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The Song of Songs

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THE discourse of love, of which the Song is a distillation, is created not only by the lovers, is not only the basis of a community predicated on love, first developing from the family, the mother-child relationship, and then the society of lovers to which the Song appeals, but also draws into its orbit things, plants, animals, geography. It can do nothing else: lovers can communicate only through the world, through metaphor. The lover explores the other person and finds in the body affirmation, response, and also solitude. Something happens that is beyond speech, and it enters language only through displacement. For this reason sexual interpretations of the Song are both fascinating and boring; they exemplify the pornographic desire to name and appropriate pleasure, to have it at imaginative command, and they miss the point. If the Song were a continuous allegory of sex, no matter how ingenious the techniques or subtle the allusions, it would be nothing more than a riddle or a tease.

The lover is a stranger who represents, in his or her heterogeneity, the world that we must make our own; the lover's body is explored, with all its multifarious possibilities of significance and action, its extremes of revulsion and attraction, its vulnerability and peril. The body is subject to death, and thus to a concern in which there is always an element of anxiety.

The lovers are two persons, with presumably their own separate biographies, but the poem is their composite speech, expressing a common personality to which they both contribute, to which each is opened up, and which is experienced in relation to the other. Further, each is, of course, an aspect of a single person, namely the poet. One of the features that gives the Song its coherence is the consistency of voice within it, shared by both lovers and engendering them.

The germinal paradox of the Song is the union of two people through love. The lovers search for each other through the world and through language that separates them and enfolds them. The body is the medium for this search and is the boundary between the world and the self. Thus the body comes to represent the self to the world, and the world to the self. It becomes the focus of metaphor, the conjunction of differentiated terms.

Metaphor links self and other, man and nature, sign and referent. Hans-Peter Müller, in a recent book on the imagery of the Song,[1] argues that metaphor, a projective identification with the world, is necessary to establish the reality of the self as an object. Thus, exploring the body is equivalent to exploring the world, a point made in verse after verse. Beyond this, the Song is concerned as much with the relationship between man and nature—his alienation from it through language and consciousness, and his participation in it—as it is with that between human beings.

The union of lovers is, then, a means for the discovery of a common identity between discrete terms; it is a metaphor for the poetic process. The subject of the poem is not just or simply human love, but also everything that enters into relation with it in the poem, the whole world as it is experienced or animated through love. The Beloved (my term for the woman in the poem) is, for example, addressed in 2:14 as a dove, whose voice communicates not only her presence but also the world it inhabits; the preceding description of the spring (2:10–13), in which the Lover (my term for the man) woos his beloved with primaveral beauty, gains much of its rhetorical power from its apparent impersonality and objectivity; it is as if the spring were wooing on his behalf. As a result the words of the poem have an element of redundancy; they are the forms adopted by a voice whose message is even simpler than their ostensible "I love you" or "You are beautiful," a voice that is a call, human and universal, announcing its own presence and desire. Many passages in the Song are likewise motivated by the need to speak for the sake of speaking. In the dialogue of 1:7–8, for example, the mellifluous exchange of cross-purposes, in which the Beloved's attempt to make a rendezvous meets with ambiguous evasion, is developed through a series of circumlocutions one of whose functions is to protract the conversation. A unit whose theme is absence keeps the lovers present to each other; between them they construct a duet. Similarly, the formal portraits that take up much of the poem have a repetitive component; they hold the image and, it is hoped, the attention of the loved one.

Analyzing the imagery of the Song is consequently both mandatory—since the poem is essentially concerned with metaphor—and only one aspect of the work of interpretation. For the Song appeals to the sensual ear as much as to the intellect; the reader may be baffled by the words and still respond to their emotional and physical connotations; in fact the difficulty reinforces this appeal to an uncritical pleasure. The poem has an enchanting quality, whatever the precise meaning of the words, that derives in part from its musical quality, its function as voice; and in part from its imaginative play with the beauty of the world, corresponding to our own reverie on the sensations with which it continually surrounds us.

The poem is, then, an abstract succession of verbal images, an order of sounds as well as sensory impressions, linked perhaps through synesthesia. Words are selected because they sound beautiful; one at least,

semadar (KJV: "tender [of grape]," 2:15, 7:12), has survived in modern Hebrew as a girl's name, and its precise meaning is unknown. Another, *pardes,* "orchard" or "paradise" (4:13), is phonetically very similar to it; as a borrowing from Persian it is both exotic and has an astonishing subsequent career, replacing "the garden of God" or "the garden of Eden," for reasons that might not entirely preclude the aesthetic. Verbal magic, whose extreme is glossolalia, is very close to incantation and hence to the roots of the lyric;[2] euphony is achieved among differentiated sounds.

Hebrew poetry has, as far as we know, no equivalent of meter.[3] Instead, compositional skill tends to be directed toward rhetorical structure, such as parallelism, and to alliteration. Alliteration is a persistent and elaborate feature of both Hebrew verse and prose, though with different effects and frequencies. Moreover, clusters of consonants are nearly always permutated, alliterate in tandem (it is more speculative to talk about vowels, because these were first recorded only in the early Middle Ages). Thus, at a purely abstract level, patterns develop, are transposed, and are modulated as elements drop out of a cluster and are replaced by others. Consider an example generated by the word *pardes,* referred to above.

(Shelaḥayikh) pardes rimonim 'im peri megadim keparim 'im neradim nerd wekarkom qaneh weqinamon

[Thy plants] are an orchard of pomegranates,
with pleasant fruits;
camphire with spikenard,
Spikenard and saffron,
calamus and cinnamon . . . (4:13–14)

The combination *prd* of *pardes* is repeated in *peri megadim* and *keparim 'im neradim*; in the last phrase, *k* is added to the cluster, and *p* drops out in *keparim 'im neradim nerd wekarkom*; the two *k*s in *karkom* are matched by two *q*s in *qaneh weqinamon* (phonetically very similar in Hebrew), which are then coupled with *n* (*qaneh weqinamon*), thereby incorporating the submotif of nasals that alternates with the *k/prd* cluster.

"Words similar in sound are drawn together in meaning"[4]—alliteration acquires a metaphoric dimension. The Cratylean concept, that a word has an intrinsic relation to the object it designates, represents a poetic ideal. A word expresses the identity of a thing not through its overt function as sign, but through paralinguistic connotations; its constitutive sounds are the elements from which the object is fashioned. A beautiful word metaphorically suggests a beautiful thing; this is a reciprocal process, since it may also acquire beauty from its associations. A beautiful language implies a beautiful world; the latter, in turn, can be properly articulated only in a beautiful language.

In the Song, alliteration connects linguistic units that are syntactically divided. For example, in the catalogue of spices, the alliteration coordinates phrases in apposition and suggests a common denominator. The

pardes produces "pleasant fruit," specified as or alongside with "camphire and spikenard." Each contains the essence of the *pardes,* the paradise of the Song. Likewise, in the formal portraits of the lovers, the overt structure, which fragments the body into disconnected parts, overlays a hidden cohesion through wordplay. Take, for instance, the following passage:

> Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep that are even shorn,
> which came up from the washing,
> whereof every one bear twins,
> and none is barren among them.
>
> Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet,
> and thy speech is comely;
> thy temples are like a piece of pomegranate
> within thy locks.
>
> Thy neck is like the tower of David
> builded for an armoury,
> whereon there hang a thousand bucklers,
> all shields of mighty men.
>
> Thy two breasts
> are like two young roes
> that are twins,
> which feed among the lilies. (4:2–5)

Syntactically, each sentence with its images is separate, its stillness marked by a complete absence of main verbs in the Hebrew; the only relationship between utterances is one of proximity and the progression from the face to the neck and then to the breasts. There are many alliterations: for example, the word "twinned" (KJV: "bear twins"), *mat'imot* in Hebrew, corresponds to its referent through its duplication of *m* and *t.* In the same verse, "whereof every one," *shekulam,* is almost identical to its opposite, "barren" (literally, "bereaved"), *shakulah,* the loss that does not befall them. Moreover, each verse except 4 begins or ends with a verbal echo. "Thy teeth," *shinayikh,* in verse 2 is correlated with "like a thread of *scarlet,*" *shani,* in verse 3, and "Thy two [*shenei*] breasts are like two young roes" in verse 5. The sequence concludes with an intensification of the same combination: *shoshanim,* "lilies," is framed by words alliterating on *sh* and *n.*[5] The series *shinayikh, shani, shenei,* and *shoshanim* ("teeth," "scarlet," "two," and "lilies") contrasts white and red, duplicity and division. The two breasts, a pair emphasized by repetition, are like twin young roes; symmetrically, in 4:2 the teeth—a dual form in Hebrew—are like ewes that twin. In between, the thread formed by the two lips, the mouth or speech that is lovely, and the split pomegranate emphasize the possibility of fracture. Just as the passage began with a fecund flock of sheep (in Hebrew specified as "ewes"), it concludes with an image of multiplicity, the lilies scattered profusely in the field, spots of color

against the terrain. The interplay of white and red evokes a powerful symbolic contrast (purity versus sexuality). The description, with its precise visual images, is a guise for a meditation on the formal relations of the body; the alliteration serves to couple opposites, such as the teeth and the lips, the two fawns and the lilies on which they feed.

The metaphors of the Song are wonderfully perplexing, sometimes surreal in their juxtaposition of extreme incongruities, their baroque development, their cultivation of disproportion. "Thy hair is as a flock of goats, that appear from Mount Gilead" (4:1); "thy nose is as the tower of Lebanon which looketh toward Damascus" (7:4); and "thine eyes like the fishpools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bath-rabbim" (7:4) are three examples among many. They have entered the repertoire of biblical absurdities. Yet they are not intrinsically funny, despite the analogy between metaphor and wit, since there is no sudden release of embarrassing truth; instead what is perceived, for example, in the formal descriptions, is an intricate series of connections between the beauty of the Lover or the Beloved and the world. The more elaborate and remote the comparison, the more universal a figure he or she will be. The breasts are likened to young roes, the Lover to a roe; the word translated in the King James Version as "roe" is in Hebrew a synonym for beauty. Likewise, there are pervasive images of intoxication: the Lover's caresses are better than wine (1:2), the Beloved regales him with her pomegranate juice (8:2), which in Hebrew probably means liquor. Thus the lovers possess and communicate all beauty and pleasure.

An image in the Song always evokes a combination of sensory qualities, which are selected according to their relevance in context, and of associations of ideas, deriving from common experience and literary tradition. Thereby it fulfills two functions—communicating the emotions of the lovers and reflecting upon their meaning and value.

From the pool of possible correlatives, often only one is selected for comparison by the text. "This thy stature is like to a palm tree" (7:7) is one example; "and the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon" (4:11) is another. At other times, even if not explicitly stated, the basis for comparison is clear—for example, the teeth are white as sheep, the redness of lips is as a scarlet thread (4:2–3). Only one property effects the metaphorical transfer. We have, then, a surplus of information that either develops or detracts from the image. For instance, the detail that the ewes twin in 4:2 adds an analogy of symmetry to that of whiteness; the specification of the scarlet as a thread might reduce the erotic appeal of the lips. Thinness, however, focuses attention on the demarcation between the lips, as the point of exploration, compounded by the succeeding "and thy speech is comely" (4:3).

Sometimes the comparison is less precise. "Thy two breasts are like two young roes" (4:5), for instance, has puzzled some critics; relevant

correspondences, of color, warmth, grace, and animation, contribute to a diffuse parallel, in which no one element predominates. Other images for the breasts, "clusters of the vine" (7:8), and "towers" (8:10), conform more closely to the distinctive attributes of the body-part they represent. The former introduces an element of synesthesia, of taste and touch as well as of vision. Sometimes the scope of an image is limited to one particular aspect, as when the Beloved's stature is compared to a palm tree (7:7), generating further analogies of taste and grasp. Simile both renders the object palpable and distances it.

Sight and smell are the dominant sensations of the Song; taste is both associated with the latter and participates in the alimentary metaphorical complex, whereby the absorption of food is correlated with amorous delectation. Sight is contrasted with smell: whereas sight, involving distance, defines things in their difference, and is the most articulated and hence most conscious of senses, smell is pervasive, attached to sexuality and to extremes of intoxication. The clarity of vision that enables us to perceive things objectively is augmented by olfactory diffusion, as a means of identification. Thus the two aspects of the simile—recognition of a common property and insistence on separation—are duplicated in the interplay of the senses.

Only one metaphor actually refers to voice, that of the Beloved as dove in 2:14; significantly, that voice is reticent: "let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice."

An image will acquire significance from its context, its relation to other images in the vicinity, and from our empirical knowledge. We bring to the metaphor of the vineyard notions of agriculture and social value. Thereby it joins a paradigm, in other words a class of related terms, such as those deriving from the realm of agriculture. Sequence and paradigm interact; the sequence, which represents the principle of time in the Song, the progression of its argument, is the intersection of innumerable paradigms from all parts of the poem, which represent timelessness, the poem as meaningful space. Every word brings with it the associations deriving from its previous occurrences and changes them retrospectively.

The *roe* in 4:5, for example, belongs to the paradigm of wild creatures in the Song—a class including lions, leopards, and foxes—and a further subset of gentle wild creatures, including doves. There is a relationship of opposition with the domestic ungulates of the first part of the description in 4:1–2. The image of breasts as young roes suggests an association of justified timidity; like the young roes, the breasts are delectable and the object of male pursuit. But here they are in repose between the lovers; they have found a safe haven, as if we have perceived them unawares, or fear has not yet interposed itself between men and animals.

An image stands for that which is unknown and unknowable; there is always a surplus of associations and meaningful contexts, hence a certain

indeterminacy. It may, for example, draw some of its material from ancient Near Eastern art. There is a pictorial motif of fawns drinking from stylized lilies; fawns were sacred to Astarte, the goddess of love. If a word or phrase is ambiguous, both possibilities may contribute to the semantics of the poem; they may augment or counterpoint each other.

The image of the roe in 4:5 brings with it, together with its natural properties, associations drawn from the rest of the poem. Elsewhere it is an emblem for the Lover, suggesting his grace and speed. Between the lovers and the breasts he looks at there is a shared metaphor. In 2:8–9 the Lover, as roe, hastens toward his Beloved; here, in the breasts, he sees a quiescent image of himself, grazing among the lilies, as his eyes feed on the Beloved's image. We thus begin to find images that embody the personality that grows between the lovers, and hence their common human identity.

The final image of 4:5, the *lily,* with its associated flower image "the rose of Sharon" (2:1), is a figure for the Beloved in the poem. Elsewhere it is said of the Lover that "he feedeth among the lilies" (2:16, 6:3), but here it is the breasts, as "young roes," "which feed among the lilies" (4:5). In 5:13 lilies are emblematic of the Lover's lips: "his lips like lilies, dropping sweet smelling myrrh." In this way this image, too, permits the interchange of identity between the lovers.

The imagery also implies a reversal of function. Throughout the Song, sense becomes sensation. The tongue and palate are tasted, the eye is seen, and the nose is smelled in the simile "and the smell of thy nose [is] like apples" (7:8). The Lover tastes honey and milk under his Beloved's tongue (4:11); for her, "his mouth is most sweet" (literally, "his palate is sweets") (5:16); there is consequently an exchange of succulence. The eyes drink in each other; the nose breathes in the air and the fragrance of the other; the Lover is thus infused and vitalized by his Beloved's breath.

The roes are twins, like the lambs in 4:2; twins suggest a pair of sexually undifferentiated siblings. Elsewhere in the Song it is the lovers who are figuratively siblings. In 8:1 the Beloved wishes that her Lover were "as my brother, that sucked the breasts of my mother!"; in 4:8–5:1 the Lover insistently calls her "my sister, my spouse."[6] The first image, in particular, is reminiscent of the two young roes who are the breasts, a clear case of projective identification. Here there is an unrealizable conflation of the Lover, a stranger encountered in the world, with the brother, who has shared her earliest experience, her mother's love, of which the primary symbol is milk. She reenacts this first love by bringing him to her mother's house and entertaining him with her own intoxicating fluids (8:2). She adopts the roles of mother and sister but also that of child, since someone—in Hebrew it is ambiguous whether the subject is the Lover or mother—instructs her: "I would lead thee, and bring thee into my mother's house, who [thou/she] would instruct me: I would cause thee to drink

of spiced wine, of the juice of my pomegranate." She acquires ancestral wisdom and in return gives of her alcoholic beverages,[7] which quench thirst and communicate ecstasy; in the Song ecstasy is ambiguously identified with true wisdom. Wine is the product of the cluster of the vine, to which her breasts are likened in 7:8; likewise she is "an orchard of pomegranates" in 4:13. What she gives, then, is herself. But the familial intimacy is possible only through make-believe; the particle "as" (*ke* in Hebrew) serves to identify fantasy and reality, a wistfulness reinforced by the initial exclamation "O that thou wert." "O that thou wert as my brother, that sucked the breasts of my mother! when I should find thee without, I would kiss thee; yea, I should not be despised" (8:1). In reality, if they did display their love openly, she would be shamed, as happens elsewhere in the Song (5:7); or if he were really a brother, the incest taboo would prevent consummation. The subversive desire, that he should be both lover and brother, can be expressed only through a fantasy of infantile regression, to a time before there were prohibitions and before society imposed secrecy on lovers.

What is unattainable in 8:1–2 is stated as fact in 4:8–5:1. The Beloved is "my sister, my spouse." One or both of these epithets must be a metaphor. The spouse who comes from far away, from Lebanon in 4:8, is identified with the sister who shared his origins; in her are invested incestuous feelings, whereby a sister is metaphorically a wife. Lebanon, the cold inhospitable region, the haunt of lions and leopards (4:8), is also the source of the streams (4:15) that water the garden of love (4:12–5:1). The Beloved is both the garden that ultimately encloses both lovers and is possessed by them (5:1), and the fountain that animates it (4:12, 15). The lovers unite—having come from afar—in the garden that identifies them as siblings as well as an exogamous couple, sheltered in its embrace and nurtured by its fruit (5:1). The garden, with its extension, its spices and fruit, represents the body of the Beloved—the woman as a source of sexual appeal; it is also differentiated from her, since she is the essence that causes it to flourish. Thus the fountain is both immanent, the very center of the garden (4:12, 15), and apart from it, rising in Lebanon (4:15). But Lebanon is also ambiguous. If Lebanon is the barren and perilous terrain from which the Beloved is summoned in 4:8 and, correspondingly, the source from which the streams flow, it is also the Beloved herself. Verse 4:11 ends "and the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon," providing a contrast between the luxuriance of its forests—proverbial for their fragrance[8]—and its desolate summits. The clothes express and conceal the woman as the forests do Lebanon.

Accordingly, Lebanon and the garden are antithetical yet interdependent poles of a movement from death (the consuming lions of 4:8) to life, from emergence from origins to submergence in re-creation. Both are associated with and differentiated from the woman. The Beloved who is

a locked garden and sealed spring in 4:12 opens to admit the Lover, and finally all lovers and friends—"eat, O friends; drink, yea, drink abundantly, O lovers [KJV: beloved]" (5:1). Self-fulfillment, then, is achieved through self-surrender. The two phases are interdependent; the woman has grown, immersed in her spices, safe and still, waiting for the Lover, as for a Prince Charming, to "awaken" her—a verb applied to the north wind that first disturbs the serenity of the garden (4:16). But this interdependence is also equivalent to the metaphoric process, whereby the illusion of two separate people enclosed in their bodies is replaced by the numerous correspondences discovered between them, perceived as a congeries of loosely cohering features allied with strange landscapes. At the heart of the metaphor is the paradoxical relationship sister-spouse: the opposite with whom the Lover identifies and who is in his likeness. That which is unknown, the concealed, mysterious garden, is another aspect of himself, with which he was born. Together they unite, male and female, to form the collective human personality.

The double epithet "my sister, my spouse" frames the passage, linking the Lebanon sequence (4:8–11) to the garden sequence (4:12–5:1). It is a constant statement of paradoxical relationship which gives assurance, amid the prevailing turbulence, that the object of desire is an intimate part of ourselves. Likewise, as Hans-Peter Müller has shown, the description of the sealed garden in 4:12–15 is a still center, characterized by an almost total lack of verbs, that contrasts with the surrounding verbal energy.[9] In 4:9 the Beloved, through ravishing her lover's heart, gives him a heart, since the rare verb employed, *libavtini,* may mean both; it also echoes the word *Lebanon* (*Levanon*) in the previous verse. It is as if Lebanon is infused in his heart. In 5:1, as we have seen, possession is mutual. The exercise of power transmits power and is thus an image of the sexual relationship. What is striking here is the primacy of the woman. Her impact in 4:9 is deflected only by metonymy ("with one of thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck") and verbal artifice; in 5:1 the Lover's self-glorification is subverted by intoxication.

The mother, as we have already seen, is a prominent figure, with whom both lovers identify; the Lover, for example, compares his Beloved's uniqueness to him, among all his queens and concubines, with her mother's delight at her birth (6:9). Mother love is the archetype of love, which all subsequent loves reconstitute; the lovers reenact this primordial relationship. We have seen, for example, that in 4:5 the Lover imagines himself as an infant at the breast, and that in 8:1 the Beloved imagines him as a fellow suckling. The breasts coordinate adult erotic feelings with an infantile correlate. The Beloved brings her lover back to the intimacy of the matrix (3:4). She awakens him at the birthplace, where he first opened his eyes to the world; she imagines his mother's labor: "I awakened thee under the apple tree: there thy mother travailed with thee; there she

travailed with thee that bare thee" (8:5 [AR]). But in 2:3 it is the Beloved who is under the apple tree, which is a symbol for the Lover: "I sat down under his [*or* its] shadow with great delight, and his [*or* its] fruit was sweet to my taste." The apple tree gives protection and nourishment; it shelters mother and baby, and both lovers. Love in the Song is an awakening of consciousness, but it is also a return to birth, and that is a prelude to the encounter with death that immediately follows, in 8:6.

There are no father images in the Song; its nuclear family consists of mother, brother, and sister. Only the tower of David in 4:4 and metaphors such as the apple tree indirectly allude to a male procreative force. In 1:6, where the Beloved is the victim of fraternal animosity, the brothers are called, in the Hebrew, "my mother's sons." The absence of the father makes the mother a global parental figure, combining the attributes of both sexes. But the absence of the father is also that of the authoritative patriarchal society outside the Song.

The Beloved is associated with the earth, a link reinforced by allusion. For example, "honey and milk are under thy tongue" (4:11) is almost identical with the familiar epithet of the land of Israel, the land flowing with milk and honey. In the Bible, the earth is the feminine complement of God: the two combined to form man, who articulates their relationship, for example, in sacrifice. Through the Beloved's hair may be seen Mount Gilead and flocks of goats (4:1); the pastoral landscape is no less the object of affection than the hair it supposedly illustrates. The elaborate combinations of parts of the body and geographic features, like those between the lovers' bodies, assert the indissolubility of man and the earth, man as part of nature, and his representative status. Through the lovers and the poet, all creatures find their voice and are consummated through love.

The woman as the earth is the trope that underlies the formal portrait of 7:2–5, which, with all its extravagant imagery, is in fact a single extended metaphor of the Beloved as the kingdom:

> Thy navel is like a round goblet,
> which wanteth not liquor:
> thy belly is like an heap of wheat
> set about with lilies.
>
> Thy two breasts are like two young roes
> that are twins.
>
> Thy neck is as a tower of ivory;
> thine eyes like the fishpools in Heshbon
> by the gate of Bath-rabbim;
> thy nose is as the tower of Lebanon
> which looketh toward Damascus.
>
> Thine head upon thee is like Carmel,
> and the hair of thine head like purple;
> a king is held in the tresses. [AR]

The face evokes peripheries: Lebanon is in the north, Heshbon in the east, Carmel in the west. The landscapes complement one another: the mountain fastness matches the city on the edge of the desert and the promontory overlooking the sea. Each suggests power and prosperity in its dealings with the outside world: the tower of Lebanon watches over Damascus;[10] the "gate of the many" in Heshbon is the focus of busy traffic; the sea is dominated by the Carmel, and from it is extracted the royal purple.[11] The toponyms signify abundance: Heshbon means "computation, account," hence a fortune; Carmel is the "fruitful land"; in contrast, Lebanon is the "white one" and correspondingly impressive. At the center of the body is the belly, which is associated with harvest. All this wealth is for the sake of the king, and for the Lover who feasts his eyes; yet the king, in the climactic phrase, is overcome by weakness: in Hebrew it reads "a king is imprisoned in tresses" ("galleries," KJV, is impossible). The king is dependent upon the kingdom and is captivated by it. There is an ideal harmony of king and realm, expressed in the sacred marriage, and in the Song by the overall scheme whereby the king falls in love with a country girl; analogously, the poet/Lover who controls the object becomes absorbed by it. But the king cannot escape his role. Throughout the Song there is a tension between his humanity and his function, between his inaccessibility, behind his curtains (1:5), and his attempt to woo the Beloved. Whether the sacred marriage can work is always ambiguous.

There is also an opposition between the woman and the country; she is its equivalent, and its rival for the king's attentions. As prisoner of her hair, he is emblematic of the vulnerability of kings, and hence of the whole body politic, to sexuality, the ultimate power of women that is the object of repression.

The metaphors of the Song reinforce its unity through an intricate web of cross-references, whereby an image is coupled with another at some distance from itself. Larger units also parallel, complement, and transform each other. We have seen, for example, that 8:1–2 abbreviates but also develops 3:1–4; another variant of this group is 5:2–7. Two formal portraits of the Beloved (4:1–7, 7:1–6) bracket one of the Lover (5:10–16); two garden sequences interact and contrast with each other (4:12–5:1, 6:1–12). There is thus a certain circularity in the Song; the second half reflects the first. Beyond this, however, there is a unity of theme, a wider metaphoricity of which the underlying motif of the lovers as king and kingdom is an example. The union of lovers through metaphor, their discovery of correlates, and of themselves, in and through each other, is the poetic process. The poem is integrated as the lovers are integrated; through its work all the fragments of the world cohere, and are granted significance, in a single vision.

Yet there is also an element of disunity in the Song, in the violence with which it dismembers the body, its total disregard for logical connec-

tion, the abruptness with which it embarks upon and abandons episodes in the lives of lovers. The disunity is also that of the lovers, whose work of integration can never be completed. Constantly they assert differences and distances. One is a lily (2:2), the other an apple tree (2:3); one is a roe (2:9, 17; 8:14), the other a dove (2:14). The dove has to be cajoled from the rocks (2:14); the Beloved seeks the Lover through the streets of the city (3:2, 5:6); he waits impatiently outside her door (5:2), snatching glimpses through the lattice (2:9). Finally, he is excluded from the garden in which she is singing to her friends (8:13–14).[12] This concluding scene suggests the status of the poem; the discourse of the lovers separates them. It is a displacement of love, in which foreplay—seduction, sweet-talk—repeatedly defers fusion.

The differentiations between the lovers are also those of language, between words and letters that represent things in their multiplicity. The violence of fracture testifies to the intensity of desire to unite even the most disparate phenomena. But these remain obstinately intractable. Between the words, sounds, and episodes are silences; the poem verges always on the limits of language, which points to that which cannot be spoken. For example, in the elaborate portraits of the lovers that stretch both the poet's and the reader's imaginative capacity, the poetic energy is suddenly abandoned in inarticulate acknowledgments of beauty ("Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee" (4:7; and compare 7:6). Correspondingly, each episode moves toward a climax that cannot be fulfilled in the poem. There is a pattern of expectation and frustration, a pressure in time that cannot be exhausted. Consequently, the Song functions also as a sequence; it has a dramatic quality as the lovers alternately converge and withdraw. Each new beginning and each loose end promises and leaves a residue of unsatisfied hope, a debt owed by the narrative.

There are two structural foci in the poem, corresponding to its two coordinates, the time of reading or listening, with its gradual increase of tension, and the timelessness of its composition, the poem as tableau, which is also that of its fictional world. Each incident takes place in a temporal vacuum. There is no "story" in the Song, no truth, only a set of anecdotes, hovering between reality and dream, that exemplify the relationships of lovers.

One structural focus is the center, the midpoint between corresponding halves of the poem. Concentricity is not strict, not mechanical, but it is nevertheless pervasive. In general, large central units complement each other (for example, the two descriptions of the woman in 4:1–7 and 7:1–6, and the two episodes in the garden, 4:12–5:1 and 6:1–12), as do smaller peripheral ones. The center is the point of transition between two entirely different moments. The first is the entrance of the Lover into the garden of love which is the Beloved in 5:1; his possession and enjoyment of its fruits constitute the one act of consummation in the poem, and hence its

emotional center. Round it all the other scenes are grouped. The other moment is the waking of the Beloved's heart to the Lover's knocking in 5:2, under cover of her sleep; this suppression of consciousness allows him to steal in, if only, ambiguously, in hallucination; her solitude is compounded in the ensuing scene by abandonment and humiliation. Between the two moments is a pause, a silence; therein all "friends" and "lovers" [AT] have been invited to participate in the joy of the couple. Correspondingly, the Song closes with the "companions" (in Hebrew the same word as "friends") listening to the Beloved's voice, in the gardens, which are gardens not only of love but of poetry (8:13). The Beloved's voice is of course associated with, and survives only in, the Song; the friends listening to her could then include the entire audience of the Song, all of whom participate sympathetically in the experience of the lovers.

The garden is the longest episode as well as the central image in the poem; its relation to the poem corresponds to that of the garden to the world. The fountain that waters it gives it life and is the invisible presence in all its manifestations. The other structural focus is the climax, in which the poem's narrative pressure—its work of comparison, its alternation of promise and postponement—is released. It is the assertion that love is as strong as death, that jealousy/passion is as harsh or enduring as Sheol, and that its sparks or coals are the flame of God (8:6). In this credo, the poet seems to speak in his own voice and not through the protagonists. The image of fire, an element that appears nowhere else in the Song, is contrasted with that of water. Both are fluid and verge on the transparent or invisible. The spring that is the Beloved animates all the fruits of the garden, and correspondingly the words of the poem, whose abundant metaphors are inflections of her fecund voice; the fire is fed by the lovers' desire to unite and by their ineluctable separation. The flame turns substance into energy, the visible into the invisible; therein the world, in all its multiplicity, is reabsorbed in the creative speech from which it emerged. It is a metaphor for poetry, the fusion of the phenomena of the world in the voice and vision of the poet. The lovers ignite the divine flame between them. In this way, love is as strong as death, an assertion that could be understood facilely as referring to generation, or to the transcendence of a brief moment, in which all time and all creatures participate and find their value, over transience.

As we have noted, the dominance and initiative of the Beloved are the poem's most astonishing characteristics. Metaphorically aligned with a feminine aspect of divinity, associated with the celestial bodies, the land, and fertility, the Beloved reverses the predominantly patriarchal theology of the Bible. Male political power is enthralled to her. The lovers live, however, in a patriarchal world; the Beloved suffers the humiliation that attends sexually adventurous women. She is cast out of her family (1:6), despised by shepherds (1:7),[13] beaten by watchmen (5:7). The lovers can

only find or imagine an enclosure, secluded from the world: a garden, a forest bed, or the poem itself. The poem is unfailingly critical of a society that does not know the true value of love and that imposes shame on lovers. The affirmation that love is as strong as death and is not quenched by the great floods (8:7), that it alone is not transient and illusory, is followed at once by the ironic comment: "if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, he [KJV: it] would utterly be condemned." In the eyes of the world, to give one's entire fortune for love is folly; from the perspective of the Song, in which riches are ultimately worthless, it is wisdom.

Yet the poem is also ambivalent. Love is the bond of a vital society; its message is transmitted by the daughters of Jerusalem, by friends and lovers, and ultimately by ourselves as readers. Nevertheless, it also threatens social order: a king falls in love with a country girl and forsakes his kingdom. Lovers seek differentiations between each other, to preserve their separate identity. Civilization devotes itself to the cultivation of a beauty that both communicates and distances the object of desire.

The Song of Songs may be contemporaneous with Ecclesiastes;[14] to Ecclesiastes' thesis that everything is illusory the Song answers with its one possible antithesis. Like Ecclesiastes it is a work of comparison, though one that results not in confusion but in cumulative affirmation. Like Ecclesiastes, it uses the figure of Solomon as the type of the most fortunate man. More centrally, the Song is a reflection on the story of the garden of Eden, using the same images of garden and tree, substituting for the traumatic dissociation of man and animals their metaphoric integration. Through it we glimpse, belatedly, by the grace of poetry, the possibility of paradise.

NOTES

1. H.-P. Müller, *Vergleich und Metapher im Hohenlied* (Göttingen, 1984).

2. H.-P. Müller, "Die lyrische Reproduktion des Mythisches im Hohenlied," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche,* 73 (1976), 23–41.

3. This is one of the most contentious issues in modern biblical poetics. I would agree with Robert Alter, who cites Benjamin Hrushovski that it is characterized by a "semantic-syntactic-accentual rhythm"; *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York, 1985), p. 8. For a full history of the debate and a powerful critique of metrical theories, see James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven, 1981). For a restatement of the metrical hypothesis, see W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (Sheffield, 1984), pp. 87–113.

4. Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," in *Selected Writings,* III (Mouton, 1981), 43.

5. In contrast to more recent translations, the King James Version is sensitive to the verbal play and rhythm of the Hebrew and is successful in finding some English equivalent. For example, in 4:2–5, quoted earlier, each verse is balanced around three- or four-stress lines; alliteration is marked: "*like* a *flock*," "*sh*eep that are even *sh*orn," "*b*ear . . . *b*arren" (a play very similar to *shekulam . . . shakulah*), "a *p*iece of *p*omegranate."

6. In 5:2 the term "my sister" occurs again, in conjunction with the more familiar epithet for the Beloved, "my love."

7. In Hebrew the erotic *sous-entendre* is overdetermined by a wordplay between *'ashqekha* ("I would cause thee to drink") and *'eshaqekha* ("I would kiss thee") in 8:1.

8. Cf. Hosea 14:7.

9. H.-P. Müller, "Poesie und Magie in Cant. 4:12–5:1," *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenlandischen Gesellschaft,* supp. III/1 (1977), 157–162.

10. For Damascus as a thorn in Solomon's side see 1 Kings 11:25.

11. Purple dye was extracted from a shellfish (the murex) harvested in vast quantities in the Mediterranean.

12. Where the KJV has "Make haste" in 8:14, the Hebrew actually reads "Flee away."

13. The obscure word *'oṭeya*, which the KJV translates as "as one that turneth aside," probably means "as one veiled," possibly as a prostitute.

14. Third–fourth centuries B.C.E. The evidence is linguistic (Persian and Greek loanwords) and stylistic.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS

Michael Fox, *The Song of Songs and Ancient Egyptian Love Poetry* (Madison, 1985).

Francis Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* (Sheffield, 1983).

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