

Genesis like a weapon, it is also the case that many lay interpreters do not go beyond the surface of the text---why should they when it serves their purposes so well? But we must also acknowledge that even obsessively faithful readers don't really know the Bible very well, even as they strain to live by it. It's hard to get the Big Picture with just an online KJV concordance and a Living Bible!

Again, turning to a folkloric truism, we all know that curses can only be removed by the one who cast them, and no one else. Is the Song perhaps a later biblical author's comment which corrects and enlarges the dismal condition of women we are left with in Genesis?

To drag our texts into a careful, critical lens, we must proceed by "defamiliarization" of the dog-eared, well known myth of Eve's Sin by placing it next to the song of the Beloved's Delight. The Song gives us good reason to do so: not only are key terms and tropes common to both texts, but the plain content of the passages are on the same subject. Both texts give us luxuriant gardens, the desire to conquer loneliness by discovering a fit companion "*k'negdo*", of the same kind: it's not good for the Earthling to be alone. In both texts, sex plays an allusive role. Early interpreters of both Synagogue and Church actively sought to gloss the shocking sensuality of the Song by styling it as a theological wedding song of God and Israel, or Christ and the Church, just as Milton and others had to write in Eve's salacious luring of Adam as her key action in tempting him to eat what is forbidden into Genesis.

Vocabulary counts, and its reversals and enhancements are the stuff of defamiliarization, according to literary critics. The crucial use of the terms in Genesis, "*to rule over*" in most versions, and "*desire*", a compelling drive, are styled as the *burdens* placed on woman as the punishment for her sin. The term *mashal*, to rule over, means something else entirely in Wisdom Literature (where the Song of Songs is homed, as it is Belles Lettres). There, *mashal* is an

indigenous genre description of a poetic utterance, a proverb, whether authored by a wisdom elite in two parallel lines, or a simple one line folk saying. Solomon's Proverbs uses *mashal* (plural, *m'shalim*) in its other meaning, "to be similar to". Quoting a *mashal*, an accepted bit of cultural wisdom, gives one the power to classify a new situation which is "similar" to the one called out in the saying. Placing the *mashal* as a reference for understanding the current context gives its user the power to "rule over" events by pointing out its similarities to the circumstances at hand. This brings the learning of the community to bear on the perception which may have seemed novel.¹ It is worth noting that the only other biblical book than the Song of Songs that gives Solomon as its putative author is the Book of Proverbs. His practical and literary wisdom became the stuff of legend,

To be sure, the Song never explicitly uses the vocabulary of the *mashal* to make this connection to received wisdom, but we need not understand its appearance in Genesis to mean *only* the hierarchical act of one dominating another in a two tiered system. In fact, the so-called "refrain of mutual belonging", "my lover is mine, and I am his" (Song 2:16, 7:11) is followed by a wholly positive "he feeds among the lilies". This is the beginning of the woman's assertion of a form of possession between the pair that has no whiff of hierarchy about it. Further, there is no poison apple to change that status: the lilies are available to both. In 6:3, the Beloved underscores this equality by reversing the word order:

"I am my lover's, and he is mine; he feeds among the lilies". Elsewhere in the Song, the Beloved calls herself "a lily of the valleys" (possibly a crocus or blue lotus), and her lover feeds there. Her abdomen is surrounded by lilies in 7:3 (4), and her breasts are twin fawns that browse among the lilies (4:5). She says that her lover's lips are lilies dripping with liquid myrrh in 5:13, and in 6:2, he goes down to his garden to gather lilies. Metaphorically, the lilies are connected to

the woman's generative body parts, and freely offered to her love. There is no curse in this garden, only a celebration of deep intimacy that seems as though Genesis 3 does not exist in the Song's verdant thought world! Genesis ends with the sadness of the human condition, whereas the Song regales us with promised blessings of intimacy and wholeness. Again, turning to a folkloric truism, we all know that curses can only be removed by the one who cast them, and no one else. Is the Song perhaps a later biblical author's comment which corrects and enlarges the dismal condition of women we are left with in Genesis?

The Bible and Defamiliarization

As a "practical theologian" working in the American and Global Human Rights context, I find that knowledge of the Bible's actual content is usually at odds with the authority accorded to this "Sacred" text in the realm of cultural relevance. Nothing could be clearer than the Great Divide between the use of the Bible in current politics, and the world of believers of contrasting demographic contexts. One hears the most shocking statements, usually diametrically opposed, coming from various quarters, all supposedly representing the "real" meaning of a text, its interpretation and application to modern situation. Our sacred texts are nothing if not multivalent, making it difficult for academic critics or religious leaders to cope with the plethora of positions battling it out on our apocalyptic landscape. In addition, contrasting readings usually proceed from engagement with the same basic text (not text critical variations in versions, etc.) so we must acknowledge that the different interpretations reflect differences in readers' and their contexts, *not* different texts or translations.¹¹

The most telling congruence between the Primeval History in Genesis and the Song is the use of *t'shûqâ*, "desire". This word, from the root "to stretch out" (one's hands in the act of

reaching or taking something) occurs only three times in the Hebrew Bible: in Gen 3:16, 4:7, and Song 7:10. It represents an intense craving in a ~~sexual~~ sense in Gen 3 and Song 7. Its use in 4:7 is rather different, where “sin” is waiting on Cain’s doorstep, desiring that the dark thoughts about his brother Abel to be turned into action. This is craving, surely, but with no redemptive elements whatsoever. It is hard to believe that our Song in 7:10 is unaware of the uses in Gen 3:16, and its use in a relationship context clearly ties the two texts together, the Song’s use overturning the situation created after Eve’s disobedience.

To echo a famous political philosopher of the early 20th century, “What is to be done?”ⁱⁱⁱ to shift damaging meanings from one position to the other? I offer here a modest proposal: before all else, we must grapple with the plain sense of what our sacred texts say, before we can meaningfully account for interpretative variance. Only then can we relate them to our current situations. We must gather all our tools of interpretation to speak of the texts as living entities in the lives of reading communities so that their shifting contexts and contents necessarily flow and change. All our beloved methods, from philology, literary criticism, historical studies, archaeology, philosophy and psychology, have critical roles to play in the quest for understanding. No easy task, but a necessary one. Oddly enough, biblical studies re-emerges as relevant, useful, and fractious as it attempts to speak responsibly about text and context, which is..dare we say it...our sacred duty. We cannot forget to explore *who* is doing the reading *when*, in support of *whose* interests, before pronouncing on the fitness of an interpretation.

To accomplish the goal of dealing fairly with competing views of the Bible, especially when dealing with interpretations which have proved harmful to human dignity, I suggest we resurrect another set of interlocking considerations harking back to the beginnings of the last century: the exploration of how literary texts create their meanings and how we bring their

complex meanings to the forefront of the consciousness of everyday, non-experts. It is here that the concept of Defamiliarization (Russian, “*ostranenije*”; French, “*détournement*”) finds its beginnings.^{iv}

Our quest begins in St. Petersburg in the *Society for the Study of Poetic Language* (Rus., OPOJAZ) and Moscow with the *Moscow Linguistic Circle*, current from 1910 to the 1930s. These scholars worked during the intellectual ferment at the end of Tsarist Rule as it transitioned to something new which demanded the breakage of former traditions of every kind. The movement was generally called Russian Formalism, but its proponents went in all sorts of different directions, while seldom agreeing on method or outcome. How does literary/poetic language actually work (semiotics), some linguists wondered, while others sought to systematize the common, repeating elements or “functions” of the different elements in a literary composition (genre studies). This work of cracking open traditional codes of meaning-making was largely unknown to the West due to its appearance in Russian, until translations into French, German and English, especially concerning the genre of the folktale. Their work inspired the Structuralists and Narratologists of the 1960s and 70s. Intrigued by possibilities, these critics sought to investigate myth and meaning, finding poetry and myth as significant as historical or literary narrative. The work of Vladimir Propp in his *Morphology of the Folktale* was particularly influential for French critics, even as they sought ways to subsume it.

Sadly, Russian scholars writing about either sets of concerns became the targets of Soviet persecution for their pungent questions, some of which were viewed as directly undercutting the political needs of the new regime. Linguistic semioticians’ work held the view that art was its own entity, following its own rules. They made the case that other forces were at work than Soviet Realism, the official view that all art must now be understood as a struggle between

elites and the newly liberated underclasses. Other than creating more effective propaganda, what on earth had these studies to do with creating a new society whose leaders already viewed most of the arts as the province of dethroned elitism? What was the strict governmental control of the arts to do with the creation of peasant tales which pressed toward a Happy Ending of marriage of the peasant hero to the king's daughter, and his subsequent elevation to elite status? Why waste time exploring how poetry worked via linguistic devices, or the tales created thereby when attempting to transform a backward agricultural society with its feudal underpinnings into a modern state?

Some linguists fled censorship, eventually founding the Prague School of Linguistics, which made its way to Harvard University in the person of Roman Jakobson. The scholars studying folk literature tried to survive as their university positions disappeared, abruptly putting a period to their work. Some ultimately tried to reconcile their earlier work with the demands of the government orthodoxy, with limited success, avoiding obscurity or execution. We need only look at Trotsky's critique of the Formalists at large to crystallize the problem: literature and artists exist in the real social world:

The form of art is, to a certain and very large degree, independent, but the artist who creates this form, and the spectator who is enjoying it, are not empty machines, one for creating form and the other for appreciating it. They are living people, with a crystallized psychology representing a certain unity, even if not entirely harmonious. This psychology is the result of social conditions" (*Literature of the Revolution*, 1924, p. 171; *Internet Archive*).

No wonder the literary and linguistic scholars suffered as they did.

Defamiliarization ("making strange"), then, was the concept that literary works created their distinctive forms by means of their variations from everyday language, using a multitude of devices of rhyme, meter, metaphor, etc.---indeed, such strategies are how we know we are dealing with poetry! This technique creates in the reader/hearer a new perception of ordinary

things by presenting them in unfamiliar ways. As common language becomes an accepted shorthand perception of how things are, a defamiliarized presentation awakens the receiver's uncomfortable suspicion that things may not be exactly—or at all! —all as they have been presented. Such concerns by the receiver of the literary presentation aim at creating new questions, apprehensions, and imaginative breakthroughs by disrupting what is familiar. An example may be found in Song 1:2: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!" What other kinds of kisses are there, we wonder. Does this refer to the deep kisses using tongue, or something else? In fact, hand or foot kissing depicts an act of obeisance to a conquering king or elite, frequently depicted in Ancient Near Eastern art. The poet's choice of mouth kissing right at the outset of the poem signals a mutual, equal use of the kiss to establish close connection, not dominance.^v Aha!

At the far end of this cultural "signal jamming" of customary language, the goal is to engender new meanings that lead to fresh perceptions and social change as a result of the receiver's emotions of "shock, shame, fear and anger".^{vi} Though we may want to find gentler language for these triggering emotional responses^{vii}, there is considerable resonance between the descriptions of critics espousing "culture jamming" and what people experience when their customary views of gender codes in sacred texts are challenged by new readings. Makers of revolutionary meanings, beware! I am sure I am not the only biblical critic to receive death threats from time to time when their views on gender in texts have found their way into modern media. A documentary producer once consoled me, saying "you're nobody until somebody wants you dead---think of it as a tribute." In the context of the seminary classroom, students merely cry and report the offender of gender orthodoxies to their dean^{viii}.

I contend that the discovery of deliberate strangeness in our two gardens hint at a competing, radically different interpretation of the female-male paradigm. By exploring this and giving it serious consideration, perhaps we can intuit a way to “defang” the snake, replace the apple with lilies and wine, and fall headlong into the abiding joys of real intimacy, where difference is delight, rather than threat and invitation to dominance. I present below a new rendering of the Song as a frank, fresh reading where a human Woman speaks, takes action, and embraces love in answer to the patriarchal vision in Genesis. My poetic reworking also looks below the surface to bring cognate lyrical love poetry into its fundamental role as an earlier repertoire of action and image that is usually not available to readers of translations. Taking these approaches together, we too might come to proclaim that “the whole world is not equal to the day the Holy One gave the Song of Songs to humanity”.

Singing a New Song

As I suggested earlier, we have good formal reasons to consider the Temptation in the Garden, and the erotic picnics in the Song of Songs as mirrored passages. The form of the Curse in Genesis is poetic as is the Song of blessing. Setting, main characters, vocabulary, and motifs are drawn from an overlapping stock of features. In the Song, we have no snake in our trees, though the little foxes that spoil the harvest, or the autocratic bartering brothers may both represent actual threats instead of divine pronouncements. Creation is of a customary material sort. In each context, a story is told about male-female relations, and their impact on the earth. The telling use of vocabulary in the curse’s outcome (rule over, desire) occurs in our Song, where speaker and meanings are reversed.

No wonder so many religious authorities experienced such shock and awe that they were nonplussed by the Song’s startling representation of the themes in Genesis. If we defamiliarize

Genesis with the Song's examples, changing the pronouncements from divine male to human female voice, we find ourselves in a rather different garden, changing disaster to discovery. Even though Genesis' use of *mashal* does not appear in the Song, I argue that the form critical 'formula of mutual possession' ---"my beloved is mine, and I belong to him/her, or "he belongs to me" nullifies the meaning of *mashal* "rule over" and reverses gender hierarchy to a state of equilibrium not envisioned by Genesis 3. Vocabulary has been defamiliarized by placing the two texts in fruitful juxtaposition.

The "old" title of the Song itself makes its meaning strange by its puzzle of playful, multiple meanings using the device of recombination of the consonants *shin*, *lamed*, *mem* and *raish* used at the outset, yielding a title which is susceptible to various translations. Is it a song *by* Solomon, *for* Solomon (between lovers or performed for Solomon), or *about* Solomon? And we must also note the suggestive confluence of homophony in the vocabulary of the title: name (*shem*), oil (*shemen*), peace (*shalom*), song (*shir*), the submerged goddess of Israel, *Asherah*, tangled with the root *Sh/w/r*, to sing, in the cohortative form, "Let me sing!" Some commentators suggest that the first line of the poem is a gloss to situate the real title, "A Kissing Song for the Beloved" (i.e., "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth") within the acceptable historical context of Solomon's reign.^{ix} The current poet takes the road of a translation of Plenitude by collapsing all these riddles into a strange, comprehensive statement of the poem cycle's intention, entitling the composition "The Song of Peace I Sing Complete", and it goes a little something like this:

The Song of Peace I Sing Complete

Sweep Me Away

Daughters, where is he?
Can you tell me,
Is he with his flock,
Does he search for me?
His sweet wine kisses...

At the House of Wine

Sweep me away...
Is there some space with key and lock
Where two might find themselves alone
And I can be his only one?

I am a wall; he is a tower
Both tumbling down into love's bower.
He is my Temple, I am his Song:
How could such yearning
Ever be wrong?

The Shepherd's Delight

To Pharoah's mare does he compare me,
Adorned in feathers, harnessed in jewels
Prancing through male ordained paces?
Would he ever be so bold!
He knows I run in no man's traces,
My shepherd king is no old fool:
He knows I am his own true gold.

Daughters, *Tell* him!

Gazelle upon the scented mountains,
does and young ones of the fields,
tell me when my friend goes forth,
tell him I will surely yield!
The tracks of flocks will help me trail him,
or rumors of him in the street,
tell him, *tell him!* if you find him,
tell him that my love is sweet!

From Jerusalem in Judah,
South to Sheba and then Kedar,

West to Sharon's old oak forest,
Tell me, Shepherd, where you are.
North in lairs of lions, leopards,
hunting in White Lebanon,
or Eye of the Kid's fresh springs of water,
I will find you, near or far!
Down the Carmel's purple mountains,
through the kingdom's central spine,
whether Samaria or Tirzah,
I come seeking: you are mine!

Let me be your pilgrim garden,
like Pharaoh's mare, seen from afar,
plumed and dressed in shining colors,
leading you here, like a Star!

A Song of My Shepherd

His bed is an altar
on which Love feeds, and is fed,
by souls to flesh forever bound
in day-bright rites that admit no wrong.
His kiss on her cleft is a sacrament.
(all lovers should worship with heads thus bent);
his touch is an anthem, his gaze a Song
of ancient furrows and desire so strong
it calls the seedling from the ground.
Within his arms and mingled breath,
old gods rise and conquer death.

No Fire can burn them
(she is ever kindled
by the oil of his name);
no Floods can quench
these lovers drenched
by Holy Flame!

The Search

He is king of my innermost room,
I am his garden where lilies bloom,
proud in the sun; by moon, I glow
and beckon for his love to grow.
I am his hallowed, straight palm tree;

he climbs to clusters that are all me.
Yes! lay hold of my branches, Love!
Come and eat! Dried fruits and fresh,
between my twinned henna'd breasts
lie waiting for your true love's flesh.
The doves are singing,
rain has softened the fertile ground
as sweet does and gazelles
their true mates have finally found.
My Beloved is mine, and I am all his;
his only desire is for me...

Blow, Tradewinds West,
and waft, Breezes East!
O Come, dearest friend!
Let us keep the feast!

The Dance

Spin, Spin, Sweet Shulamit, spin!
Your feet in sandals as you dance
hold us breathless in a trance!
So spin, Maiden, and return!
Beneath your dancing spell, we burn!

Why should you watch this dancing girl,
with eager thoughts, as I whirl?
Bristling with hostilities,
in your two camps, eyes follow me--
Only my love has ever earned
the right to see me as I turn.
So then, describe me, if you dare:
I am just pretext, I would swear!
What is it that you think you'd see?
It has nothing to do with me.

As I lay dreaming

I shiver in anticipation,
then toss and turn in burning heat--
oh, who can name my malady?
It will take more than sweet-wine apples,
more than cultic raisin cakes

to serve me as a remedy!
Faint from love, I lay awake:
Oh, tell my love to come to me!

Halom halamti....

He is the vineyard I cannot keep:
he fills my days, he invades my sleep.
I dream of him: I hear his knock;
his hand drips myrrh upon my lock;
his head is damp with the dew of night--
I stir, trembling; I wake to invite,
but find my phantom has taken flight.

I search in danger, for the dew I thirst,
but watchers, gorged on envy,
cannot countenance such quests;
they seek to stay my steadfast search
in all the ways that suit them best.
Little foxes tear the grapes,
Forestalling joyous harvest-time,
and brothers who would barter brides
count my choosing as a crime.

The Gift of the Desert

Who comes up from the desert wastes
amidst the terrors of the night,
led on by Love's conflagration,
guarded, as if poised for flight?
Inside the litter, cunningly woven,
the perfumed air is filled with spice--
Daughters wove it for his darling,
but Love has fashioned what's inside!
Mothers make the kings and marriage,
and place the crown on wedding day--
but whether Love will find true mating,
even mothers cannot say...

She-demons roam the wildest waste;
no worse than this awaits at court,
where harem schemes have deadly outcomes,
and savage Love for idle sport!
But if some prince has paid a vineyard,
might I still beg Love's chariot race
to rescue me from casual usage,
and bear me far from Solomon's place?

Fearful

He finds me awesome as a goddess,
battle-ready for the fight,
dressed with blood and warrior trophies--
Am I so fierce? Perhaps he's right.
He says he cannot look upon me,
tells me to turn my eyes away,
as though I were some bannered army
deployed to capture, make him stay!

No, he has thousands, my honey-man;
I am but one, my mother's dove.
He is the one who makes *me* fearful,
vulnerable because I love!

Kin and Kingship

Blustering, my brothers quiz me:
Will you be rampart, or a door?
For one, the brideprice;
For the other, a coffin--
isn't that what girls are for?
"We'll make you guardian of the orchard,
safe midst olives, grapes and fig--
a little tanned, a bit ill-used,
and then we'll find out, when you're big!"

Idiots! Get your honor elsewhere;
you shall not find it housed in me!
I am a rampart on a tower,
but my true love has found the key!
Your handpicked suitors
come a-calling,
gladly offering everything;
send them away with no more stalling:
they shall not hear the Song I sing.

Into the Fields

No matter when the orchard blooms,
beneath the Mother's Sacred Tree,
where Love once woke, it wakes again,

and shall renew, eternally.
He is my tall fruit tree,
my dwelling delight,
his scented kiss, like wine-sweet apples,
ah! simply delicious, from head to feet!

The UnEnding

There is no curse that can prevail
Against this love's sweet, firey gale,
Touched by God transforming sod.
Each made the same in Love's desire,
Both made equal by Love beguiled.

Come,
 my Beloved!
As the Day leaves,
and the shadows wreathe,
While the Night breathes,
to the Mountain of Spices,
Run!

ⁱ Carole R. Fontaine, *Traditional Sayings in the Old Testament*, The Bible and Literature 5, Sheffield Academic Press, 1982.

ⁱⁱ For example, those whose concern is economic hegemony over fossil fuels find their justification in Genesis 1's "have dominion and subdue" while environmentalists find warrant for their views of human relation to the Earth in other parts of the same book.

ⁱⁱⁱ V. I. Lenin, "What is to be done?" *In Essential Works of Lenin: "What is to be done?" and Other Writings* (Dover Publications, 1987).