

## The Song of Songs

Half the poems, pictures, music, stories of the whole world are great by virtue of the beauty of their sex appeal. Titian or Renoir, the Song of Solomon or *Jane Eyre*, Mozart or “Annie Laurie”, the loveliness is all interwoven with sex appeal, sex stimulus, call it what you will. (D. H. Lawrence, *Pornography and Obscenity*)

And with hand outstretched, fearful and passionate, he [King David] reaches to her. But it is Solomon who touches her hand, with rapture and joy, and cries out his gladness in the Song of Songs. (D. H. Lawrence, *Study of Thomas Hardy*)

### PART 1

The Song of Songs is notoriously difficult to understand, yet everyone feels that he has understood it. Just a few words are enough to fire our imaginations: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine.” Of course, you might like to be pedantic and omit “of his mouth” as redundant; but the phrase is in the original Hebrew—*minshikot pichue*. “Let him kiss me” is harmless enough for a popular song, but the sensuous immediacy lies in the insistence of “mouth”. Furthermore, we might be wrong-footed by the switch from third person (“him”) to second person (“thy”); but the same drive to immediacy can be seen—from confession to a third party, or a private thought, to a bold address to the woman’s lover, from the Shulamite (if that is indeed who she is) to Solomon. Three verses further on we meet with one of those unforgettable declarations: “I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon.” As T. S. Eliot once said in another connexion: “Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood”, and I think the Song of Solomon is a case in point. What does it matter if you don’t know who or what was Kedar? Are you not moved by the sentence as a whole and can you say you don’t know what it means?

Here we have in fact the beginnings of a drama that runs right through the Song. I don't mean the issue of black skin, but the drama of a love story. However, the race consciousness remains alive for the moment, as the woman begs the daughters of Jerusalem not to despise her "because I am black", she says, "because the sun hath looked upon me." She has already been victimised, though we cannot know for sure why it was: "my mother's children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept." And here we are in the very heart of the complex or you might say "broken" structure of the Song; for what does the speaker mean by remarking that she has failed to keep her own vineyard? Is that some coded reference to her personal condition? Is it anything to do with her running after her lover instead of shouldering her domestic responsibilities? Does the language follow some ancient usage that we simply do not know of? Yet precisely such difficulties I have met in seeing English translations of Flamenco songs: there are inexplicable time-shifts and the narrative line seems incomprehensibly broken, yet we dimly perceive the elements of a tragic story which, on the lips of a gypsy singer, and with the rhythmical backing of a skilfully played guitar, and with audience participation, seems to be even enhanced by the narrative dislocation. And is it not long since we have ceased to complain of the "obscurity" of certain twentieth-century styles of poetry, not least in that of T. S. Eliot himself? So perhaps genuine poetry *can* communicate before it is understood. Not that I wish to suggest that the Song of Songs is not still more precious than these things are.

At this point an attentive reader will feel a jolt. We have (1.4) read: "the king hath brought me into his chambers"; now, at 1.7, we read: "Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest, where thou makest thy flock to rest at noon: for why should I be as one that turneth aside by the flocks of thy companions?" So, is the king a shepherd? King Solomon a shepherd? You might argue that he is so, allegorically speaking, just as a priest might be called a shepherd of his human flock; but, if that were the case here, why did the author take the trouble to give details that don't point specifically to the allegorical comparison but instead actually intensify the vividness with which he conceives the incidental shepherding function? It is a beautiful and authentic-sounding scene. The lover is a shepherd among shepherds, who rests his flock at noon so that they shall eat and perhaps escape the rigour of the noonday sun. So is this a story about King Solomon or about humble pastoral folk, or two stories rolled into one? And is this contraction a way of giving universality to the experience of passionate love that the Song of Songs certainly does convey? I don't think anyone knows for sure what the compositional intention was, but no one will dispute the *effect* of the story as I have just described it.

That pastoral setting is enhanced by the frequent reference to fruits and flowers, birdsong, and the passage of the seasons, with particular emphasis on springtime, so that the love which is celebrated emerges as a force of Nature rather than an incidental romance without deeper significance. The passionate love which is celebrated is seen as a blessing, and perhaps this is where we can think of a religious dimension in the work, the inspired work. It is the Garden of Eden, yet transposed to an ancient kingdom, with its king

and its shepherds, and the various classes of humankind implied as between. But Paradise does not contain the squabbles and sufferings that humankind as we know it experiences; yet we find them here: “I sought him, but I found him not” (3.1), “The watchmen that went about the city found me, they smote me, they wounded me” (5.7); and in any event love is itself a sickness, as is so poignantly and memorably expressed here, in words which have a Shakespearean resonance: “I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if ye find my beloved, that ye tell him, that I am sick of love.”

We have to rid ourselves of our own poetic conventions: “thy hair is as a flock of goats, that appear from Mount Gilead. Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep that are even shorn, which came up from the washing; whereof every one bear twins, and none is barren among them. Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet . . . . (4. 1-3) We have to pass through the associations goats and sheep might have for us, urban folk as we mainly are: mud-splashed, noisy, smelly beasts, and see them picturesquely, their coats gleaming, their movements as the flow of a shining stream; and we have to appreciate the wealth they represent to the joyous farmer who owns them. We have to see the girl as at one with the rural world she belongs to. We have, in other words, to discover the *intentions* of our author, which can be done, I believe, by the use of our imaginations.

But the environment I have alluded to is not simply pastoral; it is laden with perfume emanating from aromatic plants; planted with gardens suggestive of a king’s palace: “I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse: I have gathered my myrrh with my spice; I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey; I have drunk my wine with my milk: eat, O friends; drink, yea, drink abundantly, O beloved.” (5.1) It has been suggested that the Song of Songs is really an epithalamium or collection of marriage songs to be presented as part of wedding celebrations—and so it may be. It is many things. The brief dramatic scenes are full of life, though perhaps more than two thousand years old: “My beloved is like a roe or a young hart: behold, he standeth behind our wall, he looketh forth at the windows, shewing himself through the lattice.” (2.9) And charged with emotion: “I charge you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes, and by the hinds of the field, that ye stir not up, nor awake my love, till he please.” (2.7) But its closing chapter 8 contains the universally eloquent truth, that love is strong as death: “Set me as a seal upon thine heart. As a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame.” (8.6) But our Jewish tradition allows us to conclude on a happier note, which happens to be struck in the immediately preceding verses, characteristic of the Song of Songs in their unflinching directness, and frank sexuality: “I would lead thee, and bring thee into my mother’s house, who would instruct me: I would cause thee to drink of spiced wine of the juice of my pomegranate . . . His left hand should be under my head, and his right hand should embrace me.” (8.2-3)

Hence is the Song of Songs itself a facet of Jewish, then Christian, religious experience. Perhaps from the beginning the priesthood used the Song as allegory of the relations between man and God: first, Israel and God, then the Christian Church and Jesus; but I have not heard that either

cult actually stressed, let alone taught from, the ostensible sensual realities of the work, though the iconic first-century Jewish Rabbi Akiva venerated the Song.

There is in the Song only one direct apparent connexion with matters spiritual, near the beginning: one reference to the righteous and their approval of the beloved, as an endorsement of King Solomon by his lover, one of the virgins that seek him, the Shulamite no doubt: “the king hath brought me into his chambers ... the upright love thee.” (1.4)—*mae’y’sharim ahave’uchah*. The “upright” love thee: that is what one might otherwise say of God, hardly even of one of his prophets. (If, however, the lover *is* the Shulamite, whom some scholars believe to be the same person as the Shunammite—that is Abishag who was brought to minister to King David in his old age—though perhaps technically still a virgin, since David had no joy of her—it would be a dubious transaction: since it is an abomination for a father and son to share the same mistress.)

## PART 2

D. H. Lawrence put his faith in the sexual relation between man and woman, within durable marriage, as the salvation of the individual and of society, and the nearest he comes to a full realisation of that, in poetic and dramatic terms, is his account of the honeymoon of Will and Anna Brangwen in *The Rainbow*, at least that is the nearest he comes in doctrine and style of expression. You could say that chapter was Lawrence’s re-writing of the Song of Songs, and a magnificent job he makes of it, too. Another locus is his still little-known play *David*, on a relevant biblical theme. But you could say his whole oeuvre points in the same direction, without implying that he has nothing to say about anything else.

Lawrence must have agonised over the Song as he wrote that lovely tale “The Man Who Died”, where Jesus rises from the dead to jettison his earlier teaching of restraint, abstinence or physical untouchability. At any rate, his example of celibacy was taken up by the Christian Church and handed down for two millenia. Lawrence saw the wickedness of that, and made it his life’s work to combat it. A descendent of the Puritans he became the Apostle of Love. But then, didn’t Ian Robinson point out in his epoch-making essay on English translations of the Bible (first published in *The Cambridge Quarterly*) that it took those stern old Protestants of the King James’ Version to strike the authentic note of passion in their rendering of the Song of Songs?

But the fact is Lawrence, unlike Freud, did not take his stand with Science, in his advocacy of the importance of sex in our lives, and this made him more of an eccentric, in many people’s eyes, than your atheist or

agnostic, Socialist or Feminist, etc. The great sin for our era has been, till recently, to distrust Science.

When Lawrence said he stood by human sexuality, the love of man and woman, husband and wife, when he (as it were) sang the Song of Songs, it didn't mean that he was impervious to all other influences. It didn't mean he wasn't a subtle psychologist, a wide-ranging metaphysician, a miscellaneous scholar; and he was almost as God-haunted as T. F. Powys—whilst, as a proud Englishman, he necessarily owed a particular debt to the Christianity which has moulded English culture. *Sons and Lovers* is not only a novel of early twentieth century Freudianism but of late nineteenth century English Non-Conformism, as well as being probably the best depiction of English working-class family life that we have. And, being the literary genius he was, it didn't mean that his stylistic range didn't encompass forms which are the antithesis, in witty intellectuality, of the sensual close-focus of the honeymoon chapter to which I have already referred. So, he was a culturally well-rounded personality, not a grunting animal, even though he might disclaim being a Christian and proclaim the pre-eminence of the blood over the mind. Of course, one cannot restrict one's human activities to these physical sexual contacts any more than the animals can, but this is the basis, the rock bottom reality without which all is sham or instability.

It has been usual in some quarters to compare Lawrence with T. S. Eliot in terms of what they stood for and the nature of their respective creative energies. F. R. Leavis did that intermittently throughout his life, seeing Eliot's largely negative view of Lawrence and Lawrence's intellectual capacities as both representative and influential; this theme formed part of his argument in, notably, *D. H. Lawrence: Novelist*. The enterprise committed him to re-defining, by himself drawing on Lawrence's various deliberations on the matter—scattered throughout his fiction and his “polyanalytics”—the nature of intellect or intelligence itself, in a way which involved him in harnessing the support of William Blake, Dickens, and the very nature of imaginative literature and its concomitant discipline of literary criticism. “What we ordinarily call thinking” (sic) is not what goes on in either *Women in Love* or *Four Quartets*.

The comparison with Blake is particularly pertinent, for was not he as assertive as Lawrence was about the supreme importance of physical love?

All his life Lawrence struggled with the problem of establishing the right relations between men and women, reaching a balance, achieving the necessary harmony, especially in the context of relations between man and wife. His struggle contrasts with the etiolated refinement of Eliot's stylish, subtle, disinterestedly confessional “La Figlia Che Piange”, a poem that boasts every virtue of “classiocity”, and whose elusive structure (so characteristic of Eliot's poetry, though each of his poems is so uniquely itself) curiously parallels the “broken” narrative line of the Song of Songs. And it is not that Lawrence himself cannot write lightly and wittily, only his versatile style is always at the service of an essentially creative theme, “creative” in a more than aesthetic sense.

Eliot, we know, embraced Christianity in a formal way, and, in his later poetry, made it—or rather his personal experience of it—his subject. He

searched his soul diligently for “hints” of a timeless reality, and saw glimpses as assurances of grace. In any event, these private deliberations of a fastidious intellectual could never reach the kind of folk Jesus sought to teach.

It is no doubt vain to assess the political correctness of a poet, when it is the poetry itself we should be addressing; so I shall not praise Eliot for thinking himself a Christian or Lawrence for not doing so. All we should say, perhaps, is that Lawrence’s sensuality is, after all, in keeping with modern psychological belief and that Eliot took steps to join the consensus in his old age. On the other hand, Lawrence’s vehement rejection of Christian self-abnegation was, like Blake’s, a stigma in the eyes of those who, whilst eschewing self-sacrifice themselves, acknowledged it as a bedrock of their belief!

The truth, though, is that too much assertion of the hygienic or spiritual virtues of sexual intercourse makes a man look ridiculous. We prefer our sages to be in lounge suits and smiling. But Lawrence was a prophet, like John the Baptist, roaring through his books the truth he had been vouchsafed. Well, not after *The Rainbow*, from which time he had learned to build into his story a counterweight or devil’s advocate in the form of those who overtly challenged his beliefs, albeit they did not succeed in overturning them. Ursula is one of them, in *Women in Love*, and Gerald another. Birkin still looks a little ridiculous but who wouldn’t rather be him than any of his suave or self-satisfied rivals, whether from this his supreme thing or from any subsequent work?

But this brings us round again to the quality of the artistic entity: *Women in Love* or *Four Quartets*? that is the question. And it will not do to cite Eliot’s contention that, in these matters, there is no competition, because we do not have here (do we anywhere?) a straight contest between labels, Christian or Sensualist, but between men and their beliefs, beliefs as embodied in men.

The mind that produced *Four Quartets* was one concerned almost exclusively with itself, though seeing itself as a soul bound by a common fate to the rest of humanity, a suffering soul thirsting for grace. Marvellously do glimpses of the world become manifest in the poem, but like thoughts or echoes in the mind: they do not escape the confines of the brooding soul to which they belong, having been consumed by that soul. But the glimpses upon which salvation hangs—the draughty church at smokefall etc.—are perhaps too flimsy to command general confidence, just as the concluding pages of Lawrence’s *St Mawr* fail perhaps to carry the reader any further than he has already been carried by the beauty and strength of the stallion himself. But the ghosts in the garden at Burnt Norton are another matter: the visionary intensity, sensitive movement, originality of phrase are of a more than Wordsworthian purity and of an at least equal depth. There is no need to be a philosopher to appreciate the nature of this poetic achievement.

*Women in Love*, however, is the opposite of claustrophobic and presents a mind struggling with fundamental problems of love, friendship, art, history, etc.: it presents a comprehensive picture of early twentieth century intellectual and social life, driven by the desire and need to discover

new values and new attitudes with which to confront the new mechanised and industrialised European world. Whether Lawrence's nostrums convince us all is as nugatory a question as whether Eliot's Christianity does.

I find myself that Lawrence's genius is the more generous and healthy one. More innocent than Eliot he may seem to be but more rooted in the life and culture of his land. For all his railings against humankind he is more brotherly, more comprehensibly flesh and blood than Eliot is, whose features, speaking figuratively, seem too close to a sneer. He is too Swiftian. Lawrence's passions ebb and flow but we are swayed by the same moon.

The Song of Songs, after all, is the surer guide.

But it remains true. *The Song of Songs* is a fresher, more joyous utterance of human sexuality and its spiritual essence, Love, than anything either Lawrence or Eliot has bequeathed us; but that is not offered as a way of life. We have the whole Bible for that. An indispensable adjunct it nevertheless is, no matter how much it may seem to clash with the more orthodox-seeming teachings. And, much as Lawrence would seem to make sexual relations a touchstone of all valid human experience, his books do not solemnly and continually promote it. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* rather dismayingly does, but his own characterisation of the creative function generally preserves him from the stultification that *idées fixes* usually entail. The strength of *Four Quartets* depends not on a promotion of ideas but on a testing of them, in the same way as Lawrence's ideological baggage is placed in the stream of his inexhaustible creativity—the promptings that come to him from the depths of his sensibility or (if you like) from his controlling Muse. That maelstrom is the true god Lawrence worships, as did Blake, not the idol of sensuality; but this god can be worshipped only subconsciously, otherwise it turns to stone.

M. B. Mencher