

Reverse the Curse:
Genesis, Defamiliarization and the Song of Songs

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Sometimes, the reinterpretation of a text proceeds by foregrounding some of its aspects in favor of other more known or valued features. At other times, it may require a much greater overhaul by calling a text into conversation with other texts, contexts, or subjects. Still other readings may engage us in the wholesale deconstruction of a text, and subsequent reconstitution according to other values than the ones it seems to espouse.

Some texts are so damaging that even after we have performed all our magics upon it, we find ourselves still unsatisfied with the results. To be clear: We cannot make a text

unsay what it clearly says, nor should we make it say what is clearly does not. In proverbial assessment, it is possible to put lipstick on our pig, but it is still a pig. The ears of our sow steadfastly resist transformation into a silk purse, and one can only acknowledge that fact.

The Song of Songs in Dialogue with Genesis

My textual engagement between Genesis 3, with all its negative impacts as a still-current myth of gender relations, will situate it in a dialogue with the Song of Songs. In particular, I want to offer several comments concerning the vocabulary and themes found, or implied, between the two. First, it must be admitted that Genesis, a myth masquerading as cosmic history, carries a moral weight which is seldom accorded to the Song, a collection of love lyrics with scant mention of the Creator god, or his alter ego, the God of historical conquests. One is viewed

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

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

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