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ROLAND BOER, KEEPING IT LITERAL: THE ECONOMY OF THE SONG OF SONGS

KEEPING IT LITERAL: THE ECONOMY OF THE SONG OF SONGS

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1. INTRODUCTION

The ultimate drive of this essay is to identify the underlying worldview of the Song of Songs. There are two ways one might go about such a task: one would be to take the text at face value and derive a worldview from there. The other, more preferred approach assumes that texts do not give out their worldview so easily. It is there, but only indirectly. So we need to find a means of looking awry, redirecting our attention to other features that show up that worldview despite the text. In other words, this essay might be regarded as an exercise in estrangement – an effort to make the text strange again so that we see it differently. In order to carry out such an estrangement effect, I focus on three matters: metaphor, ecocriticism and Marxism.

Let me state my argument before unpacking it. I argue that the Song of Songs, or rather the second chapter that is my focus, operates according to what may be called an allocatory worldview. Rather than represented directly, it shows up in the fabric of the language, particularly its imagery. So we need to look elsewhere in order to locate it; hence my focus on metaphor, breaking the metonymic axis and then exploring what world is constructed when the images of nature coalesce.

In developing this argument, I question the so-called “literal” readings of the Song, ones that assumed and continue to assume in various ways that the Song is about human love and sex (rather than about divine love).¹ How this can be a literal reading is beyond me, for it

¹ From the time of modern criticism at least, if not at a few moments in the medieval era, one may safely say that nearly all interpretations operate with this assumption. See the collections, Athalya Brenner, ed. *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs. Vol. 1, A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); Athalya Brenner, ed. *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs 2, A Feminist Companion to the Bible, Second Series* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000). As well as Dianne Bergant, *The Song of Songs* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2001); Cheryl J. Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2005); Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality, Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1977); Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (New edition. Madison, WI: University of Wis-

merely substitutes one allegory for another, a carnal allegory for a divine allegory. The Song has as much to say *directly* about human sex and love as it has about divine love – that is, almost nothing. So, interpretations that take, in all the senses of the word, the Song as literally about sex between human beings must make allegorical moves comparable to the long-standing patristic and medieval tradition which took it as an allegory of God’s love for Israel or the Church.² Elsewhere I have challenged such literal readings by taking them as far as they will go. Following a challenge from Stephen Moore (personal communication), I wrote a carnal allegory of the Song, a pornographic reading no less.³ By contrast, here I pursue directly what a purely literal reading might yield.⁴

2. METAPHOR, ECOLOGY AND MARXISM

I may be given the epithet of ‘Captain Obvious’ for pointing out that the Song deals in metaphor and its hangers-on such as simile, metonymy, synonymy, hyperbole and the ever-present allegory. There is nothing particularly new in such a point, and perusing the recent commentaries of Exum (2005) or Bergant (2001), or the older ones of Pope (1977), Landy (1983) and Fox (1985), let alone the collection of comments from the venerated ‘fathers’ of the tradition (Norris 2003), I can find adequate discussions of metaphor. Yet they all stay with the idea that metaphor involves the relation, however subtle or crude, complex or simple, between two terms that have no immediate connection. Or, to put it in more technical terms, the vehicle and referent are connected by the tenor: that link, the tenor, opens up all manner of multifaceted and delicate connections between the vehicle and the referent.⁵ For example, ‘his banner over me was love’ makes use of a characteristic (the tenor) to set up a series of links between the banner (vehicle) and

consin Press, 1985). My argument also diverges from the approach of Daniel Grossberg who, though he admirably highlights the centrality of the natural world in the Song, also concentrates on the role of natural metaphors in the evocation of human love. See Daniel Grossberg, “Nature, Humanity, and Love in Song of Songs”, *Interpretation* 59 (2005):229-42.

² See Pope (1977: 89-229).

³ Roland Boer, *Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door: The Bible and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 53-70; Roland Boer, “The Second Coming: Repetition and Insatiable Desire in the Song of Songs”, *Biblical Interpretation* 8 (2000):276-301. See the response by Virginia Burrus and Stephen Moore, “Unsafe Sex: Feminism, Pornography, and the Song of Songs”, *Biblical Interpretation* 11 (2003) 24-52.

⁴ For a very different focus on literal readings, this time in terms of the grotesque function of the images and metaphors and the production of ugliness, see Fiona C. Black, “Unlikely Bedfellows: Allegorical and Feminist Readings of the Song of Songs 7.1-8”, in *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs* 2, edited by A. Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); Fiona C. Black, “Nocturnal Egression: Exploring Some Margins of the Song of Songs”, in *Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible*, edited by A. K. M. Adam (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2001); Fiona C. Black, *The Artifice Of Love: Grotesque Bodies And The Song Of Songs* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2006).

⁵ For instance, see Fox’s nuanced discussion of metaphor, where he distinguishes between presentational and representational metaphor and explores the idea of metaphoric distance (Fox 1985: 272-6).

love (the referent). The key lies in leaving precisely what that characteristic might be unnamed, for the metaphor may go off in all manner of directions. A banner announces, goes at the forefront of the army, flutters in the wind, stands above the tent, flies from a turret, and so on. And love may flare up, wane, become bumpy – each verb of course being a metaphor in its own right. In the Song the metaphors come primarily from plants and animals, but we also find them drawn from geography, art, architecture and the military.

This is all very well, if one assumes that the mechanism of metaphor remains intact. Or rather, let me speak of the ‘metonymic axis’. That axis is none other than the tenor that links the two items, vehicle and referent, in a way that is metonymic – they come together by means of the tenor. However, what happens if I block or break that metonymic axis, closing down or cutting the link between vehicle and referent? What if the metaphor is no longer a ‘thinly veiled erotic’ allusion (Exum 2005: 115)? What if the vehicle floats free, no longer anchored to a referent? What if the ‘banner’ from my earlier example is not necessarily connected with ‘love’? These questions, which comprise my effort at estrangement, will exercise me in what follows.

As for ecocriticism, I am not interested in the versions that are off with the pixies, far too much entwined with the conglomerate of New Age spiritualisms, suggesting that the real problem with our current economic order – capitalism – is a loss of spiritual connection with the earth. Rather, I understand ecocriticism in the strong sense, namely as a political approach: it arises from and contributes to political, social and cultural change in terms of a natural, material environment of which human beings are a part but also profoundly construct. Further, as is now widely recognised, ecocriticism is very much concerned with making connections, specifically of a materialist nature.⁶ As far as the first point is concerned, rather than the more neutral definition of Glotfelty and Fromm – “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”⁷ – I follow the definitions of Michael Branch et al⁸ and Michael Cohen.⁹ As Branch and company point out in the introduction to *Reading the Earth*: “Implicit (and often explicit) in much of this new criticism is a call for cultural change. Ecocriticism is not just a means of analyzing nature in literature; it implies a move toward a more biocentric world-view, an extension of ethics, a broadening of humans’ conception of global community to include nonhuman life forms and the physical environment” (Branch 1998: xiii). Or, in Michael Cohen’s terms, “ecological literary criticism must be engaged... Ecocriticism needs to inform personal and political actions” (Cohen 1999: 1092-3). My only addition to such definitions is that they tend to leave the agency with human beings. What happens if political

⁶ For an excellent survey see Simon Estok, “A Report Card on Ecocriticism”, *AUMLA: The Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association* 96 (2001):220-38.

⁷ Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, ed. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1996): xviii.

⁸ Michael P. Branch, et al, ed.. *Reading the Earth: New Directions in the Study of Literature and the Environment*, (Moscow, Idaho: University of Idaho Press, 1998).

⁹ Michael Cohen, “Letter”, *PMLA* 114 (1999):1092-3.

change arises as a response to non-human activity? Or, to put it more bluntly: given that the ultimate contradiction we face now is between the unlimited growth of capitalism and a limited planet, the possibility for political change – the breakdown of capitalism – may well lie with large-scale environmental collapse.

As for the second point – the making of connections – there is wider agreement. So Glotfelty and Fromm: “Ecocriticism expands the notion of ‘the world’ to include the entire ecosphere. If we agree with Barry Commoner’s first law of ecology, ‘Everything is connected to everything else’, we must conclude that literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, *and ideas* interact” (Glotfelty 1996: xviii). I would also like to stress the phrase “material world,” for ecocriticism is very much a materialist approach. Up until now (in my writing) I have concerned myself largely with what I felt were the two great materialisms, namely Marxism and psychoanalysis – the one demystifying the patterns of human history and the other of the human psyche in thoroughly materialist terms. If one took on the name of historical or dialectical materialism, the other might be termed a materialism of the psyche. But of course both approaches are in fact human materialisms, resolutely concerned with human beings and not the materialism of the non-human world. By taking the other-than-human world as its basis, ecocriticism shifts the emphasis away from human beings. In short, ecocriticism’s political nature and its critique of anthropocentrism interest me for this essay.

What, then, of Marxism, my third port of methodological call? Despite the fact that ecocriticism brings out that dimension of Marxism that is so often forgotten, namely the inseparable connection between theory and political practice, there is a profound question that Marxism poses for ecocriticism. Here I draw on one of David Harvey’s best essays, ‘What’s Green and Makes the Environment Go Round?’¹⁰ He argues that although human beings may be formed by nature, they also form nature itself. In other words, the natural environment may shape a particular social formation, but that social formation fundamentally shapes the natural environment that shapes the formation. Thus, the availability of raw materials, the types of animals and plants available in an area, the climate, rainfall, and fertility of the soil obviously shape the type of social formation that may arise. It is not for nothing that a hunter-gatherer existence characterized life in large parts of Australia for millennia, while the naturally occurring sheep, goat, cow and pig in Mesopotamia profoundly influenced the development of a sacred economy there. But mode of production also shapes nature. For instance, in Australia the introduction of a host of plant species since British colonization in the late 18th century, along with animals such as the cat, dog, goat, deer, camel, water buffalo and rabbit – all of which have gone “feral” – means that nature in Australia means something far different under capitalism than it did under an earlier mixture of hunter-gatherer economy and settled agriculture economy. Add to this the fact that much of the arable land is shaped by a mix of fertilizers and pesticides

¹⁰ In *Cultures of Globalization*, edited by F. Jameson and M. Miyoshi (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1998).

and any notion of an Australian “nature” is impossible to separate from capitalism.

All of this may seem like common sense, but too often one comes across the assumption that nature has ultimate precedence, setting the agenda for language, culture, textual production and society.¹¹ Harvey’s argument puts paid to that assertion. But his argument also puts a new spin on Barry Commoner’s first law of ecology that I mentioned above, “Everything is connected to everything else.” If Commoner’s law of interconnectedness overcomes the opposition between human beings and nature, asserting that human beings are part of a much larger nature, then Harvey shows that more extensively than other species human beings are part of nature by profoundly shaping it. There is nothing more or less natural, he points out, about a freeway overpass than a field full of grass and trees. Thus, what we know as nature is held together and sustained by capitalism – all the way from agribusiness, with its pesticides, herbicides, patented hybrids and genetic modification, to forest management and national parks.

Harvey’s focus, as a Marxist geographer, is of course on capitalism. I assume, however, that Harvey’s points are not restricted to capitalism, but that they apply, with all the appropriate modifications and attention to difference required, to other very different modes of production such as the one(s) in which the Bible came together. In other words, I am interested in how Harvey’s argument relates to a text produced in a distinctly non- or pre-capitalist environment. The question remains, however, as to how my three areas of metaphor, ecocriticism and Marxism come together for reading the Song of Songs. Let me put it as follows: to begin with, if I block the metonymic axis and focus on the released vehicles of the multitude of metaphors in the Song, it turns out that most of these vehicles are flora and fauna. Secondly, once the connection to human beings that is assumed in the metaphors of the Song is gone, the animals and plants take on lives of their own, one of sap-filled fecundity, and one that is open to the insights of ecocriticism. However, before we get too enthusiastic about such an ‘anthropo-fugal’ or non-anthropocentric reading, about ecocriticism as the saviour of biblical criticism, if not literary criticism as a whole,¹² my final step picks up the point that ‘nature’ is a construct, not merely at the hands of language but also at the hands of social and economic formations. Such an anthropo-fugal reading is of course an interpretive fiction, for the Song of Songs is, after all, a product of human hands and minds. So I am also interested in how the flora and fauna of the Song are constructed by human beings.

¹¹ See, for example, Kate Rigby, “Ecocriticism”, in *Literary and Cultural Criticism at the Twenty-First Century*, edited by J. Wolfreys (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002): 156.

¹² A not uncommon assumption, but one that has also bedevilled other forms of political criticism, such as postcolonial criticism, or feminism, or gay and lesbian criticism – and the list goes on.

3. BREAKING THE METONYMIC AXIS

The theory is all very well, but let me see how it works out with the text.¹³ I take as my initial sample the collection of poems conveniently if somewhat arbitrarily gathered into chapter two. Here we find a series of metaphors, similes and images that have fallen into a distinct pattern, if not a certain hierarchy, with interpretation of the Song. The vast weight of interpretation assumes that the Song is anthropocentric, that it speaks of love and/or sex between human beings. To the aid of that assumption come a few explicit metaphors. By ‘explicit metaphors’ I mean those that provide the full works of vehicle, tenor and referent, and for which the referent is one or more human beings. For example, ‘your eyes are doves’ (Song 1:15) provides us with a human referent – ‘your eyes’ – to which the vehicle (‘doves’) is connected via the tenor. In other words, these explicit metaphors are anthropocentric. Yet another large group of metaphors is implicit; that is, they may supply a vehicle, but the referent is left out. In this group we find metaphors like ‘the rains are gone’ and ‘the flowers appear on the earth’ (Song 2:11-12). There is no explicit connection made with human beings in these metaphors, and yet in some way they are drafted in to do the work of anthropocentric metaphors. The reason: these implicit metaphors come under the spell of both the anthropocentrism of the poems and the explicit metaphors.

What if the rains that are gone are not the bondage of Israel in Egypt, or the reign of Jewish Law, but simply the winter rains? What if the blossoms that appear are not the Saints, Apostles and Martyrs but simply the flowers of spring?¹⁴ That is, what if we release these implicit metaphors from the service of anthropocentrism? They become metaphors without referents, or rather images at large, freed from human-centred power of the explicit metaphors. The first step of my reading, then, is to reverse the hierarchy. Rather than a hierarchy of anthropocentrism, explicit and then implicit metaphors, I would like to privilege the lowly, rag-tag implicit group. Let us see what we have:¹⁵

Sustain me with raisin cakes, refresh me with apples (v. 5)
 ...by the gazelles or the does of the open field (v. 7).
 For look, the winter is past, the rains are over and gone (v. 11).
 The blossoms appear on the earth,
 the time of singing has come,
 and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land (v. 12).
 The fig tree ripens its unripened fruit,
 and the vine-buds give forth fragrance (v. 13).
 My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff,
 Let me see your form,
 Let me hear your voice,
 For your voice is sweet,
 And your form is beautiful (v. 14).
 Catch us foxes, little foxes,
 who spoil vineyards, for our vineyards are in blossom (v. 15).

¹³ In this essay I am particularly indebted to the masterly commentary of Exum (2005).

¹⁴ See Pope (1977): 394-97.

¹⁵ Unless indicated otherwise, the translations are mine.

He grazes among the lilies (v. 16)
 Until the day breathes and the shadows flee (v. 17).

Released from the connections with human beings, the natural world that appears before us is one at the end of winter and its rains. A day begins and shadows fade, there are blossoms, fig trees, vines and vine-buds, vineyards, lilies, ripening fruit, fragrance, raisin cakes, apples, gazelles, does, a dove,¹⁶ turtledoves, foxes, and even the odd cleft, covert, cliff and uncultivated field (הַפְּדִיָּה). One or two items do have some human taint, but they are few and don't diminish the picture. For instance, the vineyard is cultivated by human beings. At a stretch the vines and fig trees might also fall into such a group, but there is nothing in the text that suggests such a connection, except perhaps by association with the vineyards. Finally, the imperatives 'sustain' (סַמְךָ) and 'refresh' (רַפְּדָךְ) in verse 5 are second person masculine plural, and may refer to men (the plural is intriguing), but the masculine plural is also the general plural with no specific referent needed, human or otherwise. The overwhelming number of these items, the flora and fauna, the rhythm of days and seasons and even landforms, *taken on their own* are anything but anthropocentric. And there is nothing about them that suggests that they might refer intrinsically to human love. Indeed, they are hardly metaphors in any sense of the term, for the mechanism of vehicle, tenor and referent must be imposed upon them. It is best then to speak of a collection of images, a collection that constructs a distinct natural world in its own right.

So much for the images that once were implicit metaphors. What, then, happens to the explicit metaphors in light of my argument? To begin with, the metonymic axis is fully functional, at least initially. In each case they make the connection between human beings and the various items, whether flora, fauna, geology, or indeed the built environment. Yet, at this point I need my machete in order to cut this axis and release the metaphors from their human connections. Let us see how this might work. I begin with listing the explicit metaphors.

I am a crocus of Sharon, a lily of the valleys (v. 1).
 As a lily among thorns, so is my lover among the daughters (v. 2).
 As an apple tree among the trees of the forest,
 so is my lover among the sons.
 In its shadow I delighted to sit,
 and its fruit was sweet to my taste (v. 3)
 Look, he's coming now,
 leaping over the mountains,
 bounding over the hills (v. 8)
 My lover is like a gazelle, or a young deer.
 Look, there he stands, behind our wall,
 Gazing in through the windows,
 looking through the lattice (v. 9)
 Turn, my lover, be like a gazelle,
 or a young deer upon rugged mountains (v. 17)

¹⁶ Although 'dove' (*yonah*) is usually understood as a term of endearment for a human being, there is nothing in the text that suggests it is necessary so, especially in light of my argument.

Similar images appear to those of our previous collection. In this case they are flowers such as crocuses and lilies (if indeed they can be identified so readily from Hebrew), trees such as apple trees, trees of the forest, even some thorns, and then the fruit of the apple tree. As far as fauna is concerned, there is a gazelle and a deer (a standard pair for the Song), twice in different metaphors. Finally, apart from the odd rugged or broken (בְּתֹר) mountain or valley, we also come across built structures like a wall, window and lattice. But just when we thought we were safely in the realm of metaphor, the literary device slips to simile. The first ‘I am...’ is a metaphor, and the vehicle is both a crocus and a lily, either in the valley or among brambles, but the rest are in fact similes, for the connection is made via an ‘as’ (כִּי) or a ‘like’ (כְּ). Indeed, there are two extended similes: the apple tree simile goes as far as mentioning its shade and its sweet fruit; the gazelle-deer simile stretches to the animal leaping and bounding over the hills, and then looking in through the windows and lattice while standing by the wall.

What about the referents for these metaphors? They are, surprisingly, rather muted. To begin with, the first person is ambiguous, at least in terms of gender.¹⁷ Thus, the possessive suffix, on words such as ‘my lover’ (דֹּדִי) and ‘my friend’ (רַעֲיָתִי), or ‘my taste’ (חֶכְמִי in v. 3) do not indicate the gender of the pronoun. At least we can assume they are indeed human, but that is not the case with the third person masculine suffix on words such as ‘its fruit’ (פְּרִיָּו) and ‘its shade’ (צֶלְלוֹ), or indeed the emphatic third person pronoun – ‘it’ – in verses 8 and 9 (זֶה). In each case it could be either ‘its’ (that is, the apple tree) or ‘his’, or it might be ‘it’ (the gazelle or deer) or ‘he’. At least the first person possessive pronouns do refer to humans, as also the separate first person pronoun, אֲנִי, at the beginning of the first verse and the verbal suffix, ‘I sat’, in v. 3. And we might argue that the ambiguity over the third person pronouns is part of the magic of metaphor. But a slippage does set in, one in which the anthropocentrism is not as secure as it might seem.¹⁸

All the same, there is enough to make human beings the referents of the metaphors and similes in this chapter. The ‘I’, ‘he’ and ‘my’ become the referents to which the metaphoric vehicles are connected. Thus, ‘my friend’ is like a lily, the maidens are like brambles, ‘my lover’ is like an apple tree, the young men are like trees in the wood, and so on. Or with the metaphors, we find the lover morphing into an apple tree, with ‘his/its fruit’ and ‘his/its shade’ (v. 3). Of course, these connections trigger all sorts of questions and associations: why is a lover like an apple tree with fruit and shade? Why is a lover like a lily in the valley or among thorns? Are these sexual – phallic trees and their ‘fruit’, or opening flowers in the thickets? Do tree and lover end up being connected so much that the sensuality of the tree is that of the lover and vice versa?

¹⁷ On the absence of gender specific language, and especially the indeterminacy as to who is addressing whom, see further on this my chapter ‘Night Sprinkles’ in Boer (1999).

¹⁸ Grossberg (2005: 235-37) also comments on the way that this pronominal ambiguity ‘raises several possibilities of affinity between the man and the animal.’ (237)

I have written enough to show how the metaphors and similes function, and indeed I have written elsewhere of the myriad sexual allegories such metaphors and similes generate. But my agenda is different here, for the question is what happens when we break the metonymic axis between the flora and fauna of this text and their human referents. The cut should not be too difficult to make, since the link is not as strong as it might have been. Let us see what we end up with: a crocus of Sharon, lily of the valleys or among thorns, an apple tree with its fruit in the trees of the forest, a gazelle or a deer on the mountains, or perhaps by a wall, window or lattice. Once we remove the various personal pronouns and connectors, the items of the explicit metaphors and similes slip away from the humans and join their comrades in the earlier group of images that were once implicit metaphors.

4. A FECUND WORLD

I have not sought to isolate the metaphoric vehicles merely on a whim, or perhaps as an exercise in literary dilettantism. Rather, there is a distinct agenda that arose first from lingering with the ecocritics, namely to resist the pull of anthropocentrism. Yet when I pondered the Song in more detail, it soon turned out to be a willing partner, for it all too readily gives up its footing in the human realm. Taken on their own, the implicit metaphors are hardly metaphors at all, but images in their own right, and the explicit metaphors are attached to their referents only by slippery and ambiguous pronouns – not the strongest connections one might want.

What we have is a rather large collection of bits and pieces from the natural world. Let me rearrange them slightly and do a little botany and zoology. As far as the plants are concerned, fig trees sprout figs, flowers, perhaps crocuses and lilies, spring up from the earth, vines and vineyards blossom and spread their perfumes, the branches are laden with raisins, and apple trees are heavy with sweet and refreshing fruit. The first day of spring, it seems, is in the air – after all, the shadows flee, the winter is past and the rains have done their thing (v. 11). The sap is rising, so to speak, and we are in the midst of a fecund, pulsating world of ripening and opening plants. Of course, one might make the mundane point that such images of spring are entirely appropriate metaphors for the sensuality of sex and love. Yet, this is to my mind a belittlement of the fecund world that the text creates.

Now for some zoology: gazelles and does and deer bound and leap over the hills, fields or rugged mountains, or perhaps stand and look, turtledoves are singing, foxes run through the vineyards, helping themselves to the free food. Although there are some suggestions of a built environment, with mention of lattice, wall and window, the world evoked is one of open fields and wild mountains, in short, the natural earth itself. There is, however, a distinct feature of the animals at a syntactical level: they are the active agents in a series of participles, often in the *hiphil*. Thus, in v. 9 the gazelle and/or deer is standing (עומד), is gazing (משגיח) and is looking (מצייץ), and in v. 15 the foxes are spoiling (מתבלים) the vineyards. The agency lies with them. Indeed, the inability to rope the foxes into the over-riding concern with metaphors of human love has disconcerted more than one commentator (see Bergant

2001: 31-2; Exum 2005: 128-30). Spoilers to the vineyard and metaphor itself, they operate in a world of their own. It turns out that the plants too are agents, subjects of their verbs: the flowers ‘appear’ (אָרָא v. 12), the fig tree ‘ripens’ (הִטָּה v. 13), and the vines ‘give’ (נָתַן v. 13).

Less a series of free-floating images, severed from their anthropocentric anchor, what emerges is a distinct world. The text constructs a natural world with its own agency, a world that operates perfectly well without human beings.¹⁹ Even more, it is a fecund, sensual and pulsating world, eager to get on with the job of sprouting, pollinating, mating, and reproducing. Too often the sensuality of sex is assumed to be a peculiarly human trait: only human beings, it is implicitly assumed, flirt, parade, chase and lust, all for the sake of that elusive moment of sex. But that is a rather impoverished idea of sex, for the world of nature beyond human beings is far more varied and sensual in its celebration and pursuit of sex than ever human beings might be able to achieve.

5. ALLOCATION

Before I get too carried away, bounding with the deer on the mountains, or perhaps sinking into orgiastic raptures with the flowers, I do need to remind myself that this fecund world is after all constructed by a text, a text produced by one or more human beings at some point or other. Indeed, it is worth reiterating the commonplace point that the idea of ‘nature’ is a human construct, indeed that ecocriticism itself is a discourse by human beings about nature, and not in some strange way the voice of ‘nature’ itself. In a sense, then, the effort to produce an ‘anthropofugal’ – over against an anthropocentric – reading is a fiction.

Yet it is a fascinating fiction, although now for another reason, a distinctly economic one. Economics? The Song couldn’t be further from the realm of economics with its celebration of a fecund nature, or, if one wants, of human sex. The underlying assumption of my argument is that economics is prevalent in the Song, but that we need to look awry to find it. One might reverse the point and say that economics has a knack of turning up when one is least expecting it. So far I have traced a path through the language of the Song, particularly its penchant for metaphor, which has allowed me to get as far as the fecund world of the Song. And it is that fecund domain of nature in the Song’s second chapter that gives off all manner of economic signals. To begin with, the plants produce of their own accord. Apples appear on apple trees, figs on fig trees, grapes on vines, and before the fruit come the flowers with their various pollens and smells. As for flowers such as crocuses and lilies, they spring from the earth where they will.

¹⁹ This is a world in which the commentators unwittingly immerse themselves with their obsessions over the identity of the plants, flowers and animals. For one example among many, see Bergant (2001): 23. Early Christian and medieval commentators, in their search for allegorical hints, often give detailed attention to the features of the plants and animals – for instance, the ‘gazelle is so-called because of its native sharp-sightedness’ (Theodoret of Cyrus in Richard A Norris, ed. *The Song of Songs: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans [2003]:117) – to the extent that they come to life in these commentaries see further Norris (2003: 90-133).

While the animals do not produce young in this passage, preferring to stand and look or gambol over mountains, the agency of the animals is a crucial signal of what is going on here. As I pointed out above, they are the active agents of a number of verbs, a feature the plants seem to have acquired as well. Note what the plants actually do: they ‘appear’, ‘ripen’ and ‘give’ (vv. 12 and 13), especially fruit and flowers and smells. Human beings can do what they will, and there are suggestions of cultivation (vineyards in v.15) and husbandry (grazing in v. 16), but they cannot actually make the plants and animals produce. Nor does the Song fall back on the position that some deity is responsible for making the plants and animals produce, for the Song is notable for the absence of any reference to a deity.

The natural world of the Song is, then, a fecund, self-producing world, a point that will turn out to be the key to its economic assumptions. However, before exploring that point further, let me finally consider the human beings themselves. As above, I list the relevant texts:

He brought me to the house of wine,
and his banner over me is love (v. 4)
I place you under oath, daughters of Jerusalem...
that you do not excite or awaken love until it desires (v. 7)
The voice of my beloved!
My lover answered me said to me:
“Arise, my friend, my fair one, and come away (v. 10; see v. 13)
My lover is mine and I am his (v. 16)

Three items interest me in these verses, three signals of economic assumptions. The first is what I might call the agency of ‘love’ (הַאֲהָבָה) in verse 7. The daughters of Jerusalem are not to ‘excite or awaken love until it desires’. Is this a profound comment on the nature of love, or of lovemaking (see Exum 2005: 117-19)? Perhaps, but the verbs suggest something further: love (הַאֲהָבָה) is the subject of ‘excite’ (עוֹר) in the *hiphil*, ‘awaken’ (עוֹר in the *poel*) and then ‘desire’ (חפץ). Love, in other words, is the agent, and in that capacity it echoes the agency of the plants that ‘appear’, ‘ripen’ and ‘give’. In other words, something arises of its own accord, whether that is fruit, flower, scent... or love. Its awakening is inexplicable; one may assist in some way, but it arises in its own time and in its own way. Love, like the plants and indeed the animals, is self-sufficient and self-producing. In other words, it is of the realm of nature, of the flora and fauna of the Song, drawing near to what we might now call instinct than any flights of emotion.

The second signal comes in what appears at first sight to be a statement about the mutuality of love: ‘My lover is mine and I am his’ (v. 16). Now, while I might be suspicious about such a verse as an ideological screen that in the end supports gender hierarchies, dowry systems and the use of women as exchange objects, the point I want to draw out here is somewhat different. There is a pattern of mutual giving, or allocation. I might paraphrase it as, ‘My lover gives himself to me and I to him’. This ideology of mutuality, if I may call it that, belongs to the fiction of love²⁰ – that it does not necessarily partake of power

²⁰ This fiction of mutual love in the Song is well explicated by Alicia Ostriker, “A Holy of Holies: The Song of Songs as Countertext”, in Brenner

plays, of the instincts for reproduction, security and economic exchange. What we find, in other words, is that love itself is part and parcel of an ideology of mutual allocation: it is given and taken in turn.

If one suspects that this signal of allocation is a little too flimsy, then the third signal reinforces it. Verses 4, 10 and 13 present a work-free environment: rather than the toil required to plough, seed, water, weed and harvest various crops, or indeed to pasture, protect and nurture animals, what we find is that everything is already available. It simply produces of its own accord and all one need do is reach out and pick something to eat. We might imagine a Song that foregrounds work – something like, ‘Come, my lover, and help me with weeding the barley field’, or perhaps ‘My lover is better than the tribute gatherer’, but that would be a somewhat different collection of poems. Rather, the call in verses 10 and 13 is, ‘Arise, my friend, my fair one, and come away’. And where do they go? Into a somewhat bucolic, even Edenic, realm of self-producing nature, where the flowers, figs, apple trees and vines fill the air with scents and their branches and vines hang with fruit, albeit with an occasional fox tearing about the place. Or they go into the wine house (בֵּית הַיַּיִן in v. 4), there to feast and drink to their heart’s content, the food and wine laid out before them.

The three signals now come together: when the human beings do actually appear in their own right, they operate in a world of mutual giving, the inexplicable and almost instinctual self-production of love, and the sweat-free availability of food. On top of this the plants and animals live happily in their own fecund, self-producing world, oblivious to the human beings. All of these characteristics indicate that the Song ought to be considered an important text within the pastoral genre, broadly conceived.²¹ Bucolic and Edenic it is, and the connections to the garden in Genesis 2 are not fortuitous.²² However, here I want to suggest that what is operating in this world – one that is, I repeat, a constructed literary one – is what might be called an economics of allocation. Rather than an economics of extraction, in which produce is extracted from the ground, or tax is extracted from those who enable such production, the Song operates in terms of a very different logic – one of allocation.

All too briefly, under such an allocatory economics,²³ the key items that produce do so apparently of their own accord: the land, animals, plants and women produce food and young inexplicably. One may attribute such activity to a deity or three, as we find elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, or indeed in the Ancient Near East, but the crucial economic feature of such production is that there needs to be a complex system of (re-)allocation in order to ensure the (un-)equal distribution

(2002), although she does buy into it.

²¹ See the entry on ‘pastoral’ in M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 4th ed. (Holt, 1981).

²² On the connections with Genesis 2-3, see Francis Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983): 183-9, who argues that the Song is an inversion of the Genesis narrative – the couple goes back to the garden. See also Grossberg (2005: 234).

²³ See further, Roland Boer, *Political Myth* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007).

of the produce. Various modes of allocating the produce turn up at various points, such as kinship, or patron-client relations, or the military: according to these modes crops, animals, women and land are allocated and re-allocated.

The catch with all of this is that the Song is not merely a reflection of an economic system. For this reason I have focused on its language and the unwitting world it creates – the natural ‘scenery’ as it is sometimes disparagingly termed. Further, it does present an ideal pastoral world, even a fantasy of escapism. However, in the very act of producing such an ideal world for lovers to inhabit, it can only construct such a world out of the social, economic and cultural tools available. So the question then is: what tools does it use? We might distinguish two levels in an economics of allocation, one that concerns the self-producing agents of earth, plants, animals and women, and the other that focuses on the ways in which such producing agents and their produce may be distributed. The second chapter of the Song only implicitly refers to the modes, or regimes, of allocation – the banqueting house, the mutual giving of lovers to each other, although elsewhere in the Song we do find hints of kinship in 6:9; 8:1-2, 8, patron-client relations in 1:4 and 9, and the military in 3:6-11. Its main concern, however, is with the first level, namely, the fecund, self-producing realm of nature. It constructs a world that operates at the primary level of self-production.

6. CONCLUSION

My effort at estranging given readings of the Song – that it is about human love, or rather, sex – has led me on a path through the thicket of literary matters, ecocritical concerns and out into economics, of all places. At first I sought to break the metonymic axis of the Song’s metaphors, or at least those in its second chapter. Such a move then led me to consider how the world of nature is constructed by this text, and it turned out that this constructed world makes sense within what I have called an economics of allocation, particularly at the level of self-production. It seems, then, that rather than a bucolic world of infatuated love, this is a very economic text. Lest the charge of reductionism be laid at my feet, particularly with my move to economics as the ‘ultimately determining instance’, I would point out that any text does not and cannot exist in a vacuum. It is part of a larger network in which politics and economics loom large.

Indeed, I would go further, and argue that the Song as we have it could be told and written only within a certain social formation. Its achievements – and many continue to be amazed at what it does achieve – and its limits are determined by that social context. My thesis, then, is that it is a small piece of the culture of an allocatory economics, an economics that inescapably seeps through the way in which the world – a fecund, natural world – of the lovers is constructed. Love may not make the world go round, but it ensures that the economy does. That such a thesis is preliminary, that it needs to be tested on the remainder of the Song hardly needs to be said.