well; for Whitman, a country. Release of narrow view lies behind surprise in humor, intellectual riddle, tragic catharsis—why should it not lie as well behind the surprisingly perennial beauty of the objective world, which is not of our making and does not exist for our use? Astonishment’s other side is powerlessness over the view.

Lyric epiphany [biblical revelation] is democratic, equally intimate with Aeschylus and the stand-up comic. If its effects on us seem to link it more to the former, its economy and means of meaning-making are nearer the latter. E.E. Cummings, when asked his technique in poetry responded: “I can express it in fifteen words, by quoting the eternal question and immortal answer of burlesque: ‘Would you hit a woman with a baby? No, I’d hit her with a brick.’ Like the burlesque comedian,” he went on, “I am abnormally fond of that precision which creates movement.” The joke’s technique recalls a second immortal comment, this one by Groucho Marx: “Outside a dog, a book is a man’s best friend; inside a dog, it’s too dark to read.” The mechanism of the gesture is identical—a sleight-of-hand worked on a single word’s two disparate meanings. But the example quoted by Cummings rests on slapstick’s unjustified aggressions, Groucho’s on its reminder of isolation and friendlessness, of the depth of a night

in which a book and a dog are the only two options, and even they are then stripped away. His invention holds word-wit in its right hand; in its left, the sufferings of Jonah and Job.

Familiar jokes can still evoke laughter for the same reasons that known poems [familiar biblical texts] continue to move and surprise. We perennially fall for what enlists us into an experience so simply and seductively offered, we cannot not enter through the offered, open door. Neither a poem's nor a joke's [nor a biblical text's] reason for being can be found except by remaking the motions of mind that creates it. A joke's punch line, like a poem's [biblical text's] meaning, is not in its words, but in us. As with poems [biblical texts], our amnesia to certain jokes is almost complete; when it isn't we sometimes laugh harder at the inertia of a prat-fallible mind. The performing arts—which include comedy, poetry, music, dance, and magic, as well as theater [and preaching]—ask of us not only the theater's well known suspension of disbelief, but also suspension of foreknowledge. All partake of ritual: the reenactment of and entrance into a mystery that can be touched but not possessed.

“Wit” was once a synonym for simple “knowing.” Groucho's words feel close to those of a poem [biblical text] not only in their undertow of sadness, but in that undertow's very existence, in its challenge to deep preconception. Jokes are supposed to be funny, are they not? Yet what makes a truly good joke good is precisely that it is not merely mechanically funny; it also shows us something both discomfiting and true. We are alone. Inside a dog, and us, it is dark.

The more you look at the element of surprise in good poetry [in scripture], the more it resembles the work of the comic and trickster: it argues against those things we most think we know. It is when fundamental and unexamined assumptions of mind and nature are shaken that we are most moved, in the arts as in science. Against gravity and entropic loss, a poem [biblical text] proposes the levitations of fine excess and gratuitous beauty—sound-trance's memorability; the aerial devices of implication; metaphor's democratic connectedness with all existence; the praise of whatever is for what it is. In a painting, a small square of sunlight rests on the rounded shoulder of a glass vase, preserved impossibly against time's passage; the pause in a piece of music by Mozart stops the heart for no reason except that it is there. Against transience, art [scripture] provides a witnessing endurance; against the stringencies of survival, it offers the moment's dalliance or chosen disappearance. The love poem born of unfulfilled desire embraces its own longing. The love poem of fulfillment carries somewhere within it, however lightly, the shadow of time and death. A painted apple cannot be eaten. As evolution's creatures, we align with goal-attainment, self-protection, and the useful. The part of art [scripture] which is art [revelatory], and not device, unshackles us from usefulness almost entirely.

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*In the latter part of Hirschfield's article she interprets 3 poems: “Ithaka,” by C.P. Cavafy; “Oysters,” by Seamus Heaney; and “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” by Robert Frost. Then she concludes ...*

While poetry [scripture] reminds of the uselessness of the useful, it reminds as well of the usefulness of the useless. It reminds, that is, that existence itself is sufficient. The reasoning of great poetry [of the biblical witness] transcends reason because reason—a faculty rooted in the attainment of goal and its own perpetuation—cannot and does not encompass the whole of life. Through a good poem’s [a biblical text’s] eyes we see the world liberated from what we would have it do. Existence does not guarantee us destination, nor trust, nor equity, nor one moment beyond this instant’s almost weightless duration. It is a triteness to say that the only thing to be counted upon is that what you count on will not be what comes. Utilitarian truths evaporate: we die. Poems [biblical revelation] allow[s] us not only to bear the tally and toll of our transience, but to perceive, within their [its] continually surprising abundance, a path through the grief of that insult into joy.

I began these considerations believing the transcending knowledge of poems [scripture] is a singularly human liberation; that poetic epiphany [biblical revelation], by loosening the psyche from the grip of expectation and purposeful pursuit, is a capacity of knowing entirely unique to our own kind. I still think this is so: if there is a poetry [revelation] of dolphins, ravens, and elephants, it is not like ours. But something else seems possible as well—that the peculiarly human phenomenon is the grip held on the heart by goal-seeking, end-weddedness, purpose, and that what good poems [biblical texts] restore us to is something close to what is meant by “animal joy.” They allow us to see the leaf’s passage from gold to green and mourn neither, to taste an oyster for both the history of rapacity and its salt. Poetry’s [scripture’s] purposeless purpose, now as in Homeric Greece, is to restore to us the amplitude and exuberance of the Ithakan journey, even when knowing that inside a dog it is dark.

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This is perhaps a simpler way to encounter “double- wording”—after you’ve read the article in this way, go back to the beginning of the file and read it in the “less simple” way.

Three hints:

- Skip over the words inside the [brackets] as you read through this version.
- If you find this difficult, identify one substantial paragraph and work with that single paragraph until you grasp the concept of “double- wording.” Then, read that paragraph in the first version. BUT – before you do this, honestly attempt to read through the entire version as given below.
- Remember that it can help to *read out loud*, especially when dealing with difficult or unfamiliar content.

Each instant of a biblical text [good poem] provides the enactment of an unfathomable transformation. From the silence preceding the title’s first word to the first word, from the first word to the second, everything is changed. The illimitable possibility of the empty page becomes some constellation of feeling, thought, interior shift, and musical gesture: the many-levelled experience we feel as “meaning.” Scripture [A good poem] makes self and world knowable in new ways, brings us into an existence opened, augmented, and altered. Part of its work, then, must also be to surprise—to awaken into a new circumference is to be startled.

Biblical texts [Poems] transport us into unanticipatable comprehensions. In this, scriptural revelation [lyric epiphany] is like any learning sharply won: its surprise is the signal of strongly shifted knowledge. But one of the distinguishing powers of scripture [art] is that it unseals its experience freshly not only once, but many times. Biblical texts [Good poems] provide an informing so simultaneously necessary and elusive that they are never, it seems, taken in fully, and can never be fully used up. New each time they are read, biblical texts [good poems] offer a kind of mirror-reflection of Tantalus’s Hell—each time we enter scripture’s [poetry’s] realm, we find hunger both wholly present and wholly answered.

Other conceptual realms are not like this. Even ground-breaking research such as source criticism, textual criticism, ideological criticism, literary criticism, historical Jesus research [discoveries] so revolutionary as those made by biblical scholars [Copernicus, Keppler, and Newton] eventually become taken for granted: impersonal, emotionally neutral, as calm and fixed in the mental landscape as a long-familiar chair or backyard boulder. These things may—and do—still astonish, if contemplated closely. Still, their usefulness does not depend on the strength and depth of our reaction to their existence. In scripture [art], the response is the actual discovery—whether conceptual, aesthetic, or



emotional, whether consciously parsed or felt as uncomprehendingly as an ox feels the stick. A long memorized biblical text [poem] can still evoke a stunned revelation during recitation. Pound put it simply, “The Bible [Poetry] is news that stays news.” How this happens is what I would like to look at here.

It is, of course, we who house biblical texts [poems] as much as their words, and we ourselves must be the locus of scripture’s [poetry’s] depth of newness. Still, the permeability seems to travel both ways: a changed self will find new meanings in a biblical text [good poem], but a biblical text [good poem] also changes the shape of the self. Having read it, we are not who we were the moment before. Awareness matters if this reciprocity is to happen, and scripture’s [art’s] first seduction is the summoning and instigation of presence. If a biblical text [poem, piano concerto, or painting] does not feel alive and pressing, demanding from us the attention of current discovery, it is not, at that moment, fully scripture [art ]—only something travelling under a canonical [art’s ] name with which we happen to share a room. A work of art is not color knifed or brushed onto a canvas, not shaped rock or fired clay, a vibrating cello string, black ink on a page—it is our active, agile, and participatory collaboration with those forms, colors, symbols, and sounds.† Scripture [Art] lives in what it awakens in us.

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Biblical texts [Poems] preserve their inaugural newness in part because they are like the emotions—not object, but experience, event. The emotions must always be primal, because they are local and unextractable, occurring only in present-time: emotion informs us of current circumstance, current needs. Biblical texts that last [Poems] are those that do not lose the power to astonish and move their readers in equally immediate ways. The same biblical text [poem] that resists time’s erasure also lives in and by it. An embeddedness in the fleeting, it is the score to a music in which the reader is instrument and audience both, not conclusion or summation but an orchestration of self, whose meaning cannot be named except by its own enactment played fully through.

Biblical revelation [Poetic realization] is also strangely evaporative and volatile: while the biblical text [poem] can hold it stably, the mind cannot. Like certain chemical, or perhaps alchemical reactions, a biblical text [poem] is held in the vessel and procedures of its own making. Even the mind of

the writer cannot keep what has been found: biblical texts [great poems] exceed their historical authors/contexts [creators]. They are more capacious, compassionate, original, witty, strange, avaricious for range and beauty; their surprises are, as the etymology of the word “surprise” literally states, beyond grasp. For this reason, historical criticism [the biographies of poets] puzzle[s]. The historical context [the biographies of poets] neither fully accounts for nor reflects the biblical texts’ [poems’] achievement. There is no explanation for a Paul or John, nor an Isaiah or the Psalmist or James [Larkin or Dickinson, but also not for Celan, Blake, Hopkins, Whitman, or Shakespeare]. The outer life story, the historical times, do not make the scripture [art]. The creative leap is inconceivable until it is done—not least because, as will be explored further below, a certain inconceivability is part of its nature. Biblical revelation [Lyric epiphany], it seems, gives off a kind of protective mist or exudate, an amnesia to any generalizable recall. And what can’t be remembered will (re)appear to us as new.

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If the mind recognizes discovery by its perception of change and the unexpected, all real revelation [creativity], then must surprise. Surprise erases the known for the new. Counterfactual thought’s “what if” resides on a spectrum; play also shakes things together—often quite literally—in new ways. But while the results of play both instruct of the world and bring pleasure, they rarely jolt. Make believe can play its indispensable role in a life precisely because it doesn’t matter or count; without the commitment of outer-world repercussion, it is experience courted but not married. The distinction clarifies why some texts [poems] seem essential, while others, as accomplished and interesting of surface, do not. Deep surprise is the way the mind signals itself that a thing perceived or thought is consequential, or that a discovery may be of some real use. (The experience itself, though, especially in responding to a biblical text [work of art], may well be felt as some different emotion, the one that follows—scientists say that surprise itself lasts half a second at most.) We can think of the role of surprise in survival’s own

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Surprise magnetizes attention: an infant hearing an unexpected sound will stop and stare hard. The experience of surprise is itself surprising. It is also, literally, arresting: in a person strongly startled, the heart rate momentarily plummets. It's as if the whole being pauses, to better grasp what's there. Surprise does not weigh its object as “good” or “bad”; though that may follow, its question is simply “What is it?,” asked equally of any sudden change. Its facial expression, according to one researcher, is close to rapture, the openness of a baby's first waking, empty of self. Darwin, in his book investigating the emotions, grouped surprise with astonishment, amazement, and wonder.

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dozen pitons share the willingness to submit themselves to the unknown. Risk of failure—not unfamiliar to even the desk-bound—amplifies the exhilaration of success.

Surprise is the gate through which the new must pass. If something in a sermon [poem ] startles others, it will have startled its maker first. Robert Lowell wrote, speaking in one poem about his others, “My Dolphin, you only guide me by surprise.” “No surprise for the preacher [writer], no surprise for the hearer [reader],” stated Robert Frost. Sermons [Poems] only appear to come from the self if you do not write them. The preacher [writer] knows they are gift, won from collaboration of individual with language, self with unconscious, personal association and concept with the world’s own uncontrollable materials and events. Picasso said, “I do not seek, I find.” Insight’s arrival as if from outside the self has been described not only by artists but by biologists, economists, mathematicians. The early-20<sup>th</sup>-century mathematical prodigy Ramanujan reported that his theorems came to him from a whispering goddess. If you leave out the goddess, the description turns out to be not uncommon among mathematicians—many radically new propositions, it seems, are proved after rather than en route to their first appearance, whole, in the mind.

At the start of considering these questions, I raised the question of abiding surprise with a friend, while walking. We reached a ridge, and I said, “We’ve been here many times before, why is it always so new?” I myself was thinking of E. O. Wilson’s theory of sight-lines and the African savannah; of the complex textures of sky, leaves, and grasses; of the role of cloud and mist in Chinese paintings. She answered, “Because it isn’t me.”

The world’s beauty continually surprises, in no small part because it is not controlled by self or what self knows. Even a grain of sand or pebble, considered closely, can liberate us from conscious mind’s constriction, from our close-held embrace of ego’s dominance over things—the proof is in poems by Zbigniew Herbert, Wislawa Szymborska, Charles Simic, Carlos Drummond de Andrade. A city would serve as well; for Whitman, a country. Release of narrow view lies behind surprise in humor, intellectual riddle, tragic catharsis—why should it not lie as well behind the surprisingly perennial beauty of the objective world, which is not of our making and does not exist for our use? Astonishment’s other side is powerlessness over the view.

Biblical revelation [Lyric epiphany] is democratic, equally intimate with Aeschylus and the stand-up comic. If its effects on us seem to link it more to the former, its economy and means of meaning-making are nearer the latter. E.E. Cummings, when asked his technique in poetry responded: “I can express it in fifteen words, by quoting the eternal question and immortal answer of burlesque: ‘Would you hit a woman with a baby? No, I’d hit her with a brick.’ Like the burlesque comedian,” he went on, “I am abnormally fond of that precision which creates movement.” The joke’s technique recalls a second immortal comment, this one by Groucho Marx: “Outside a dog, a book is a man’s best friend; inside a

dog, it's too dark to read." The mechanism of the gesture is identical—a sleight-of-hand worked on a single word's two disparate meanings. But the example quoted by Cummings rests on slapstick's unjustified aggressions, Groucho's on its reminder of isolation and friendlessness, of the depth of a night in which a book and a dog are the only two options, and even they are then stripped away. His invention holds word-wit in its right hand; in its left, the sufferings of Jonah and Job.

Familiar jokes can still evoke laughter for the same reasons that familiar biblical texts [known poems] continue to move and surprise. We perennially fall for what enlists us into an experience so simply and seductively offered, we cannot not enter through the offered, open door. A biblical text's [nor a poem's nor a joke's] reason for being can be found except by remaking the motions of mind that creates it. A joke's punch line, like a biblical text's [poem's] meaning, is not in its words, but in us. As with biblical texts [poems], our amnesia to certain jokes is almost complete; when it isn't we sometimes laugh harder at the inertia of a prat-fallible mind. Preaching [The performing arts—which include comedy, poetry, music, dance, and magic, as well as theater—] asks of us not only the theater's well known suspension of disbelief, but also suspension of foreknowledge. All partake of ritual: the reenactment of and entrance into a mystery that can be touched but not possessed.

"Wit" was once a synonym for simple "knowing." Groucho's words feel close to those of a biblical text [poem] not only in their undertow of sadness, but in that undertow's very existence, in its challenge to deep preconception. Jokes are supposed to be funny, are they not? Yet what makes a truly good joke good is precisely that it is not merely mechanically funny; it also shows us something both discomforting and true. We are alone. Inside a dog, and us, it is dark.

The more you look at the element of surprise in scripture [good poetry], the more it resembles the work of the comic and trickster: it argues against those things we most think we know. It is when fundamental and unexamined assumptions of mind and nature are shaken that we are most moved, in the arts as in science. Against gravity and entropic loss, a biblical text [poem] proposes the levitations of fine excess and gratuitous beauty—sound-trance's memorability; the aerial devices of implication; metaphor's democratic connectedness with all existence; the praise of whatever is for what it is. In a painting, a small square of sunlight rests on the rounded shoulder of a glass vase, preserved impossibly against time's passage; the pause in a piece of music by Mozart stops the heart for no reason except that it is there. Against transience, scripture [art] provides a witnessing endurance; against the stringencies of survival, it offers the moment's dalliance or chosen disappearance. The love poem born of unfulfilled desire embraces its own longing. The love poem of fulfillment carries somewhere within it, however lightly, the shadow of time and death. A painted apple cannot be eaten. As evolution's creatures, we align with goal-attainment, self-protection, and the useful. The part of scripture [art] which is revelatory [art], and not device, unshackles us from usefulness almost entirely.

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*In the latter part of Hirschfield's article she interprets 3 poems: "Ithaka," by C.P. Cavafy; "Oysters," by Seamus Heaney; and "Nothing Gold Can Stay," by Robert Frost. Then she concludes ...*

While scripture [poetry] reminds of the uselessness of the useful, it reminds as well of the usefulness of the useless. It reminds, that is, that existence itself is sufficient. The reasoning of the biblical witness [of great poetry] transcends reason because reason—a faculty rooted in the attainment of goal and its own perpetuation—cannot and does not encompass the whole of life. Through a biblical text's [a good poem's] eyes we see the world liberated from what we would have it do. Existence does not guarantee us destination, nor trust, nor equity, nor one moment beyond this instant's almost weightless duration. It is a triteness to say that the only thing to be counted upon is that what you count on will not be what comes. Utilitarian truths evaporate: we die. Biblical revelation [Poems] allow[s] us not only to bear the tally and toll of our transience, but to perceive, within its [their] continually surprising abundance, a path through the grief of that insult into joy.

I began these considerations believing the transcending knowledge of scripture [poems] is a singularly human liberation; that biblical revelation [poetic epiphany], by loosening the psyche from the grip of expectation and purposeful pursuit, is a capacity of knowing entirely unique to our own kind. I still think this is so: if there is revelation for [a poetry of] dolphins, ravens, and elephants, it is not like ours. But something else seems possible as well—that the peculiarly human phenomenon is the grip held on the heart by goal-seeking, end-weddedness, purpose, and that what biblical texts [good poems] restore us to is something close to what is meant by “animal joy.” They allow us to see the leaf's passage from gold to green and mourn neither, to taste an oyster for both the history of rapacity and its salt. Scripture's [Poetry's] purposeless purpose, now as in Homeric Greece, is to restore to us the amplitude and exuberance of the Ithakan journey, even when knowing that inside a dog it is dark.

†You might try to re-write this sentence, making it about Scripture rather than art. Give it a try!

\*This is a *fantastic* paragraph – but not an easy paragraph. Spend some time figuring out what she's saying. Again, I say: This is a fantastic paragraph! Can you freewrite on it for 3 minutes or more?