

Architecture and Ecstasy: A Reading of the Song of Songs

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The Song of Songs. Merely speaking these words evokes in us the mystery, passion, and sweetness of the great love poem of our tradition. And, depending on our familiarity with it, the images of this poem may quickly flood our consciousness, creating a lush pre-memory, something we can almost touch.

This winter, after returning from an archeological dig at Ein Gedi, I was reading the Song's new translation into English by Ariel and Chana Bloch¹ when a current of wistful sadness took hold of me. I followed this sadness back into the text, and there I found something I had not perceived before: a buried feminine perspective. I lightly, painstakingly brushed the dust away from it, much as if I were kneeling on the ground over a bit of ancient pottery or glass, and felt myself to be touching an ancient source of feminine love at the crossroads of its socialization and embodiment in myth.

"Kiss me."

The grammar, a command; the demand, pre-lingual. The power to love in the feminine gender is presented with fresh force, contemporary in its sparseness. If the power to love, physically, can be imaged, the emblem of this power is the kiss. It is the moment at which the word is silenced and the plunge into the world of the senses begins. So begins the Song, the voices interwoven, images rising and falling, delineating real and imagined spaces that reveal ancient attitudes toward the erotic self.

The Bloch translation and commentary steadfastly locate the poem in the mouths of two young lovers, preferring to treat it as narrative of real events, rather than as allegory. As the narrative begins we see the two

¹ Bloch, Ariel and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary*, University of California Press, 1998.

lovers grasping hands and running toward their first dwelling. The poem begins with an image of mastery on the part of the young man, grounded in a metaphor of the young man as king: "My lover, my King, has brought me to his chambers." (1:4) As light-hearted as this sounds, as pretending-to-be royal, it nonetheless established certain power relations between them. The young woman, who is also referred to as the Shulamite, is in love with a man to whom she attributes great erotic power, and this power is in demand by "every woman around," much as if he were surrounded by a harem.

The chambers imagined are beneath a tree somewhere in the natural surroundings in the vineyards or brushes. The space is imaginary and is filled with joy at the Shulamite's insistence: "We will laugh, you and I, and count each kiss better than wine." The repetition of "Every woman wants you" sets him aside as a kingly prize, and the first domain of the poem is clearly his, giving the impression of a ritual of being carried off by him to a place he has found for them. This sets him up as a dominator in the relationship, and part of her initial desire for him is attached to this dominant-submissive pattern.

The young woman first presents herself by saying, "I am dark and beautiful as the tents of Kedar." (1:5) With the image of the black goat-hair Bedouin tent we move from the imaginary king's chambers to an encampment. Beauty and selfhood are identified with the black tent full of lavish tapestries. Then the remarkable line: "Do not see me only as dark/The sun has stared at me." (1:6) The translators have boldly interpreted the Hebrew here to connect the idea of sunburned skin with origins of consciousness—the eye of the sun itself.

As one sees the dark face of the Shulamite against the tent full of rich tapestries, one can imagine that her consciousness has been informed by the sun itself—a knowingness of ripeness. Her own first domain in the poem is a backdrop for her beauty, and not necessarily the place of a sexual encounter. She is preening and stepping into her own erotic self as a tent that lies richly decorated, yet almost part of the earth itself. This close association with the earth as the source of the erotic and as a tapestry in itself, rich with fruit and flower, herb and spice, is a continual counterpoint in the Song to the images of civilization.

A question brings us to the next image—the Shulamite asking her lover where she might find him, picturing herself lost among the flocks of his companions. In this answer he assures her that her beauty is unique to him,

too—the “loveliest of women”—and he directs her to graze her goats in the shade of the shepherds’ tents, where she will find him. This is the daytime world of their labor, this part of the Song presenting them as two shepherds. The shepherd’s tents are a backdrop for the desire to simply see each other; to reinforce their passion with a glimpse. If desire begins in the eyes, in beholding one another, this daytime rendezvous is a prelude to their lovemaking, where, “wherever we lie, our bed is green. Our roof beams are cedar, our rafters, fir.” (1:16-17)

Now the domain of their love expands into a bed, real or imagined, with roof beams, real or imagined, over them. We are in the presence of roving surrealism. There is no one location for lovemaking in the Song. This mysterious quality of making the entire landscape—field, village, city, nation, the whole countryside from Ein Gedi to Damascus—the location of their love underscores the dreamlike reality set forth.

“Wherever we lie, our bed is green” attests to the merging of the lovers’ inner and outer realities. The naming of cedar and fir also interests me. It’s almost as if they were borrowing architectural elements from a larger dwelling, perhaps Solomon’s palace, and incorporating them into the vision of their duet. But the bed of greenery insists that however grand that bed might be, the lush fields come into their dwelling with them. Perhaps the roving is an extended metaphor for different phases of lovemaking in which the lovers transport themselves in a world of sensation to different domains: “Now he has brought me to the house of wine” (2:4) referring to a stage in their passion, rather than an actual location. “And his banner over me is love” confirms this as an exultation, rather than a description of a physical reality.

As the narrative moves the couple back and forth between multiple encounters, we see the young man as a gazelle, a wild stag standing on the other side of “our wall, gazing between the stones.” (2:9) And in one of the most lyrical passages in the entire song, he proceeds to urge his love to “Hurry, my love, my friend, and come away,” citing all the signs of spring. “Our wall” is an interesting image with many possible interpretations. Is it

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the wall of her village, her home, the city wall, or the wall that exists between them in daily life, a psychological reality, which they must burst through into their own inner paradise?

Ominous Presences

As the song moves from pastoral domains to the domain of the city in Chapter 3, narrowing constraints and ominous presences begin to torment the feminine voice. She rises in longing from her bed and seeks her lover—"I must rise and go about the city, the narrow streets and squares, 'til I find my only love" (3:2)—and it is then that the watchmen find her.

This first encounter is resolved when she sings out a question to them, "Have you seen him? Have you seen the one I love?" (3:3) and promptly finds him after she passes them. But these watchmen are a part of the city itself, and part of the consciousness it creates in the poem. Later, in Chapter 5, when she seeks him again, they violate her, enacting a repressive counterpoint in the Song with their force and brutality, stripping away her freedoms: "Then the watchmen found me/as they went about the city/They beat me, they bruised me/They tore the shawl from my shoulders, those watchmen of the walls." (5:7)

Just before this beating occurs, one of the most hallucinogenic sequences in the entire poem is presented. The young woman lying in her bed ("I was asleep, but my heart stayed awake") hears her lover knocking: "Open my sister, my friend, my dove, my perfect one." (5:2) Her response is ambivalent, and shows the struggle between her desires and the civilizing influence of being in her household: "But I have taken off my clothes,/how can I dress again?/I have bathed my feet/ must I dirty them?" (5:3) Then as she hears him reach for the latch, she rises to open it, her fingers full of perfume on the lock, and he has slipped away. I found it significant that the beating by the watchmen occurs just after this waking dream. It is as if her entire world, the world of the city, is rising up to torment and suppress her free-flowing desire, which seems so sumptuous and easy in the Eden-like settings of nature.

Passionate desperation enters the city voice of the Shulamite as she finds her lover in Chapter 3 and brings him to her mother's room. "I held him, I would not let him go/until I brought him to my mother's house, into my mother's room." (3:4) This is her only resource in a patriarchal domain.

Her struggle now to create a permanent bond with her lover becomes ever more poignant as the Song progresses, and the laments stemming from this part of her are among the most profound explorations of the place of love in the feminine self as it is being socialized, within the city gates.

When the Shulamite later says, "If only you were a brother/who nursed at my mother's breast/I would kiss you in the streets/and no one would scorn me/I would bring you to the house of my mother/and she would teach me" (8:1), she is illustrating the complex set of social concepts that govern her eroticism in the city and in her childhood home. In her youthful confusions she imagines that if her lover were a real brother, the dangers, ungovernable wildness, and antisocial elements of her passions would be contained, and she would be taught by her mother the "correct" ways to love him, the socially acceptable ways to tame this energy that has them bounding all over the landscape of their mutual engagement. Also, being raised by the same mother, it is her fantasy that they would have absorbed the same values, perhaps, and would not be so far apart. Anxiety at their separations and fear of the death of love occupy her thoughts in the domain of the city.

One feature of the Bloch translation that manages the reading of the text very well is the way typography is used to define the various voices, indicating the Shulamite's in italics, her lover's in plain print, and the chorus of women who represent the daughters of Jerusalem in bold italics. In a series of questions sprinkled throughout the Song, the chorus locates the lovers in the space of a mirage: "Who is that rising from the desert/like a pillar of smoke" (3:6); "Who is that rising like the morning star?" (6:10); "Who is that rising from the desert/her head on his shoulder?" (8:5) These surreal images are haunting in their evocation of love as a presence perceived by group consciousness. It is as if the lovers enter this domain in order to witness for others the powers of love, becoming representative of that part of ourselves capable of such abandon, such self and mutual definition of all of the beauties inherent in the erotic. The chorus proceeds through the Song by such questions, as consciousness itself always teaches us by questions, leading us footstep by footstep over a domain that is apart from tradition, civilization, even nature itself.

Images of Power

In Chapter 3, a majestic pavilion built by King Solomon rises into the center of the poem as part of the song of the feminine lover. This seems like a set piece and a referent back to the title of the Song of Songs, "which is Solomon's." This domain belongs to the king and gives rise to the idea that the entire Song is in the nature of an epithalamion, an ancient Greek form which traditionally celebrated the bride and bridegroom in their nuptial chamber: "Come out, Oh daughters of Zion/and gaze at Solomon the King!/ See the crown his mother set on his head/on the day of his wedding,/the day of his heart's great joy." (3:11) The pavilion of cedars of Lebanon with silver pillars, cushions of gold, and couches of purple linen is resplendent, as was the legendary court of King Solomon.

"And the daughters of Jerusalem paved it with love" (3:10) evokes the devotion of a harem for its king, the interdependent feminine beings in it circumscribed by and conscribed in the grandeur of the king's pavilion.

The male lover's voice in the poem is not burdened with as many complexities and does not have as strong a narrative function as does the female voice. It exists mainly as a counterpoint in the verses of praise. "How beautiful you are, my love, my friend," says the male voice at the opening of Chapter 4, and after a series of comparisons that come from the natural world, suddenly, the tower of David rises into the poem as the Shulamite's neck: "Your neck is a tower of David/raised in splendor/a thousand bucklers hang upon it/all the shields of the warriors." (4:4) The power of this image rests in the image of the warriors' shields all hanging on the tall slender tower of the Shulamite's neck, as if a huge necklace was wound around it, exemplifying the defenselessness of the warriors (who have given her their shields) in the face of love. These warriors seem a reference back to the ones who surround the bed of King Solomon under his pavilion, "each one with his sword on his thigh against the terrors of the night" (3:7), suggesting their surrender to the charms of the Shulamite.

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When the chorus of the daughters of Jerusalem ask, "How is your lover different/from any other, Oh beautiful woman?" (5:9), the Shulamite answers with eight full stanzas of outrageous praise which intermingle images of nature with those creating a huge jeweled Colossus. "He towers above ten thousand/His head is burnished gold...His arm a golden scepter with gems of topaz/his loins the ivory of thrones...A man like a cedar/His mouth is sweet wind, he is all delight." (5:10-16)

These stanzas move from the wrought splendor of a huge jeweled king back down to a mouth of sweet wine, returning us once more to the kiss as the final proof of the lovers' supreme value, the delight that he holds within himself, the final testimony.

These praises are answered by the male voice in Chapter 7 as he responds in turn to the questions of the chorus: "Why do you gaze at the Shulamite/as she whirls/down the rows of dancers?" (7:1) His praises, too, intermingle the images of nature with those of wrought jewelry. "The gold of your thigh/shaped by a master craftsman/Your neck is a tower of ivory/Your eyes are pools in Heshbon/at the gates of that city of lords/Your proud nose the tower of Lebanon that looks toward Damascus/Your head crowns you like Mount Caramel,/the hair of your head/like royal purple./A King is caught in the thicket." (7:2-6)

To the modern ear, these images may clash with each other and disperse erotic power with their free ranging locations. Although I have not focused on the male self here, one can also sense a retreat into courtly forms here, set pieces that disperse the eroticism into grandiose forms that dwarf the truly human. It is as if the beautiful dancer were suddenly turned into a relief map. But, in answer to the question, "Why do you gaze?" the images combine to answer, "Because I am overcome!" A king is caught in the thicket of the Shulamite's purple hair; whether that king is Solomon, watching the dancers, too, at a real or imagined court scene, or the male lover himself, we are free to interpret.

In the final chapter of the Song, the Shulamite's brothers try to diminish her powers by saying, "We have a little sister/and she has no breasts./What shall we do for our sister/When suitors besiege her?" (8:8) Here they again take on the role of her guardians, adding, "If she is a door/we will bolt her with beams of cedar wood." (8:9) Two things are assumed here: that she needs embellishment to attract suitors, and that she needs to be protected against their assault.

Both assumptions on the part of the brothers are openly challenged by her: "I am a wall/and my breasts are towers/But for my lover I am/a city of peace." (8:10) In this short verse, incredible resolution occurs. It is as if the entire Song, with all its questions and answers, quests and praises, is stabilized and resolved with this statement. "I am a wall" suggests an enlargement in the concept of self; the eroticized and terrorized young woman has grown into her strength and beauty. She can defend herself. She sees herself as a refuge for her lover, as a city of peace. A transformation has occurred, from the young shepherd girl into a grown woman, civilized, sure of herself and her powers.

But the ending of the poem unmistakably returns the true forces of Eros into the natural world, when her lover requests: "Oh woman in the garden/All our friends listen for your voice/Let me hear it now." (8:13) Her final reply echoes down through time with fresh urgency, "Hurry my love! Run away,/My gazelle; my wild stag/on the hills of cinnamon." There is a sense of profound separation here. She, a city of peace and the woman in the garden, urges him to recover his own wilderness and sweetness, but she does not put herself into the mountain of spices with him. The images of their passion remain forever captured in the Song of Songs, beautiful artifact that it is, to be returned to but not to be regained or continued in the future—and so to be forever enshrined, with the haunting poignancy of the original Garden of Eden, in the poetry of our primal memory.

*For Shani Naaveh and Dodani Orstav
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