A Lost Cyclical Tale

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Parable

There is a Hasidic parable that tells the story of a great teacher. During a lecture, he notices an elderly man among his listeners who is unable to follow his words. The teacher summons the man telling him, “I can tell my words are unclear to you.” The teacher asks the man to listen to a melody that will lead him to the meaning of his words. In response to the melody, the man replies, “Now I understand the meaning of the words you wish to teach. I feel an intense longing for God.”

Sensation

The universal power of music is well documented. Aristotle iterates in *Politics* that various musical modes can be attributed directly to behavior and that the modes must therefore be used judiciously, “ethical ones for education, and the practical and divinely suffused ones for listening when others are performing.” Musical sensation typifies what Abraham Maslow would call a “peak experience.” Without words, it speaks directly and naturally to the habitable, emotional state of complex beings in the way that people inhabit their hallucinations in dreams. Individuals do look to music as a biological, living entity. In an experiment with rhesus monkeys in the late 1950s, Harry Harlow found that they naturally sought companionship through dolls with implanted heating devices.

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Similarly, music penetrates consciousness to the fundamental sensation of being alive, of atoms moving unperturbed by an illusory sense of a socially mediated self. Not surprisingly, physicians consider music to be an important form of treatment for Autism. Hasidism derives from Hebrew word hasidut, meaning piety, as the movement itself strives to reach a “peak” or “self-actualized” relationship with God. These principles rest in century-old traditions in both Jewish music and culture. Italian-Jewish composer Salamone Rossi (fl. 1587-1638) recognized the mystical power of both music and Judaism in the Ciceronian, humanistic sense embodied by the Renaissance. In 1622, with the publication of his polemic Hashirim Asher Lish ’lomo, he attempted to consolidate the two by introducing polyphonic music into the Jewish liturgy. Rossi’s Songs of Solomon echo kabalistic ideology reflected in 20th century psychological thought, incorporating Solomon’s ecclesiastical traditions to create a new, characteristically Jewish musical voice.

A Personality

Salamone Rossi worked at the court in Montua from 1587-1628 under Isabelle d’Este Gonzaga. Jews at that time in Montua were required to wear a badge of shame, yet Gonzaga spared Rossi of this indecency because of his accomplishments at the court. English composer Thomas Weelkes even saw fit to adapt two of Rossi’s canzonetas for his Ayeres in 1608, though with no attribution to Rossi. Rossi composed music indicative of all the genres present during the Renaissance. Despite not having to wear a badge, Rossi remained loyal to his people throughout his life. Even after the Duke Vincenzo confined the Montuan Jews to ghettos in 1612, Rossi appended the word Hebreo, Jew, to his signature on all his compositions. He came likely from the scholarly family, Me Ha-
Adumim (of the red), dating back to the year 70 at the time of the Jewish exile from Jerusalem under Titus.

Rossi was primarily a madrigal composer, as his works are often ricercare, binary, or ternary, and have a ritornello. Notably, he was also an accomplished violinist, his sonatas being some of the first that propelled virtuosic violin technique, parallel to Giuseppe Tartini’s compositions; both Tartini and Rossi were apart of the Florentine Cammerata under the patronage of Count Giovanni de’ Bardi. Prior to the publication of the *Songs of Solomon*, Rossi wrote several Hebrew motets, yet still felt an insatiable desire to introduce the polyphonic music of the Renaissance into the Hebrew liturgy. His desire has roots in traditional Jewish liturgical practice, derived from the Greek dramatic practice of partly sung, partly recited theater. Music in the synagogue was performed polyphonically with instrumental accompaniment until the Second Temple of Jerusalem fell in 70 CE, after which polyphonic music was banned in remembrance of the loss. There is even suggestion that these “performances” in the synagogue included female voices. Yet *Songs of Solomon* is the only extant polyphonic work for the synagogue printed before the 19th century. With *Hashirim*, Rossi knew he was making “A new thing in the land” as quoted from his title page to the work. This was very much a humanistic endeavor; humanists sought to expand human reason beyond the creed of scholastic logic. By Rossi’s time, Piyyutim (Jewish poems interpolated into the liturgy) were already universal to services, included in some of the most sacrosanct Jewish

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prayers such as the *Shemah* or the *Amidah*. Yet recitation had remained monophonic to emphasize the text. Instruments, in keeping with the temperament following the destruction of the second temple, were considered non-Jewish and banned from use in the synagogue. Rossi certainly intended for his works to be used in services as he observed custom by not including instruments, mixing gender in the voice parts, nor adding a basso continuo in the songs. Nevertheless, he was still very conscious of how his polyphony would be received as common Christian liturgical and secular practice. He tested various selections from *Hashirim* on friends to see if the works might be appropriate for services. With the publication, Rossi includes a laudatory poem by Rabbi Leon Modena who states, “What does science of music say to others? I was stolen out of the land of the Hebrews” (note the reference of the Christian’s liturgical adaptations of David’s psalms for their own right).  

**His Work**

The Hashirim are celebratory and joyful, written partially for rejoicing during holy festivals. The *Hashirim* is not an adaptation of the *Song of Songs* as suggested by the title, though Rossi’s work seems influenced by that epic as demonstrated by a wedding ode concluding the work. Restating Rossi’s aim, the *Hashirim* was to become a part of the service. His polyphony in some respects was an inevitable progression from long-standing custom. The piyyut involving the *Shemah* for example is strophic and through its form invites song, stemming from the earlier Iberian *Muwassahat* poetic form that added instrumental accompaniment to recitation. The *Hashirim* are also decisively in the

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Renaissance spirit, highly consonant in the style of Francesco Landini. *Kaddish no. 16* is even in the Balleto style (marked by gibberish, fa-la-la) championed by Giovanni Gastoldi, who also worked at the court in Montua 1572. The songs are unique for their melismatic qualities as well as for their text-setting. Considering that Italian words are accented on the penultimate syllable, melismas in Italian works occur generally once and on that syllable. However, words in Hebrew are accented on the final syllable, and Rossi, fusing the Hebrew language with accepted Italian part-writing, often uses two melismas in a single word on the final two syllables, or more commonly extends the final two syllables of words so much as his choral style permits, e.g. his rendition of David’s eighth psalm. With respect to the text setting, Rossi was forced to be creative since Hebrew is read from right to left and music written from left to right. He aligned the first letter of each word with the “first letter of each word with the last note to which it was set, leaving the singer to figure out how the notes and syllables should coincide.” Aside from this complexity limiting one singer to each part, this practice suggests that there were musically literate vocalists in the Montuan ghetto.

Rossi’s use of eclectic compositional techniques, with respect to secular and Christian genres, is expansive. For instance, in Rossi’s *Shir Hamma’alot, Ashrei Kol YeRe Adonai* (psalm 128), he stratifies the bass and the canto with his six part (canto, sesto, alto, quinto, tenore, and basso) vocal setting- enigmatic of later 4-Part Harmony despite the work being modal (mixolydian). In mm2, Rossi interpolates non-harmonic

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tones to create dissonance that he then resolves, in this example by a 4-3 suspension as seen in the piano reduction. Rossi furthers his use of dissonance by juxtaposing starkly contrasting pitches, e.g. si natural to si flat in mm25-26 and fa sharp to fa natural in mm34, archetypal of madrigals. Before cadences in the psalm, Rossi uses contrary motion as well as a raised leading tone and other chromatic pitches to solidify endings such as in mm 7, 18, 26 33, etc. Beginning in bar 34, Rossi includes a seven-measure falsobordone section, reminiscent of the conductus style or the discant clausulas of Notre Dame School in the 12th century, which in turn heavily influenced Mauchaut and later Landini. In mm 52, the work becomes imitative briefly and sequential indicative of the Baroque and Classical styles to come. In mm71, Rossi uses standard voice-exchange between the altus and the bass, especially emblematic of 4-Part Harmony. In mm75, Rossi adds distinctive rhythmic complexity championed by such 16th century composers as Josquin and Wert. Though salient consonance replaced symbolic rhythmic complexity in the Renaissance, this occurrence in the psalm serves as text painting, highly characteristic of Renaissance writing.

Fast-forwarding through time in the text, King David writes, “And see thou the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life; and see thy children’s children.” This in fact is the only phrase that the venerated rabbi Rashi (1033-1105) discusses in his commentary about psalm 128. He writes, “seeing sons of your sons is peace for Israel.” This intimacy

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8 Gruber, Mayer, *Rashi’s Commentary on the Psalms,* (Boston: Brill, 2004), 713.
with Israel exemplifies the kabbalistic ideology extant within the *Songs of Solomon*, ideology rooted in the teachings of the sages Rashi, Akiva, and Ibn Ezra.

**Illusion**

The Kabbalah, as written in the Zohar (1290) is one of the earliest forms of well-defined, ordered, and symbolic mysticism. As written in the Zohar, one “is encircled with a thread of grace; he looks into the firmament and a light of holy rests upon him.”

The nature of the Zohar is similar to Shamanistic Native American tradition in that pious observers would “deprive themselves of food, water, and companionship” in order to engender introspective hallucinations. As the western world has been at the forefront of technological development and logical thought, the east has a rich history of spiritual practices, i.e. Yoga, Taoism, and Tibetan Buddhism, that embody the principles at the foundation of Wilhelm Wundt’s first analysis of sensation in the late 19th century. The Zohar goes so far as to attribute specific interpretations to symbols in dreams. For example, the Zohar posits that one dreaming of their teeth falling out is indicative of forthcoming physical illness. Freud, in his magnum opus *The Interpretation of Dreams*, also attributes that very same dream to enervated functioning, though in Freud’s case sexual dysfunction. The teachings of the Zohar were regarded to the extent that if one had a troubling dream on the eve of Shabbat, he must spend the feast day fasting and meditating in order to uncover the origin and purpose of his inner turbulence. Furthermore, he must be able to articulate his dream to a confidant in order to seek

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10 Ibid, 110.
objective understanding- the most fundamental practice to Jung’s Psychoanalytical method.

Cognition may never be fully understood until artificial intelligence can mimic the entire micro functioning of every atom that constitutes human thought. Yet we ourselves live in a world defined by macro perception, including our very notion of a self, language, and emotion. Jewish mysticism aimed to solve such asymptotic problems by approaching mystical concepts in mystical terms. The Zohar uses the word devekot, union, to describe its teachings as the blurring of the human spirit from the divine. Mystical life can be separated into five overarching stages: normal mysticism, mystical intimacy, addressing God’s needs, drawing down grace, and prophetic kabbalah. Normal mysticism is achieved through living a base level, observant Jewish life and praying to God in a rudimentary sense. Mystical intimacy encompasses the notion that the lord is a consuming fire as stipulated in Deuteronomy. The idea is that human individuality is revealed to be ultimately an illusion- not far though from current beliefs regarding cognition.

Cognitivist Daniel Dennet asserts that consciousness arises from the activity between huge numbers of unconscious elements. For instance, imagine a scenario drawn on through a deck of post-it notes. Each individual post-it gives no illusion of motion, yet if one flips through the deck one sees the scenario play since our visual system is too slow to process the time interval from one post-it to the next. This is the illusion of human thought and the origin of analogical thinking. In the Zohar, human individuality is

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12 Ibid, 17.
also an illusion in that the “will” in everything is a sense of self stemming from unconscious elements that interact not only inside a self-referential human brain, but also on a more coarse-grained level with the selves in others. Addressing God’s needs posits the ideals of theosophical-theurgic kabbalah, in that humans possess the ability to affect directly the fabric of creation. Drawing down grace constitutes the rigorous introspection of the priest like followers of kabbalah, the Tzaddiks, that elevates the spiritual consonance of humanity. Prophetic kabbalah asserts that meditation and hypnosis are necessary to reach the heavenly realm. The kabbalistic goal of this type is ecstasy, meaning literally “standing outside.” Yet its meaning here is paradoxical. Though standing outside connotes dualism, standing outside in this sense is to separate oneself from the bounds of cognition and enter a dream-like world in which the individual achieves total isomorphism with knowledge, action, and desire. In the words of Blake, “The sun descending in the west, / The evening star does shine; / The birds are silent in their nest, / And I must seek for mine. / The moon like a flower in heaven’s high bower, / With silent delight.”

These concepts in the Zohar correlate directly to the texts of the Hasirim as illustrated by psalm 128.

A Song

Psalm 128, SHIR HAMMA’ALOT, ASHREI KOL YRE ADONAI

1. A Song of Ascents.

2. Happy is every one that feareth the Lord,

\footnote{Blake, William, \textit{Songs of innocence and Songs of Experience}, (New York: Dover, 1992), 25.}
3. That walketh in His ways.

4. When thou eatest the labour of thy hands,

5. Happy shalt though be, and it shall be well with thee.

6. Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine, in the innermost parts of thy house;

7. Thy children like olive plants, round about thy table.

8. Behold, surely thus shall the man be blessed

9. That feareth the Lord.

10. The Lord bless thee out of Zion;

11. And see thou the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life;

12. And see thy children’s children.

13. Peace be upon Israel!\(^1\)

This text, similar in nature to all the texts in *Songs of Solomon*, is saturated with kabbalistic reference. Line 2 suggests a description of normal mysticism. Here, fearing God is an acceptance of his power as illustrated by the Torah, and walking in his ways, in accordance with the unity of mystical intimacy, builds upon that acceptance constituting the first stages of kabbalistic teaching. To walk in God’s way also requires acute introspection, not only necessary to reach philosophical epiphany, but also necessary to draw upon heavenly grace. Judaism, from the Torah to the Zohar to the Mishnah (the Jewish book of Law), is ordered. One cannot simply draw down heavenly grace for they will be overwhelmed. Studying kabbalah is playing with fire in a sense, and accordingly, there is a myriad of restrictions governing who is eligible for this form of commitment. The enjambment with the repetition of “feareth the lord” in line 9 is synonymous with the

humility of the Tzaddiks in their efforts to reach an elevated realm by understanding and absorbing the words of the Torah, noted in Rossi’s music by cadential material in mm48-51. Line 5 addresses God’s needs by suggesting that individuals are in a relationship with God. He shall be happy with thee and shall bless thee (line 10) commensurately if one fears his power and follows his teaching. “Wife,” in line 6, if interpreted symbolically, is a double-entendre for God. The fact that “Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine, in the innermost parts of thy house,” shows the extent to which individuals may be intimate with God as imbued in the creed of prophetic kabbalah. Rossi even stresses “innermost” by enunciating each syllable of the word by repeating a B-flat major chord three times as seen in mm32. The texts of the Hashirim demonstrate a profound kabbalistic influence, and serve as the foundation for Rossi’s text-painting magnifying the affect of the work. Perhaps the only equal to this influence is Solomon’s ecclesiastical tradition, exemplified by the Song of Songs which is Solomons’, Shir’ Hashirim L’Shlomo, in the Midrash.

The Songs

The Songs of Songs is truly a joyous work. In contrast to passionate love, deriving from the latin patior- to suffer, the Songs reflect uninhibited innocence, free from consequence and judgment. There is a freedom from social custom in the Songs. The accepted hierarchy between man, animal, and nature is dissembled, and the love of the Shulumite and her lover is persistently described in terms of fruit, deer, gazelles, “the plants are an orchard of pomegranates.”15 As written in the Book of Proverbs,

Three things I marvel at,

Four I cannot fathom:
The way of an eagle in the sky,
The way of a snake on a rock
The way of a ship in the heart of the sea,
The way of a man with a woman.16

Sex, as described by the word “Onah” in the old testament, is considered a wonder, far from the antipathy associated with it in the new testament, “for this is your portion in life to repay your toil here under the sun” (Eccel. 9: 7-9).17 This creed naturally arises from classical Greece. Not only is the style of analogy in the Songs reminiscent of the Pastoral poetry of Theocritus, but the Shulumite, the girl as opposed her lover, has the dominant role in the songs. Her character is close to that of Aphrodite, the first known female to be sculpted nude in Greece, done so by Praxiteles in 350 BCE. Line 6, especially if interpreted literally, and line 7 of psalm 128 mirror this style of writing. Beyond even the Hashirim, the impact of the Song of Songs, though fundamentally secular and even lascivious in nature, has been tremendous. Its teaching of human emotion in the present is not only fundamental to Kabbalah, but also to the style of the Occitanian Troubador love songs in the 12th century.

Though the Songs are attributed to Solomon, it is highly unlikely that he himself wrote them. Post the Jewish exile from Babylon in the 6th century, Aramaic gradually replaced Hebrew as the predominant language in Palestine. The morphology and syntax


of much of the Aramaic in the *Songs*, for example *eykah*, in the locative sense “where,” or *sugah*, “surrounded by,” reflect a date following Solomon’s reign in the 9th century.\(^{18}\) Perhaps, though, the connection of the *Songs* to Solomon helped the work survive since its inception before the birth of Christ, dating back to a time when scrolls were valuable and difficult to maintain, only certain widely respected works being given the attention required for them not to fade from the literature entirely. Rossi may have had this in mind with his attribution of the *Hashirim*. Though none of those texts were written by Solomon, Rossi’s evocation of the sagacious King reflects the new freedom of expression and philosophical thought Rossi hoped to introduce to the synagogue.

**Jews and Society**

Rossi’s determination was further influenced by Jewish culture in the Iberian peninsula prior to their expulsion in 1492. The Hebrews settlements in southern Iberia date as far back as classical times, and they had in fact maintained positive relations with the Spaniards up until the decree of the Inquisition. Though the Spanish economic decline of the 15th century is generally considered a result of their expelling the large, bourgeoisie Jewish population, the extent of the expulsion is controversial. For example, based upon the stipulations of property trade decreed by the Inquisition, a Jew would have been traded an ass for a house, contributing to the difficulty in simply leaving the country to begin with. *Conversos* were allotted the social benefits of being a non-Jewish citizen. Based upon these observations, it is likely that the Inquisition was intended as a unifying method of conversion in the Roman and Visigoth tradition of the 5th century. Nevertheless, between 150,000 and 400,000 were expelled, some of whom settled in

\(^{18}\) Ibid, 23.
Italy. Yet Jews in Italian society became isolated, self-inflicted resulting from their Iberian history, and then enforced by their confinement to the ghettos. Consequently, the Jewish music did not absorb the cross-culturization of their Christian neighbors. Rossi, given his unique position in the Montuan court, recognized the virtues of the modern secular genres as well as the rich artistic tradition of the Jews. His works would not have been the first to be incorporated into Jewish culture, considering Ibn Ezra’s monumental treatise Tahkemoni of Alharizi’s seven postulates of Arabic poetry. Rossi envisioned his music creating a new Jewish voice through the influence of Hebrew tradition in a way that would reunite a people with the outside world. His ambition came feverishly, near the end of his life, possibly as an onerous foreshadowing of opportunity thinning in Montua.

A Personage

In 1630, the year of Rossi’s death, Austrians raided the ghettos in Montua and Rossi’s hopes and works were ultimately forgotten. Yet his quest is a story of rich tradition and virtue that extends far beyond the scope of an individual. After all, Rossi’s work and the work of his colleagues is what determines our perception of history. Domineering patrons do not dictate our knowledge of society or our conception even of what is true, but art does, in its timeless existence. Rossi’s work, as an example of many, is work that opens the door for us to study culture. Psalm 128 concludes with the cycle of seeing the children of Israel, saying that the children will bring with them peace. The

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Song of Songs ends, “Hurry, my love! Run away, my gazelle, my wild stag on the hills of cinnamon.”

There is no conclusion! This Side of Paradise, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s semi-autobiographical on his own personal growth, ends with, “I know my self,” he cried, “but that is all-,” the hyphen entailing an endless search for self. Rossi’s goal may never have been realized, but his search illustrates the depth of Jewish tradition in a cycle that itself mirrors the runic essence of cognition. In the words of Petrarch, “it is better to will the good than know the truth.”

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21 Fitzgerald, F. Scott, This Side of Paradise, (New York: Barns and Noble Classics, 2005), 262.

APPENDIX

12

SHIR HAMMA'ALOT, ASHREI KOL Y'ERE ADONAI
(PSALM 128)

A Song of Ascents.
Happy is every one that feareth the Lord,
That walketh in His ways.
When thou eatest the labour of thy hands,
Happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee.
Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine, in the innermost parts of thy house;
Thy children like olive plants, round about thy table.
Behold, surely thus shall the man be blessed
That feareth the Lord.
The Lord bless thee out of Zion;
And see thou the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life;
And see thy children's children.
Peace be upon Israel!
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Salamone Rossi, Hashirim ‘asher lishlomo, Corvivia Consort, Hungaraton Classic HCD-32350.